Thor is distraught by Loki's sacrifice on the Dark World. He never in a million years would
have thought it would happen. He is determined to fix it somehow. He is forbidden from bringing him back... but Odin didn't say Thor couldn't stop it from happening at all. This time, armed with knowledge of how much his little brother bottled everything inside, Thor was going to ensure mistakes weren't repeated.

A Time Travel Fix-it where Loki really did die and Thor goes back to save his brother before he needs saving. A strange hybrid of marvel bits and actual Norse mythos all crammed into angsty wrapping. **Not a Quick Fix-it. Epic Length Story Warning** It'll take time for things to get solved.

Notes

Happy Thanksgiving!

So, I should, you know, be working on one of the other stories I have in the works but this one would not leave me alone. So I'm not sure how often this will get updated but I quite like the idea and thought 'I wrote it might as well put it out there'.
Thor wasn’t sure what he expected when he returned to the barren world of the Dark Elves. He had convinced himself that there was nothing there to be found. Because, after all, his brother had faked his own death before. He had most likely done so again. His illusions were always convincing. His ashen color and the blood that had stained the dirt had most likely been further tricks. His brother was far too clever, far too furious, to allow himself to die for Thor. Truly, Loki must be laughing at him for buying it for even a moment. Thor would be angry about it later - after he found wherever his brother had run off to and given the Trickster a hug mighty enough to break ribs- the cad.

As the mighty God of Thunder reached the top of the rise, Mjolnir slipped from his hand to impact heavily upon the cracked surface of the planet. A small noise, half-strangled and far from worthy of a God, escaped his throat without him even realizing it. It wasn’t... wasn’t possible. Loki had tricked him. He had. His brother hated him, he would never have done this in truth. Not for him. Suddenly, Thor felt a jolt through his knees, and he realized distantly that he was no longer standing. He put a hand to the ground to help brace himself as Thor stared at what he had convinced himself he would not see.

Loki.

His little brother.

His skin had turned unmistakably sapphire and his eyes, fixed unblinkingly on the desolate sky, were clouded over but unsettlingly red. The illusion used to mask his true species was no longer needed. Thor felt as if he had been punched straight in the gut so hard his lungs would not expand properly. Thor reached out almost without realizing it. A dark stain was spread out beneath his brother where his blood had seeped into the ground and turned the dust into black mud. “Loki...”

No. No, it could still be an illusion. Honestly, there were no lengths his brother would not go for his tricks. He could still be alive somewhere. It was possible... He would have to be nearby. But it could be... No. Not could be. He was. Loki was definitely alive. There was no other option.

“Loki!” His voice echoed through the barren landscape and was answered only by the distant rumble of thunder. “Loki! Brother, this joke has gone much too far!”

Fear started to clamber in his heart, as no answer came. Thor looked around for any sign of a hiding place. There were rocks nearby, jagged things that ripped through the ground at strange angles. There was no shimmer, however, to tell of his brother hiding there. “Loki!” Thor pretended to not notice the way his voice cracked like a shattered stone.

There was nothing. No answer. Thor’s eyes scanned the wasteland around him again, searching for any sign of green shimmer. Any hint of magical concealment. Because there must be some. There just had to be. Another distant rumble of thunder echoed as Thor’s eyes disobediently shifted back to the form in front of him. It was an illusion. It had to be. Once he touched it... it would fade. Just like the other illusions. He was positive.

He just had to touch Loki, and the body would disappear. Thor had absolute confidence in that. Why, then did his hand not want to obey? It was not so difficult a thing.

After a long moment, Thor hesitantly touched his brother’s far too inanimate face with one hand. He was ice cold and stiff. Nothing at all like he should have been. Loki’s smile, ever irrepressible
even with madness driving it, was entirely too absent. Tears that Thor had been sure wouldn’t come (his brother wasn’t really dead, after all) seeped from his eyes without his permission. Finally, his need for air overwhelmed the strange hole in his gut, and he was forced to drag in a ragged gasp. He moved closer, avoiding the dark stain now dried on the ground as best he could, to brush back the lanky strands of ink-black hair.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there trying to process something that he’d convinced himself had in no way happened. Lightning cracked nearby in the grimy clouds, but he barely noticed. Guilt clawed at him. This was all his fault. His brother, his baby brother, had saved him. Despite all the baggage between them, all the bitterness and ill will, Loki had saved him. And Fair Lady Jane. He’d had no reason to. None. And yet he had. And Thor had repaid such an act poorly. He’d repaid it not at all. Another bolt of lightning streaked from one cloud to another before splintering into a dozen white hot veins. He hated how his fingers trembled as they moved across his brother’s face to close his eyes. He should have done that before. His brother should not have been lying here so long left exposed to the elements. Thor could only be glad this world was so devoid of life for it spared his brother’s body the dishonor of being desecrated by wildlife. He hadn’t thought of that before and was ashamed.

“I am sorry, Brother,” Thor rasped as he bent over Loki. “I should not have left you here. It was ill done of me...” He hadn’t had much choice at the time, but he could have returned sooner. He should have returned sooner. Another snap of lightning split the sky.

Despite his reputation as a God, it took Thor far longer than usual to gather his strength to stand. Loki was still too stiff in his arms and much too cold. Thor had never had such a difficult time walking before. Even when freshly mortal and dazed from falling to Midgard, he had not had such trouble. His eyes were blurred and burning, and the weight of his brother’s body seemed to drag him down. But somehow he made his way to the skiff that he had taken and carefully put his baby brother in the bottom.

The pain suddenly became too overwhelming, and Thor had to brace himself against the side of the transport as he struggled to breathe. He stared at the dirt beneath him, drained of richness and dry as sand. The sign of a dead world. Lightning cracked overhead, and drops of water finally started to fall. Thor blinked as he realized spots beneath his head were wet from droplets that had fallen amid the dry silhouette of his bowed head. It took him several minutes for him to understand the droplets had come from his own eyes. His hair hung around his face in dripping strands, and his cape was plastered to his back like a second denser skin.

He had to take several moments to take deep breaths until he could lift his head again. The rain had rinsed the dirt and blood from his brother’s body slightly, but it certainly didn’t help much. Thor swallowed thickly before getting into the skiff. He felt far too large and awkward. A bumbling lumber like his brother had accused him of being. He hadn’t realized he’d failed to breathe properly until the pain in his chest forced him to take another harsh gasp. He grabbed the rudder of the skiff but did not do anything further. He sat there in the rain and struggled to gain control of himself. It took several long moments of sitting there and letting the lightning crack with very little pause while the rain came down in punishing sheets. Thor automatically pulled his cloak from his back and laid it across his brother despite both already being soaked. He shook and told himself it was the cold of the rain.

He stared for several moments at nothing before blinking it all away and forcing himself to focus on piloting the skiff. He wasn’t the best pilot ever. Loki reminded him of that frequently enough. He would need to pay attention to what he was doing.

It was a blur of a trip. Despite trying his best to pay attention, Thor couldn’t seem to manage it. He
must pilot better when he was in a daze, though, because the surviving Odinson didn’t hit anything and he still managed to get back. It was dark when Thor managed to finally reach the docks of Asgard. The violent storms had been left behind on the dead world, but already clouds were forming above Asgard to block out the twinkling stars. Thor tossed the rope around one of the moorings to keep the transport in place but then could only sit there and try yet again to process something he thought he’d never have to process again.

The clouds above had quickly darkened, and already a fine mist-like rain began to fall. It was nothing like the harsh pelting force of the storm before, but it was constant. Thor had just managed to gather hold of himself and left the skiff with his brother’s body cradled in his arms. He heard hurried footsteps but barely bothered to pay much attention to who it was. He heard Sif call to him but then, abruptly, gasp.

“Is that...”

Thor didn’t even glance at Fandral but nodded some in answer to his question. He couldn’t voice the truth more than that. All he could manage was a slightly choked, “I go to my father.” His friends did not try to stop him, for which he was immensely grateful. He didn’t think he could manage any sort of conversation at the moment.

The walk back to the palace seemed to stretch endlessly, but Thor wasn’t about to let his brother be carried by anyone else. He had left Loki on that planet alone, but he wouldn’t disgrace his brother further by not even bringing him inside their home. The rain was still misting over the whole of Asgard as Thor ascended the steps to the palace. He was distantly aware of his friends following behind, but they continued to say nothing. Thor could tell they were worried, but his only focus was on where he was going. He didn’t worry about the water that he trailed through the palace or the servants that rushed out of his way. He knew that at least one would tell his Father what was going on. If he didn’t already know.

Sif and the Warriors Three stopped outside in the hall as Thor entered the small chamber where his mother had been prepared for her own funeral so terribly recently. Thor felt another pang go through him at the thought. This room had been used far too much lately. Far, far too much. Thor laid his brother carefully on the plinth and took his cloak away. His fingers felt inordinately weak as he dropped the sopping fabric over a nearby chair. Thor tried to take a few breaths to center himself as he reached over to brush some of the wet hair out of his brother’s face. He looked so much different somehow, and not because of his skin being blue. The lack of anger, Thor thought.

Thor didn’t hear him enter, but he was suddenly aware of his Father in the room. Thor looked up at his Father. Odin’s expression was entirely unreadable, but Thor could tell from the white of his knuckles around Gungnir he was not as passive as his face would lead one to believe. The quiet was nearly oppressive, and finally, Odin closed his eye. Thor wanted to scream at his Father, to yell and rant and rave like a child, because it wasn’t fair. It wasn’t. And Odin should be doing something. Anything!

And then Odin opened his eye again, and Thor was honestly taken wholly aback by the wetness there. It made the tears form in his own eyes instantly. “I... I did not think-I didn’t believe that...”

Odin reached over and put a large but gnarled hand on Thor’s shoulder. “It is not something we ever want to think about,” he said, his own voice strained with grief.

“I should not have left him there.”

“You did what you had to. And Loki would be glad that you went back for him,” he said, though Thor thought it brought little comfort.
Thor looked down at his baby brother again. It still didn’t seem real. How could this have happened? “We failed him, Father,” Thor managed, tearing his eyes back up to Odin.

“Thor...”

“We did!” Thor said harshly. “We failed Loki. He thought we didn’t care about him! That he wasn’t truly part of our family! He died thinking that and it’s our fault!”

Odin was silent for several long minutes. “You are right... he did not have to think such things, and it was my mistakes that lead him to think it in the first place. I thought I was doing what was best for him but clearly not...”

Thor closed his eyes tightly and shook his head. “It wasn’t just you, Father. I was not the brother I should have been.” Looking back with a bit more experience and wisdom, he could see things had not been as good as he’d thought they’d been for some time. He’d simply ignored the tension because it was easier to do. Before, if people had a problem with him, Thor simply ignored it. He was allowed it for the luxury of his birth. He was Prince and didn’t have to deal with anyone he didn’t wish to. It was a habit he still had not entirely shaken, for he had avoided Loki even while he was locked away. Because it was easier to do. At least until he’d needed Loki’s help.

The Allfather sighed heavily and put a hand on his adopted son’s icy forehead. The markings of his blood relations were strange to feel under his palm after so long feeling nothing there but smooth skin. “I am sorry, Loki,” he murmured. “I should have done much different with you... I see that now.”

Thor thought he’d never heard his Father’s voice so strained. He had spoken little after Frigga’s death, and now it sounded as if someone had tried to squeeze the very life from him just moments before. Odin closed his eye and Thor could not bear to see the tear that had managed to escape. “Father... can’t we do something?” Thor asked as he focused instead on his brother’s hand that he had cradled between his own. It was cold and seemed so small despite Loki being full-grown.

“No, Thor. I’m afraid not...”

“But Father-”

“No, Thor,” Odin said firmly. “We must respect the sanctity of death. If we change the fates now, are we not being cruel to others who have lost loved ones? If we bring back Loki... then we start down a slope we cannot return from. Gods we may be, but sometimes we must know when to not use our powers,” Odin managed though by the end his voice was even more strangled than before. Thor opened his mouth to protest but did not get a chance. “Do you think I do not wish to do so? That I did not wish to do so with your mother before? We cannot dishonor their sacrifices... no matter how much we wish them back.”

Thor closed his eyes against the hot tears building there. He knew, on some level, that his Father was right. That they couldn’t just go around changing who died and who lived on their own selfish whims. But... but it was his brother. His baby brother. He shouldn’t have been killed on that rock. Not for Thor-a brother that was less than he should have been.

The silence lingered for several more moments. “Come, Thor, help me with your brother...” Odin said softly. “Difficult our relations may have been, he is still yet a Prince of Asgard. He deserves to be sent off as such.” All the God of Thunder could do was nod.

It was not as he thought it would be to prepare his brother’s body for the funeral. Before, they’d had no corpse to prepare, and he had not tended to his mother’s. It was far harder than he imagined
it would be. Especially when he saw the massive slice straight through his brother’s chest exposed for the first time. Thor had seen many serious wounds before, but it was different when the injury was what had taken his brother from him. For the first time in a long time, his hands shook at the sight of cleaved flesh. Thor muscled through as best he could and helped his Father wash the blood away.

The funeral was set for the next day, and despite Odin managing to coax Thor to go to his room and not linger over Loki’s body, the Prince of Asgard did not get any rest that night. He tried as his Father bade him to, but only half-heartedly. The rain kept up all night along with his melancholic mood while he stared at the ceiling and remembered better times.

He didn’t eat the next morning, and Odin didn’t urge him to. It was if he knew it would be useless to try, which he probably did. The Warriors Three and Sif came in an attempt and cheer the Thunder God, but Thor was not in the mood for such a thing. His friends seemed determined to not let him stew over his sorrow, but it had little results. It was hard to allow himself to be cheered up when he knew what was to take place later on. It didn’t help that he now realized Loki had not been as good of friends with them as Thor had initially thought. In fact, he couldn’t quite remember the last time Loki had friends of his own. Certainly, it was before they were fully-grown. Just how blind had he been? Why could he have not have seen such things before?

The day, strangely, seemed to both crawl by and speed by at a frightening pace. Each minute seemed to slow to a crawl and leave Thor far too long to think and miss his brother, but then suddenly it was time to go to the docks. Thor very nearly panicked. It couldn’t possibly be time already. It just couldn’t! He wasn’t ready yet. He couldn’t face anything so horrible. He didn’t even have Jane here to help him through this. How was he supposed to stand there and be a perfect stoic warrior when he watched his baby brother drift towards the edge that he’d once fallen from before? He couldn’t. He just couldn’t.

A hand landed on his shoulder and Thor was ashamed to admit he jumped in surprise. Turning his head, he saw his Father standing there with a familiar sadness in his eye. “It’s time, Thor…”

“Father…”

He wanted to say it. To say he couldn’t. He wasn’t ready for this. He hadn’t been prepared for Mother, but somehow this was worse. He was the older brother and was supposed to look after Loki. And he didn’t. He’d failed, and it cost Loki his life and Thor couldn’t even say sorry to him. “I know,” Odin said, and Thor forced himself to breathe again. If only to try and ease the knot in his chest. “But we must.”

Thor swallowed hard before nodding. He followed numbly as his Father led the way to the docks. The people had come out, far fewer than had come out for Frigga. Thor barely noticed them. Thor could hardly even glance at his brother lying in the boat in his finest armor. He looked a proper prince again, no matter what color his skin or the strange lines over his body. It took every effort Thor had to simply stand there and breathe as the boat drifted through the water.

He didn’t catch sight of the arrow that lit the funeral bier, but it ignited with no difficulty. Thor struggled to remain silent as he watched the dark shape in the middle of the boat quickly become consumed by orange flames. His eyes struggled to make out the shape of his brother through the fire, wanting to keep him in sight for just another second longer if he could. The sparks seemed to glow green and purple as they escaped the top of the inferno. Thor supposed it was fitting, in a way, for even the flames to respond to the chaotic nature of his brother and fan and wave in different colors. God of Tricks. God of Fire. Even in his funeral, he had to make things theatrical. Thor tried to smile at the thought. So like his brother. The tears in his eyes ruined it and made it
more of a grimace than anything.

The boat fell away into the nothing of space just after Odin smote the ground with Gungnir. The sparks, a whirlwind of colors that shimmered like frosted crystals, floated into the air towards the stars and Thor tried to find comfort in the thought that perhaps finally his brother was at peace.

Slowly the funeral procession left for home, but Thor stood there for much of the night just looking at where he’d last caught sight of the whirlwind of shifting color and shape that had been his brother. “Goodbye, brother;” he choked out after even Odin had left him to his silent vigil.

It was late, and despite doing nothing all day but wait for night, Thor was more tired than he could recall ever being. It weighed on his shoulders and made his movements sluggish. Even still, he had no real desire to sleep. He trudged along with no real destination in mind. His thoughts were a circular mess of regrets and where it had all gone wrong to lead them to this.

Odin was right. They couldn’t just bring Loki back. Especially if he had found peace in the afterlife. It wouldn’t be fair to anyone. It would be selfish, and Thor was done being selfish at his brother’s expense. He had done it far too much. If he had done it less, then his brother would still be beside him.

Thor wandered for most of the night and when he saw pink light on the horizon knew that he should at least head back for his rooms. As he made his way to the side door of the palace, which was the closest entrance, he heard a racket coming from the stables. Slightly concerned, Thor veered off to go to the large entrance door to the royal stables. Inside, in the largest stall at the very back, several hostlers were trying to calm the grandest of their charges.

The golden hooves of the stallion slammed into the walls of his stall and noises of pure fury were exploding from his barreled chest. His sleek black mane and tail thrashed as his eight legs easily kept the Asgardians away. “Sleipnir…”

Without waiting to see if the hostlers could handle things, Thor stepped forward and let himself into the stall despite the danger. “Sleipnir! Calm yourself;” he said as he reached for the stallion’s tossing head. Thor cast a glance at the hostlers, who quickly took the unspoken command to leave. Sleipnir tossed his head and kicked as he bellowed and shouted his distress. Thor stayed well away to not be hit with the massive hooves. “Easy, Sleipnir, it is me, Thor;” he said in the most soothing voice that he could manage. He held his hands out and open to show he meant no harm.

Sleipnir snorted, and his blood-red eyes were anything but calmed. He reared up to his massive full height and pawed at the air with another challenge. “Sleipnir!” Thor cried as he dodged those hooves that could easily crush skulls within their helms. “Sleipnir, you must calm down!”

The stallion did no such thing and went from upright to kicking the stall again with two of his powerful back legs. Thor cursed and took the chance to dart forward to grab at the massive black head. It took all of his strength to hold tight and keep the head bigger than his torso nearer to the ground as Sleipnir tossed and fought against the grip. “I am sorry, Sleipnir;” Thor said, harshly into his laidback ear. “I am sorry I could not bring him back to you!”

Sleipnir paused, huffing mighty breaths and eyes rolling in maddened grief. His tail whipped at nothing and his golden hooves stamped. “I will miss him too;” Thor said, trying his hardest to not choke on his own words. Sleipnir let out a much softer noise somewhere between a cough and a baying sound, and Thor realized it was the closest the hot-blooded young stallion could get to a sob. Slowly Thor loosened his grip from a restraining one to something more comforting and ran his fingers through Sleipnir’s bangs. “It’s alright, Sleipnir…”
Thor nearly buckled under the weight of Sleipnir’s head and neck but kept standing despite that. The truth behind Sleipnir and Loki’s relationship was shrouded at best. Thor was very sure that his brother had not actually bedded a stallion. In any form. But the mortals seemed very enamored with that story for some unfathomable reason. What was clear though, was that, despite Loki’s usual ambivalence to horsemanship, Sleipnir had been the exception. The Trickster God had doted on the stallion almost as if they were blood, which was perhaps the reason the mortals came up with their fanciful version of events. Thor was more inclined to believe Loki’s original tale of making Sleipnir with his magic and accidentally giving him too many legs. Considering Loki’s age at the time, such a mistake seemed likely. And since both Sleipnir and Loki were oddities in Asgard (formidable oddities but oddities true enough), they had a particularly strong bond.

Thor ran his fingers through Sleipnir’s mane and murmured nonsense to him until he seemed to calm down fully. The sun was entirely in the sky by the time Sleipnir pulled his head away and shuffled into the corner of his stall to lower his head and seemingly slip off to sleep. Thor wasn’t sure if he was really asleep or not, but it seemed to be his signal to leave. He decided it would be foolish to press his luck with things how they were currently.

With one last glance at the magical horse, Thor silently left the stall and relocked the door. He told the hostlers to leave Sleipnir to himself for the day and to not push him for the next several. If Sleipnir truly saw fit to do so, he could effortlessly kill someone, and Thor would rather not push the distraught stallion into such a thing through lack of patience.

Thor started for the palace again but then paused. No doubt Odin had told Sleipnir about Loki. But… Sleipnir was not the only one who needed to be told. The Thunder God stood in place for many moments before going to his room to retrieve Mjolnir. He would not neglect his duties. No matter how painful they were. No matter how much he didn’t wish to do them. He was not a spoiled prince any longer. He knew he could not simply ignore that which he didn’t want to do.

Thor went north over forest and mountains, following a river until he reached a lake. In the center of the lake, he spotted the mountainous island that he was searching for. The sheer walls of the small mountains sloped straight down into the frigid waters leaving very little beach around the edges. They did, however, form a valley between them and that was Thor’s destination.

The isle and, therefore, the valley upon it, was nowhere near civilization and -much like that horrid dead planet- was filled with cracked earth, jagged rocks, and little else. Although, Thor saw bones scattered about. Some were gnawed upon, and others shattered to tiny shards. Thor couldn’t quite tell what all the different species that had contributed to the mess were, but he supposed that didn’t matter much. Thor swallowed his unease as he stepped closer to the yawning cave at the end of the valley. Massive stalactites and stalagmites wreathed the entrance to give the appearance of a mouth full of fangs. “Fenrir!” Thor shouted. “Fenrir, I must speak with you!”

Several long minutes passed, but Thor stood his ground and simply waited. In the cave, he heard something massive moving. Chains clinked together and rattled as the ground nearly shook beneath Thor’s feet. Thor shifted his grip on Mjolnir and did his best to remind himself he was not here to fight. The ground rattled again. And again.

Fur as white as snow brushed through the teeth at the top of the cave when the massive wolf stepped forward. Yellow eyes blazed with the fires of Ragnarok itself as Fenrir snarled. Thor couldn’t quite help but feel guilty at the chains keeping the towering predator restrained. Truly, Fenrir hadn’t done anything. Yet. So perhaps the restraints were unnecessary and overly harsh. Blood stained his pure white fur where the jagged spikes affixed to the chain around his neck had dug deep into his flesh. Another chain wrapped somewhat more loosely around each of Fenrir’s paws, and the last chain was locked around the wolf’s massive head, preventing him from opening
his mouth too wide. He could still eat but nothing too large. Of course, when one was the size of a small house, ‘too large’ became somewhat subjective. What do you want, Odinson?

Thor was slightly taken aback. He had not expected the wolf to be able to speak within his mind. Perhaps he should have known better. “I bring news of my brother. Loki.”

Fenrir snarled and took another step closer, but halfway through a second, the chains brought him up short. Fenrir glanced down at the chains and growled before backing enough to stand straight. What of him?

“He… he is dead.”

Lies!

Thor couldn’t help but jerk back at the snarl and how Fenrir slammed himself to the end of the chains. The wolf snarled and tried to bite, but Thor was just out of reach. “I tell you no lies,” Thor said as he slowly straightened to his full height again. “I was there.”

He tricked you!

“I wish he had, Fenrir. But I swear to you that he is with your Sister,” Thor said. Fenrir threw his massive weight against the chains again, drawing fresh blood and ripping tufts of fur from his coat.

You lie! He cannot be dead! He cannot!

Thor was quiet for a moment and forced himself to hang Mjolnir on his belt. “Fenrir… I would not say such things if I were uncertain. He was my brother… I do not want him to be gone either,” Thor said as peaceably as he could while the wolf thrashed and fought against chains that were meant to never break. They had been explicitly enchanted with Fenrir in mind.

Father would not leave me! Fenrir roared. Even to be with Hela he would not leave me here alone!

Suddenly, despite the earth-shaking depth of the voice in Thor’s mind and the snarling house-sized wolf thrashing in front of him, Thor could hear only a scared, broken, child. Thor swallowed hard. “You will not be alone, Fenrir. I am your Uncle. I will make sure you are taken care of.”

Fenrir’s burning eyes fixed onto Thor. I bite my Uncles, he threatened as he strained against his chains again. Thor remembered the mangled mess of Tyr’s hand and shivered. Now leave, liar! I have no use for you!

“Fenrir, I know you can tell when someone is lying and when they are not. Loki would not have failed to teach that to you. I promise. You will not be alone,” Thor said with conviction. He may not be able to bring his brother back, but he could, at the very least, visit his distraught son.

Fenrir snarled one last time before turning. I will believe that... when I see it, Odinson. Now leave. Before my Father returns and turns you into something unpleasant.

Deciding there was little left to do here if Fenrir would not even listen to him, Thor began to swing his hammer by his side. He would return when Fenrir was perhaps in a less hostile mood. It would probably take a few visits. Or several, most likely. As Thor sped through the air, he heard an ear-splitting howl and closed his eyes against the guilt and pain that hearing it caused. Fenrir might growl and snap and threaten but just hearing that desolate howl and knowing that Loki would not be able to come… it broke Thor’s heart all over again. Thor could remember hearing that howl in the past, he had rarely paid it much attention save for the fact that Loki had always left immediately after it echoed over Asgard.
Thor needed to leave this realm. He could not stand it any longer. Hela would already know of her Father’s fate as she would have his soul safe with her in her own realm. She could wait to be visited. Midgard, however, was where he needed to go. Both to find the last that needed to know of Loki’s fate and to curl up with his beloved Lady Jane again. Perhaps such a thing would help mend the broken heart that continued to bleed poison into his self.

Midgard was a vast place. But there were only so many places that Jormungand could dwell without being disturbed, and the giant serpent preferred his privacy. At least, from what Thor remembered of him, which was admittedly not much. Jormungand had not been very old when he’d been sent away.

Thor knew where Jormungand had been put and started his search there. Up in the Northern reaches of the world. Back then, there had not been very many humans in this area. The waters were icy and inhospitable, but there had been prey enough for Jormungand in the whales that migrated through each year.

The rocky shore was silent this late at night at least. Thor was glad for that. But, he also had no idea if he was in the right spot. Nor how, if he were in the right spot, that he would contact Jormungand. He studied the fairly calm surface of the inky black water thoughtfully. He had a feeling if he wielded magic this would be much easier. Very much, indeed. Then again… He did have some magic. He did not control it with the skill of his brother or even have the amazing versatility that Loki had. But he did have something else almost as important.

A way to focus it.

Thor closed his eyes and lifted Mjolnir into the sky. Clouds swirled above and quickly darkened as lightning jumped from place to place. He continued to build the storm, causing the wind to chop up the surface of the water into rougher and rougher waves.

Lightning split the sky in half and slammed into Mjolnir’s head before Thor threw the bolt back up into the air. It ricocheted through the clouds and then down into the sea with several smaller bursts of light to call up a fantastical show unseen in nature. He waited for a moment before unleashing the power of lightning again, this time holding until the electricity running through Mjolnir was even more concentrated.

Thor continued this for several hours until he had to fall to the ground to catch his breath. Sweat streaked down his face, and the wind whipped his damp hair back. He was confident at least some of those light shows had to have attracted attention. Was he being ignored? Or was this just the wrong spot? Perhaps he should have checked something like that before he threw so much into the effort… He knew it was a possibility, but he hadn’t been patient enough. Now, he had exhausted himself, and he might not have even done anything worthwhile.

*You throw tantrums like my brother,* a silky smooth voice whispered into his mind. It was impossible to really place if it was a male or female voice as it was ranged somewhere in the middle, but it had a certain cultured aloofness that Thor couldn’t help but be reminded of Loki at his most charming and diplomatic.

Thor’s head snapped up, and he looked around, but he couldn’t spot any sign of Jormungand, for that was who it had to be. Perhaps he was still under the water? “Jormungand. I must speak with you,” Thor said as he pushed himself to his feet and looked around again as subtly as he could.

*I gathered from the incessant flashing. What is it, Thunderer?*

“I… I bring unfortunate news,” Thor said as he couldn’t help but spin in an effort to try and find
the massive snake. How could something reportedly so large hide entirely? He didn’t particularly like not knowing where the person he was talking to was. And Jormungand could, like his brother, easily swallow Thor with a single bite. He had to still be in the water, but Thor was surprised that the massive snake could project its voice so far.

There was a vaguely interested sounding hum in the Thunder God’s mind. Very few people bring me news… do tell me what it is. Jormungund sounded almost eager to hear what Thor had to say, but the Thunder God wasn’t sure how genuine that impression actually was. Jormungund had inherited Loki’s silver tongue more than any of his siblings.

“It is about Loki.” Thor found himself faltering there. He still had no idea where Jormungand was, and he’d rather know that before telling him what had happened. Unlike Fenrir, there was nothing to keep the serpent from eating the bearers of bad news.

Yes? the voice questioned with what sounded to be utter patience. What about my Father?

Thor swallowed hard. “He’s dead.” He still hadn’t thought of any way to suitably soften the blow. There was silence.

“How long has it taken someone to see fit to tell me of my own Father’s demise?”

Suddenly, the sand beneath Thor’s feet shifted, and he had to scramble back to try and stay upright. He took one step back too many and tumbled down as a massive tapered head lifted up in front of him. Cold salt water rushed into the hole left behind, and Thor had to half swim half claw his way out of the pit onto nearby boulders. He stared up in slight shock as the sand fell away in great rivers to reveal black scales, the smallest of which were the size of shields. Golden rosettes ran along the snake’s back, which disappeared into the depths. Green eyes slit through with gold and black focused on Thor even as Jormungand reared up to tower over the God.

Thor, for his part, had not expected Jormungand to be as large as he was. His eyes drifted to the beach and quickly took in just how large of a hole had been made from the serpent moving. The hole looked to be able to fit an entire city bus within and still have room. Movement caught the corner of Thor’s eye, and he turned to see a massive coil of black and gold scales break the surface of the water what seemed to be at least a mile down the coast. His eyes darted back up to the serpent’s tapered face. “I am sorry, Jormungand. But Loki was killed in battle,” Thor said.

My father was an excellent warrior.

It wasn’t really a question or even an argument, but Thor scrambled for an answer anyway. “He saved my life… and killed an enemy many times his own size! It was not for lack of skill that he perished…”

There was silence. When?

The God of Thunder blinked. “When?”

When did this happen? Jormungand clarified. How long has it taken someone to see fit to tell me of my own Father’s demise?

“T-the funeral was only yesterday. I knew you hadn’t been told and came as soon as I could,” Thor answered. “We have no ill will towards you, Jormungand.”

No? the giant reptile asked lightly. He sounded amused, but there was a dangerous edge hidden within that Thor could only hear because he knew Loki all his life. No ill will you say? And what,
precisely, is stranding me here on Midgard without even my siblings nearby? Exile to a land full of foolish mortals to spend my life in hiding like I am some shame to the Gods is hardly what I would call ‘good’ will.

Thor tried to come up with some response to that and failed. He failed miserably. Words were not his strong suit. Jormungand gave a strange-sounding snort and turned away. You have delivered your message, Thunder God. Now leave me… unless you are now here to kill me without my Father here to protest.

“I would never-!”

Then I do not need your company and your fragile little lungs would collapse where I retreat to. Thor wasn’t about to comment on the slight tremble that had entered the serpent’s voice. Jormungand slipped beneath the dark waves, and the God of Thunder could only sit there and stare after.

Thor had to admit he had never thought much on Jormungand, or Fenrir, or the others either. It was a part of Loki’s life he hadn’t paid much attention to, mostly because the only one he saw at all was Sleipnir. But… now that Loki was… gone. What would become of them? Guilt built up in Thor’s chest, and he tried his best to not drive him to do something entirely irrational. There would be no Loki to tell a guard to warn their Father this time. No. Loki wouldn’t be doing that ever again. Or seeing his children.

He had made mistakes. But, they had led him to this. This fate should not have been his. But Odin was right as well. He couldn’t just demand that Loki be brought back from death. And it was too late now anyway. Without a body, he would have to be reincarnated and who knew where he would end up then.

No. That was simply not an option. He would have to think of something else. Surely there was some… workaround he could find. He knew from Loki that magic was full of loopholes if you knew where to look. Thor didn’t. But… perhaps he could find someone who would know where to look.
To The Past

Chapter Summary

Thor is going to go back and help his brother no matter how many people tell him how dangerous and not a good idea it is.

Chapter Notes

I already had this chapter half written, hence why it's out already. I've tweaked Angrboda here to fit her more with what I needed. I figured with sentiments towards Giants being what they are in Asgard there wasn't really any chance of Loki associating with a full blow giant but maybe a rumored half-giant would be just scandalous enough for him to not care about. Also, after seeing Dr. Strange I just had to include him even if it is just a small cameo part. He probably won't be appearing ever again... sad.

Finding a sorcerer in Midgard was less straightforward than Thor might have initially thought. It was only due to living in a realm where magic was more widespread that he found any clue as to where a sorcerer might be. He'd noticed the occult symbol in the window before but had little reason to take anything more than a passing glance at it. Up until now, that is. He wasn’t even entirely certain where he’d seen the symbol before. Probably in a book that Loki had been reading or perhaps his mother. He’d rarely seen anyone else flipping through magical tomes.

Finding the building with the window again took some effort, but after searching the city for a few hours, he did manage it. The symbol was distinctive although most in Midgard probably considered it entirely ornamental. Other than the window with the vaguely familiar magical symbol embedded in it, the building didn't look like a center for magic. But then, things were different here on Midgard. Perhaps they did not want to be easy to find.

Thor went up to the door and slammed his fist against it several times. He stood there for a moment and then the door opened for him. There was nobody behind the door, but Thor didn't let that worry him. It was magic after all. He was not well versed in it, but he was accepting enough to not question every little thing like Stark might.

The room on the other side of the door was two floors tall with an even taller ceiling and slightly curved stairs. The floor had the same symbol as was on the window embedded within the stone. On top of the stairs stood a man with a carefully cropped goatee and a large crimson cape. "Are you the sorcerer of this place?"

The man tilted his head slightly. "I prefer Doctor. Doctor Strange."

Thor inclined his head slightly. "Very well. Doctor it is. I have need of advice of a mystic nature."

"Then you came to the right place," he said before gesturing to the stairs with one gloved hand. "Come upstairs. We'll have ourselves a consultation."
The building seemed mostly empty except for the two men and Thor couldn't help but notice all of the different strange objects held within glass cases that were on display as they passed. Doctor Strange, whose cape fluttered even without any wind, sat down in a chair in front of a large circular window and gestured for Thor to take the seat across. "Now, what exactly do you need from me? I didn't think Asgardians would need the help of us 'mortal' types." Thor thought there might have been some amount of annoyance in that tone, but couldn't be sure.

"My brother, Loki, he is-"

"I'm quite aware of who he is," Strange said. "He's on my list." Thor frowned a little at that. What sort of list? Still, it wasn't important just then. Before he could continue, however, Strange gestured to the table in front of him. "Tea?"

"Thank you, but I prefer a stronger brew," Thor replied. Before he could even say another word a large clear tankard of beer was in his hand. His eyebrow went up but then he raised the drink slightly. "My thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now, what about your brother?"

Thor sighed and fiddled with the beer in his hands. "He has perished in battle."

"I'll update my list."

Thor cast the sorcerer a bit of a glare. He knew his brother had done some unforgivable things but he deemed such callousness uncalled for, plus he was unaware of any time this Doctor Strange would have been personally wronged by Loki. "I wish to know if there is a way to change his fate," Thor said.

Strange narrowed his eyes slightly. "That's not a good idea, Thor."

"And why not? Are you saying my brother does not deserve a second chance?" Thor demanded. This meeting was not going as he had hoped it might. The God knew the idea of helping his brother would be… controversial but he hoped this meeting wasn't setting the precedence for later ones.

"He did destroy most of New York," Strange pointed out.

The God of Thunder glared at the ground as he continued to fiddle with his beer. "And if I were to change that as well?"

There was a long moment of silence. "... you're talking about changing history. About meddling with time. And that's definitely not a good idea. You'd be going too far back. Changing too much. You could make what happened even worse," Strange said in a tone that he clearly thought would broker no arguments.

"I would not allow it to be worse," Thor said confidently.

"You can't make that promise," Strange said. "I got scolded by my teachers for using time to manipulate an apple... what you're talking about it infinitely larger than that. Besides, the amount of energy such a thing would take would be... far more than I would suggest using for anything. It would burn out a human."

"I am not a human," Thor stated.

"You also don't know how to do magic." Thor continued to scowl. "I'm sorry you lost your
brother," Strange said, although he didn't sound very sorry, "but manipulating time is not the way to deal with it. And I won't help you do it."

Thor was not happy, but since Strange didn't sound as if he would be changing his mind, he would simply find someone who would. He quickly drained the beer in his hand before getting to his feet. "Very well," he said as he put the tankard down on the table. "I will take my leave then." Strange didn't bother to see him out, but Thor didn't much care either.

Once he got onto the street, he let Mjolnir slide down to its leather strap and began to spin it beside him. He was still determined to save his brother, but his mind was not providing him with any other options at the moment. Odin would most likely not have any different answer than Strange had. His mother was gone. And he knew very few other sorcerers. Thor was certain that this was the best solution, however. If Loki had not been ignored and mistreated so badly, then things would have been much better. For Loki, Midgard, Asgard, and Jotunheim.

He just had to think of someone who might be willing to help him. He needed something to help jog his memory. There had to be someone, somewhere who both knew magic and would be amiable to using it to help him…

Tony paused at the entrance to the main living level of the Avenger's tower and pulled off his sunglasses to better observe the strange sight in front of him. The entire table in the middle of the room was pretty much filled with empty bottles of all types, and one very large Norse God of Thunder and Flowing Locks was face down beside them. "Wow… what happened here?" he asked as he stepped fully into the room. "Did I miss a party? I hate missing parties."

"Apparently the requirement for getting pass-out-drunk for Thor is pretty much the entire contents of one billionaire playboy philanthropists' liquor cabinet," Clint offered where he was sitting nearby on the back of the couch. "When we got here he was already through about half of it… and making very little sense, I might add."

Just then Natasha came into the room hanging up a cell phone. "Jane says she'll get on a plane and head over."

"Right… and what caused Point Break to down my entire very expensive booze collection?" Tony asked as he reached over to pick up one of his favorite gins, which was now nothing more than a pretty bottle that smelled of alcohol. He never thought he'd have to get a lock for his booze…

"Jane says Loki died," Natasha offered as she leaned up against the back of the couch beside where her partner was perched.

"Died?" Clint echoed dryly. "Didn't he die before?"

"I guess this time it stuck," Tony said flippantly before bending closer to Thor and giving him a rough nudge. "Hey, Goldilocks. Point Break. Hammer time! Thor!" Thor didn't so much as twitch despite the shout right beside his ear. "Wow, are we sure he's still alive? I mean, even Asgardians have to get alcohol poisoning, right?"

"They drink pretty much pure hundred-proof alcohol back on Asgard, though. At least from what Thor says," Natasha said. "You know, stuff us 'mere mortals' shouldn't drink."

Tony grunted a little and straightened. "So, Jane tell you what happened or just that Loki finally kicked it?" He knew that Thor had been holding onto that 'my brother can be saved' thing for a while and Tony did feel a little bad for the guy to lose his brother but… well, Loki did throw Tony
out of a window and mind control Clint and… so forth. He couldn't honestly say he himself was too broken up about it.

Natasha shrugged some. "They were fighting something called 'Dark Elves'. Jane wasn't too clear on what happened but apparently Loki saved Thor and got a sword through the chest for the trouble…"

"Huh, well, I guess Point Break was right that he wasn't all crazy and evil," Tony mused as he tried not to think about swords through chests. That had probably hurt like a bitch.

Suddenly, Thor sat upright. "Angrboda!"

The others could only exchange looks of confusion. "Uh, you okay there, buddy? Maybe you should drink some water…" Tony suggested as Thor clumsily pushed himself to his feet.

"Nay, I'm afraid I have no time for such things, Man of Iron. I must return to Asgard in all haste," Thor said as he swayed slightly on his feet.

"Thor," Natasha began, her voice somewhere between being gentle as if talking to a child and disapproving, "you just drank most of an alcoholic's liquor cabinet. You really should sit down and stay there."

"Hey! I'm a high functioning alcoholic, thank you," Tony said. Natasha rolled her eyes at the slight distinction. As if that really mattered in the grand scheme of things. Alcoholic was still alcoholic no matter how well one functioned.

Thor, however, had made his way across the room towards the door out onto the balcony. "Whoa now, I think Nat's right. Trust me, flying under the influence causes massive property damage," Tony said. "And I'd like to not rebuild half the tower… again."

"You have been most hospitable, but truly I must go," Thor said.

"How about you at least wait until Jane gets here?" Clint piped up. Thor did pause at that.

"She's worried," Natasha added when she noticed Thor's hesitance. "She's already on her way. It won't take very long."

Thor paused with his hand on the door handle. He had told Jane he would see her soon. She would be most unhappy if she knew he was on Midgard again and did not see her. Finally, he nodded and turned back to the room. "Very well. But, only until I speak with my Lady Jane. To ease her worries."

“Great. How about you sit down,” Tony said as he tried his best to shepherd someone who was larger than him into a seat on the couch.

“You are true friends, and I thank you,” Thor said as he sat down on the couch quite heavily.

“So, what’s an ‘Agrabadada’ or whatever?” Tony asked.

Thor blinked. “Angrboda,” the God of Thunder corrected. “She is my brother’s… I am unsure the proper word for it. Perhaps ‘mate’ would be best although that does not seem entirely correct either.”

“Mate?” Clint echoed. He could not have heard that right.
“Yes… it is probably the closest to correct. She and my brother had several children together,” Thor explained almost absently. He was still pondering if there was a better term to his brother’s relationship to Angrboda that he hadn’t thought of yet.

There was a somewhat awkward silence then although Thor didn’t notice it. Yes, he would have to simply accept mate as the best. He didn’t have his brother’s way with words to come up with something more ‘delicate’ or ‘appropriate’. They hadn’t been wed after all. “Children? The guy was a father?” Tony asked. When Thor nodded, Tony just let out a little noise of surprise. “He didn’t really seem the type…”

Thor looked up in surprise. “My brother is a very dedicated father.”

“Wait a second,” Natasha said, holding up her hand. “I’ve been reading up on you guys since the invasion. You wouldn’t be referring to the giant wolf and snake and eight-legged horse would you?”

“Sleipnir was not of Angrboda, nor birthed by my brother, he was made purely through magic. But yes, Fenrir and Jormungand are his sons by Angrboda,” Thor confirmed. “I am surprised the mortals knew of them… they were quite young when last Midgar was visited.”

“I’m sorry… did you say ‘giant wolf and snake’?” Clint asked.

“What kind of crazy genetics you people have up there in Viking land?” Tony asked, also looking very wide-eyed.

Thor frowned a little. To be honest, he had never really put much thought into it before. “I… I am not certain, to be truthful with you. I have never been a studious type. A healer or sorcerer may be able to answer your questions more to your liking. I can only assume that magic, either my brother’s or Angrboda’s, had something to do with my nephews’ forms. We could perhaps ask Jormungand, the serpent, he is on Midgard… although he has retreated to the depths beyond our reach after learning of Loki’s… death.”

“There’s a giant snake here on Earth?” Clint echoed. “How in the hell did we miss that?”

“Jormungand can hold his breath for a very long time,” Thor supplied. “He spends most of his time underwater where humans cannot reach.”

“Right, so, I’m never going swimming in the ocean again,” Tony said as he looked through the bottles on the table for one Thor might not have fully drained.

“Make that two of us,” Clint muttered.

Natasha nodded as well. Thor frowned. “My friends, there is nothing to fear,” he argued. He was a bit offended on behalf of his nephew. “Jormungand would not harm you. He would much prefer eating whales as they are more worth the effort to catch being so much larger.”

That didn’t get the reaction he had been hoping for. His three brave friends simply stared at him in amazement. “How big did you say this ‘giant’ snake was again?” Tony asked.

“Big enough to wrap around the world,” Natasha supplied in a tone of exasperation.

Thor thought for a moment and nodded a little. That did sound about right. “He did seem to stretch for many miles…” He hadn’t considered just how large his nephew would have grown by this point and he hadn’t seen much of him during his talk. “There was no room for him on Asgard, so my Father sent him here.”
“Gee, thanks, Odin…” Tony muttered. “What a lovely roommate you sent us… Snakes the size of planets. Super.” Thor frowned but decided that trying to change their minds probably wouldn’t be very easy to accomplish. They didn’t know Jormungand and, Thor had to admit, if he had only the little information that they had, he might be wary as well.

It took Jane several hours to arrive from England, and by that time all of the benefits that Thor had gotten from his consumption of Tony’s alcohol were well and truly gone. Although Tony had been kind enough to order more though this time his friends would not allow him much more than a few bottles. Such limitation was frustrating. He had no need for them to monitor his drink. Nobody had monitored his drink for many a year.

When Jane finally did arrive, Thor had to admit that he was glad he waited to see her. She calmed him like nothing else could, which was still a fascination to him as he’d never thought to find something like that with any person much less a mortal woman.

Jane was most understanding and as they secluded themselves on the roof of the Avenger’s Tower, Thor felt himself relaxing more. “We had his funeral yesterday,” Thor found himself telling her before he really thought about it. He wouldn’t have told his friends any of this. He knew they had mixed feelings (to put it mildly) about his brother, but Jane had been there. She had seen what Loki had done as his last act. She had slapped him, true enough, but Thor somehow knew that she would understand more than the other Avengers would.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured as she brushed his hair behind his ear. Her other hand was laid over his bicep. They were sitting side by side on one lounge chair that was near a large ‘H’ in a circle that Thor had never understood the purpose of. “I know how much you wanted to reconnect with him.”

“I half expected it to be another of his tricks,” Thor admitted. “But when I returned to the planet… he was still there. I have seen death before. But never before has it affected me so. Not even Mother’s.”

Jane gave a small attempt at a smile. “Part of us expect our parents to go first… but not our siblings,” she reasoned.

“It was not only that,” Thor said, finally looking up from his hands to face her again. “I was so sure that he could not be trusted any longer. I warned him that I would kill him myself if I thought he would betray us, and he still saved me. He saved you. I threatened his life, and still, he saved us… I am ashamed of that.” He looked back down at his hands again.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed about, Thor,” Jane assured him, wrapping her arm around his wide shoulders. “He’d betrayed people before. You were being cautious, and I don’t think Loki would have taken it personally.”

Thor couldn’t help but snort a little. “Loki took everything personal. When it came to what me and my father did, he became very good at finding offense where none was meant.”

“He was angry,” Jane pointed out. “He felt betrayed and abandoned. But he wouldn’t have done what he did if he didn’t still love you. I know that. People don’t run other people through with a sword and then stick a grenade on them to protect those they don’t love.”

“He should still be here, Jane,” Thor said before leaning closer to rest his head on hers. “So that I can throttle him for doing such a foolish thing.”

Jane laughed a little. “I don’t think that’s the best way to thank someone for saving your life,” she pointed out.
“I would do it with love.”

“I’m sure you would,” Jane agreed, still sounding amused. “I’d volunteer to smack him again for you, but I think he liked it a bit too much.”

Thor laughed some and opened his eyes to look over at her. “You surprised him, I think. I don’t imagine he thought a mortal woman would be daring enough to slap a God. Much less one with his reputation. He has always appreciated a fiery spirit. I think, if you had met under different circumstances, he would have liked you even then.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Jane said as she rubbed his bare bicep. “Are you going to be alright?”

The God of Thunder was quiet as he thought about that. “In time perhaps,” he mused. “I must be mustn’t I?”

Jane nodded a little before leaning over and giving him a kiss. “I’m here if you need me, Thor.”

He reached up to trace the line of her cheek. “I appreciate that more than you can know, my Lady. I must return to Asgard. But if all goes well I will be back soon, and I will see you then,” he promised. If all went as he wanted, she would never even know he was gone at all.

“Don’t go destroying any rainbow bridges and keeping you from me too long now,” she warned.

“Never again,” he promised.

Once Thor returned to Asgard, he made his way out of the city and towards the hills where few went. The wilds were where many hunts were carried out and much of the beginning training for the warriors were carried out. But the most hidden away corners almost nobody ventured to unless they had a specific purpose in mind. Thor had to search most of the day before he could find the particular trail he was looking for.

He’d never before visited Angrboda, not even when she and Loki had been living together. Thor rather regretted it now, as even with a trail to follow, her home was difficult to locate. Finally, however, he came to a dark hollow surrounded by twisting ancient trees. Nestled in one corner was a small hut formed of roughly carved rock and had a mossy roof. He didn’t allow himself to worry as he went to the roughly carved door and knocked loudly.

Angrboda looked amused to see the son of Odin at her doorstep. "My, my, to what do I owe this pleasure? It has been some time since a son of Odin came to me for any reason. Not since Loki left me to make your father happy." Thor scowled a little since he recalled things between her and Loki ending quite differently. Though Odin had not been happy with the relationship, Loki had doggedly ignored their father's opinion. It was his first -more passive- attempt at rebellion and had lasted an entire decade. What had finally ended the relationship, Thor wasn't sure, but Loki had come home fuming mad and not -for once- at Odin. Thor had the impression it had something to do with the children but, again, he couldn't say for certain. He'd never thought to ask.

"It is because of Loki that I am here," Thor said. Angrboda's eyebrow went up, and she stepped back to allow the shorter God into the house. Angrboda was rumored to be half-giant with how tall she was, but nobody could confirm that. And it wasn’t as if her height was impossible to reach for Aesirs, just unusual. When she was a bit younger, she had served as one of Odin’s Valkyries, for her unparalleled strength and reach made her an impressive force on the battlefield. Thor hadn't heard the story of why she had left that calling, but he assumed it had something to do with her changing interests. Now, she stayed by herself in the wilderness where very few people bothered
her, and she could practice her occult magic. "You heard of what happened?" Thor asked.

"Aye," Angrboda agreed. "But somehow I doubt you are here to offer condolences for the loss of my children's father."

Thor's scowl deepened slightly. He didn't want to bring Loki's children into this conversation. Such a topic would be a minefield he didn't want to try and navigate. "Loki learned much of his darkest magic from you, Angrboda." Angrboda's pension for the occult had been part of Odin's argument against Loki being with her. But, of course, Loki had simply been fascinated by a new form of magic, and only too happy to dive headlong into learning it.

"And is the golden son of Odin interested in dark magics now?" she asked with a grin. "How very unusual."

"Is there a way save Loki from his fate with your magic?" Thor asked, ignoring the taunt.

Angrboda's grin dropped a little and was replaced with surprise. "I cannot bring someone back from the dead. I've tried... all I got was a misshapen blob of bone and flesh. Very unattractive. Little Loki wouldn't appreciate being brought back as such, I don't think. He was always so very vain about his appearance."

"I do not mean raising the dead," Thor denied while determinedly ignoring the slight against his brother. "Can you send me back to before... so that I can save Loki from dying at all?" Strange refused to do it, but Thor knew that Angrboda was far less scrupulous.

"Piercing through time is dangerous, son of Odin," Angrboda said, her taunting smirk returning. "It's not something to do lightly."

"But you can do it," Thor insisted.

"Aye. I can do it... in a manner of speaking," Angrboda said as she went to sit in a high-backed chair that was draped in different strings of bones and feathers and even a few chains, probably all of which were used in rituals of some sort or another. "But like I said... it's a dangerous prospect, Odinson."

"I do not fear danger."

"And if the danger were not to you?" Angrboda asked. "If you go back, there is no telling what might happen. When you change something, it will ripple outwards. The moment you start changing the past the future will be in flux. You'll never know what your seemingly tiny change will have on other events or on other people. Some things may change for the better, others for the worse."

Thor frowned in worry. "I cannot see how it would be worse to allow Loki to remain dead," he said firmly. And he would be there. He would make sure whatever 'ripples' there were didn't harm his brother.

Angrboda looked a little surprised again but then shrugged. "So long as you're willing to take the risk, I suppose I can help you. But, another warning, if you don't mind. Some things... cannot be changed, Odinson. You may wish to change them and do your best, but the fates won't allow them to be changed. Some things simply need to happen even if the nature of how they happen change. You may do all of this and not even save Loki's life. Are you still willing to try?"

"For my brother, I am willing to do anything."
The witch hummed a little, sounding somewhere between surprised and impressed. "Such a change in tune. If only he hadn't had to die to get it out of you."

"I have always loved my brother."

"Perhaps, but you certainly wouldn't have taken such drastic steps before," Angrboda replied. "Now... where do you want me to send you? The further back you go the harder it will be to predict how the future changes."

Thor shifted uneasily as he thought about that. He couldn't say precisely when the shift between himself and his brother happened so he couldn't reliably tell Angrboda when he wanted to go. "I... need my brother to trust me again."

Angrboda chuckled. "No more specific for me?"

The God of Thunder tried his best to not show his embarrassment. He knew he hadn't been the best of brothers, but that didn't mean he liked admitting it. "So long as my brother trusts me and lets me help him again, I do not care when you send me."

"It may be further back than you expect," she warned in a voice halfway to another taunt and halfway towards being a little song. Thor tried his best to not be annoyed, though he was beginning to see why his brother had left the witch despite all he could learn from her. If she was this superior sounding all the time, it was a miracle (or just a show of remarkable stubbornness) that Loki had put up with her long enough to have three children.

"So long as you can do what you claim."

Angrboda shrugged again and got to her feet. "Let nobody say I didn’t give fair warning," she said as she went to the shelves that took up an entire wall of her small house. Thor watched as she opened various containers and muttered things to herself as she mixed the contents together. Thor wanted to be sure he saw everything to she put into the little glass phial even if he had no idea what half of it was. It would make him feel better about it.

After about twenty different things, Angrboda put a cork in the top and turned to hand it to Thor. "There. Mix it with water and drink it just before you go to bed. When you wake, you’ll be where you need to be in the body of your younger self but with all the knowledge you have now... for all the good that will do you once you start meddling with things."

Thor took the mixture and stared at it with some slight amount of trepidation. But, if this would do what Angrboda promised, it would be well worth it. "Very well. You have my thanks, Angrboda."

She smiled a little. "Always a pleasure to help a son of Odin." Thor wasn't entirely certain how to take that statement. So he decided to just nod his goodbye and leave without a word.

Thor did not want to waste any time. He flew back to the palace and went straight to his room. He wouldn’t give his father a chance to find out what he’d planned and then try to talk him out of his decision. The hour was still early to go to bed but, somehow, Thor didn't think it really mattered when he took it and went to sleep so long as he did. He grabbed a goblet of water and filled it with fresh cool water.

When the powdery mix dissolved into the water, it turned the liquid a dark blue that was almost purple. Thor studied the potion for several minutes before going back to stand beside his bed. The liquid could, he supposed, be pure poison, but somehow he doubted it. Angrboda had seemed far too amused by his request to just turn around and poison him. No, it was more likely the potion did
precisely what it was meant to do, and Angrboda thought that Thor’s own request would be punishment enough. Thor snorted a little. He would not fail. No matter what he would be a better brother this time and save Loki.

Thor sat down on the edge of his bed and watched the dark liquid seem to swirl as if constantly mixing with itself. He almost thought if he stared long enough he could see little veins of brighter purple magic threaded through the clouds of dark blue.

The God of Thunder pushed his indecision down and brought the cup to his mouth. Knowing better than to taste magical potions, he downed it as quickly as he could without spilling it. Surprisingly it didn’t taste as bad as he thought. The liquid tasted almost like mint and grapes mixed together, which was not an altogether good taste but not vomit-inducing either. Thor put the goblet down as a strange tingling began behind his eyes.

He could taste a too sweet residue in his mouth as a black spot appeared in his vision and slowly began to grow. Now Thor realized why Angrboda had said to go to sleep after. He would most likely not have a choice. He was getting dizzy, and his fingers were numb. A faint ringing in his ears made him shake his head, and he couldn’t help but try to blink as the dark spot grew in his vision.

The ringing was growing louder, and Thor thought that what little he could still see of the room was starting to spin. The numbness spread up his limbs even when he felt the bed come up to hit his back. Had he fallen? Or was the room truly spinning around him?

The blackness had now spread to all of his vision, and his head felt like it was being split apart. He groaned and tried to lift a hand to find it was impossible. That incessant ringing was growing louder! It was making his head hurt worse! Colors suddenly burst behind his eyes. An entire rainbow of colored rings that grew and disappeared one right after another. As if the colors themselves were splashing over him and he could only just catch sight of them. The ringing was still growing louder! Even though he couldn’t see it, the world was spinning. He felt like he would throw up and tears of pain escaped from the corner of his eyes. He was surprised he didn’t feel any blood from his skull because surely it had burst apart by now. It hurt far more than any headache he’d ever had before!

He thought he might be screaming, but all he could hear was that ringing! It had to stop! More colors flashed by faster and faster and the spinning of the world he couldn’t see made his stomach roll itself into a tight knot. It seemed to last for ages or more accurately a lifetime of an Aesir. And then, finally, Thor passed into unconsciousness…

When Thor awoke, his head was still aching, and confusion was the first thing on his mind. He heard birds in the distance and groggily pushed himself off his pillow. He was still confused and had to gather his bearings for several minutes. It was early morning judging by the shadows on his floor. He looked around and did not spot Mjolnir anywhere, nor his armor. He blinked again and looked down at himself to check that he wasn’t still wearing it.

His eyes widened at his body. He was so small! He had not been this small for centuries! He was still a boy not even at his full height. Surely he had not had to go back this far!

Thor threw his blankets off of himself and ran to the washroom. Sure enough, in the mirror the face of a young boy stared back at him. Still as blue eyed and blonde haired as he’d ever been, but still with rounder cheeks and gentler jaw. He wasn’t sure what day this was, and he was unlikely to place it just by his appearance. It had been far too long ago.

Thor reached up and touched his cheek. No, he really was as young as he looked. How was he to
save his brother like this? But then, Angrboda’s words came back to him. If he was in the body of his younger self… then Loki would be too. He would be more vulnerable than ever with only his basic knowledge of magic to call upon. If this were when things started to go bad between him and his brother, then clearly Loki would need his help now as well. So, he would not have Mjolnir, he was not without the ability to fight.

The young prince of Asgard ran back to his room and found a pair of trousers and a tunic that would serve. He pulled on his boots and ran out of the door without bothering to even tie them. He probably looked half mad as he bolted down the hallway but he didn’t care. He had to find his brother!

It didn’t take more than a minute. Thor nearly tripped over his own feet when he saw the familiar door open and another youth appear.

It was Loki. Loki.

Just as Thor remembered him. His black hair combed back neatly and his clothing perfectly in place. He had already taken to wearing greens and dark browns with a hearty supply of black intermixed. His boots were polished and, though he didn’t wear armor, he had a dagger on his belt and probably another hidden away somewhere.

Loki was coming out of his room already nose deep in some book on something suitably esoteric. He didn’t even look up as Thor barreled down the hall, but Loki was forced to give a little yell of surprise when Thor slammed into him and wrapped his arms tight around his middle, nearly taking them both to the ground. “T-thor!?”

“Brother! I missed you!” Thor said before thinking, tightening his grip on Loki’s thin waist. He buried his face into Loki’s shoulder and tried hard to not remember seeing the life drain from him on that dead planet. He couldn’t quite help the tears from building.

“What are you talking about, oaf? You saw me just last night… also, did you even comb your hair? It’s a mess.”

Thor choked on a mix of a sob and a laugh. “I had a strange dream, and you weren’t there,” Thor said, halfway telling the truth.

There was a moment of silence and then he heard Loki sigh. “It’s probably all that mutton you ate before bed last night. Honestly, you should know better than to challenge Volstagg to an eating contest. You’ll never win.”

Finally, Thor looked up and grinned at his brother. So young! Loki’s hair was still kept short and though he had less roundness to his face than Thor (at the moment at least), he still had that freshness of boyhood. He’d gained his height faster than Thor had but he’d taken ages to gain any width. “I like a challenge,” Thor managed to reply.

Loki rolled his brilliantly green eyes. “You like the impossible more like. Now let go already, you great lump.”

Thor obeyed somewhat reluctantly though he couldn’t quite keep the grin from splitting his face. Loki eyed him uncertainly. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your head getting out of bed this morning? You’re never this lively in the early hours… much less smiling.”

“I’m just glad you’re here,” Thor said though he made a supreme effort to tamp down his grin a little. It wasn’t easy. Because this was his Loki. The one he’d desperately missed.
“Where else would I be?” Loki asked even as his eyes skimmed over Thor again. “Mother is going to skin you if you break our fast looking like that. You need to at least tie your shoes.” Thor scowled a little, unable to really help it, and Loki grinned at it. “Not my fault you look like you were raised in a barn, brother.”

Thor stared for a moment before quickly ducked down to tie his boots, mostly to hide how hearing Loki truly call him ‘brother’ again made tears return to his eyes. It was ridiculous how such a simple word had come to mean so much. He would have given anything to hear Loki call him that again before the potion. Anything at all. Of course, this time, he wouldn’t make Loki stop calling him that. There would be no reason for him to stop. He swore it.
Resolutions

Chapter Summary

Thor makes some resolutions to ensure things are different this time.

Chapter Notes

I couldn't find much on Vor other than she was the Goddess of Wisdom, but I wanted to include some more obscure Gods and Goddesses so I figured she'd make a good librarian/tutor to the two Princes. I'm also going to be tweaking some things here and there to make it fit better with my story both on the myth side and on the marvel side. Also, something about this story just makes me wax all introspection-y. It's weird. Especially since a lot of it is going to be in Thor's voice and he doesn't strike me as one to be for lots of introspection.

Sitting at the table with his family was the strangest feeling Thor had in a long time. It was like a dream and a memory mixed together with the added strangeness of it being real. Loki was sitting beside him with his book 'discreetly' hidden in his lap under the table. Frigga was pretending to not notice what Loki was doing - since it was technically against the rules to have 'distractions' at the table - and Odin was talking with Tyr at the head of the table. It was odd seeing Tyr with both hands again. He hadn't had both hands intact in ages. The eldest son of Odin and Frigga had removed himself from the line of succession before Thor had even been born, which had been quite the scandal at the time but now was so normal it was rarely even mentioned. But despite no longer living in the palace or having a claim to the throne, Tyr still made time to join them for breakfast every so often. Usually once a week, sometimes more if something exciting was going on.

Thor couldn't quite focus on his food, he was too busy studying the once familiar scene in front of him. He wanted it so clearly embedded in his memory he would never get it out. He didn't want a single detail out of place when he thought back on this.

He wasn't sure what his father and brother were discussing but it hardly mattered. It was probably something to do with security or training the men or something involving the military on the whole. Baldr and Hodr were, of course, absent since they did not live in Asgard any longer. They rarely had a chance to visit home though they did try their best to appear at the important holidays and celebrations. They couldn't always, but they tried.

Neither Thor nor Loki were particularly close to their three elder brothers, mostly due to the rather large age gap between them. Thor knew now that he had been, what Midgardians called, a 'surprise' child for his parents, which had never occurred to him before since he had Loki so close to him in age. It had only seemed normal for him. But now that he had already lived through childhood once, he could realize that it was, in fact, strange. He always thought of himself as the older brother but if it hadn't been for Odin and Frigga adopting Loki he would technically be the baby of the family. Though, he doubted he would have felt like the baby. More likely he would have felt more like an only child with the age gap between him and the twins Baldr and Hodr.
Thor sat picking at his food for a moment as he tried to recall why exactly the twins were not in line for the throne. It wasn't something he thought on much. He felt somewhat bad. These were things he should probably know for certain rather than just have vague memories of. This was his family, after all. Had he really been so self-absorbed he didn't even know why his own brothers - that were older- were not to inherit the throne of Asgard? Was it some argument? Did they, like Tyr, decide to abdicate? Or wait… wasn't Hodr married? Or was it Baldr? That might have something to do with it… if it was a union with someone whom had their own title. Having multiple titles in the mix always complicated things. The laws of succession were… not something Thor studied all that much, which now seemed a catastrophic oversight he couldn't wrap his head around. Before he had just assumed that everything important would be told to him when it came up, actually learning it himself hadn't been a priority. Not for the first time since his return to Asgard after his exile (which now hadn't actually happened oddly enough), he thought perhaps Loki had more of a point about his readiness for the throne than he had wanted to admit. Perhaps this time, along with helping Loki, Thor might get a few other things right. He hated studying but obviously there were important gaps in his education that truly needed to be filled. And maybe his other brothers could be closer than they were now. It would be nice, though, Thor had no idea how to go about doing that. His first priority was still to ensure Loki was alright. That his life turned out better than before.

"Loki," Frigga said in a warning tone. Loki's head snapped up instantly at his mother's voice. "If you don't put more attention on your meal it will get cold." Apparently, she was done letting him get away with reading at the table.

His brother made a face of annoyance but reluctantly closed his book to focus more on his half-eaten oatmeal. Thor tried hard to not snicker but couldn't quite manage. Loki shot him a bit of a glare and Thor could only smile back. He had missed these mornings. It was quiet and peaceful; usually, he was still waking up, but for once he was perfectly alert. The sunlight that streamed through the windows was golden and warm. The food on the table was, of course, delicious and settled pleasantly in one’s stomach. The windows were open to the gentle morning breeze and brought with it the smell of early summer and the peaceful calls of birds. All of the things that made for a wonderfully lazy morning were in full evidence.

As Thor muddled through his own bowl of oatmeal sweetened with honey and milk, he turned his thoughts resolutely back to his primary task. Keeping Loki safe and happy was perfectly easy in theory, but Thor hadn't all the information that he needed. He was sure there were things that had happened that Loki hadn't told anyone and Thor would have to do his best to keep them from happening. He probably should have prepared more for this, but he hadn’t so he had to make do with what knowledge he did have. Perhaps the biggest blow to his brother, after all, Thor did know about. Finding out he was adopted so suddenly after they were already grown had been a shock that Loki had never been able to properly deal with. He’d never had the time to deal with it. Thor would make sure that was fixed. But, how to broach that topic… well, that wouldn't be easy.

Firstly, how was he to explain knowing about it? He hadn't before. Nobody, not even the servants, had mentioned it. Thor never had any indication that Loki had not been born of Frigga and Odin. In a way, it was good, as it proved how little it mattered. But, on the other, it made such knowledge difficult to explain.

Secondly, after explaining the knowledge, how was he to get his parents to talk with Loki about it? Because Thor might not be the smartest being ever to exist, but he knew his parents needed to be a big part of this. Frigga had always said that she hadn’t believed keeping the truth from Loki was a good idea so Thor knew their mother would agree with him. It was more with their father that Thor saw the problem. He nearly winced as he tried to figure out a way to convince Odin Allfather to change his mind about something. Perhaps it would be better to ask forgiveness rather than
permission? He knew he had heard that saying somewhere before. It seemed rather appropriate right now.

No, Thor knew enough to know he couldn’t just go blurting out the truth of Loki’s birth at the breakfast table. It had to be parcelled out revelation by disturbing revelation. Well, disturbing in Loki’s mind most definitely. That way, hopefully, Loki would be able to handle the news better than he had before. Thor hadn’t been there when Loki found out the first time, but he’d heard about it afterward. Odin hadn’t said much about it, but Frigga had explained how pained and bewildered and lost his little brother had been. It hurt him to know that Loki had been so lost while Thor had been experiencing coffee for the first time and looking for a mount at a pet store (which Thor now knew to be a rather embarrassing mistake).

Suddenly, Thor felt a sharp kick to his shin and jerked himself more fully upright. His eyes flicked over the table and his family’s faces. Loki was giving him an exasperated look, most likely he had been the source of the kick to the shin, and Odin was looking mildly irritated. No matter how much Thor scrambled to think of what he’d missed, he simply hadn’t been paying the least amount of attention. All he could think to say was a very unintelligent, “What?”

Loki snickered a bit behind his napkin and Frigga sighed a little and shook her head, but it was done with fondness. Odin too looked more amused than truly angry. “My son, you really must pay more attention when people are speaking with you,” he said. Odin’s voice was stern but less harsh than it had been when Thor was full-grown. “I asked if you remembered what your lessons for today would be.”

Thor stared and fought to not look like a Midgardian deer caught in bright lights. He felt he failed if Loki’s continued sniggers were anything to judge by. “Uh… Swordsmanship?” Thor guessed. It was what most of his lessons were about at this age. That was all he could remember learning anyway.

Odin sighed. “Thor you cannot rule on sword alone,” he said with utmost attempts at patience. “No, today, you and your brother will be in the library with Vor.”

Despite knowing he needed the more classical end of his education and even his new resolve to try harder, Thor couldn’t help the wince of displeasure at the mention of the library. It just wasn’t a place he enjoyed being for any length of time. He liked fresh air and open spaces and exhilarating activities. Sitting inside, mostly quiet, with dusty tomes was sure to drive him to sleep. It certainly didn’t help that Vor the Wise was always so very difficult to listen to. She spoke slowly and deliberately with a pleasant but unremarkable voice that never failed to put Thor right to sleep.

“What are we to study?” Thor asked, trying his best to wipe the displeased look off of his face.

“Runes and their origin,” Frigga supplied. “I know it is far from your favorite subject, but it’s important.”

Thor sighed and nodded a bit before going back to his meal. Not his favorite subject was a little bit of an understatement. He knew the runes, of course, he could read and write just fine. But learning the history and meaning and lore behind each individual rune was mind numbing for him. So focused on pushing his oatmeal around unhappily, Thor didn’t notice the surprised looks on his family’s faces. Before he would have tried very hard to get out of such a lesson, though it probably wouldn’t have done him much good. But now, Thor just couldn’t find it in him to try and squirm out of it.

After a moment of awkward silence where Thor didn’t argue over a lesson in the library, Tyr cleared his throat some. “Well, little brothers, your lessons can’t last all day. How about this
afternoon I take you riding?” Thor glanced up at that, instantly feeling a bit better about the day.

“Riding where?” Loki asked curiously. It had to be somewhere rather interesting to get Loki on the back of a horse. If Thor remembered right, it hadn’t been that long ago when he’d been thrown off one and shattered his elbow, Loki been rather ambivalent to the beasts ever since.

Tyr shrugged some and pretended to think -as if he hadn’t planned this already. Truly, it had been meant as a bribe to keep Thor from arguing over the lesson plans, but just because the little spark wasn’t fighting didn’t mean he’d give up his plan. “Well, I was thinking Noatun would be a rather nice afternoon for us.”

Thor grinned widely. “Noatun is always nice, brother,” he said. The bright, warm beach with cool splashes of crystal clear ocean was perhaps one of the most pleasant places in all of Asgard. Not the only pleasant place by any means, but one of the premier places to be certain. It had been ages since he’d been; even as a child, he rarely got a chance to go.

“So it is,” Tyr agreed. “Well, what do you say? Muddle through your lessons and come to Noatun with me?”

“Of course!”

Loki looked a bit less enthused at the idea but then his skin was always so sensitive to the sun. He would burn abominably without some precautions. Still, he glanced between Thor and Tyr (who were both far too rambunctious and cheerful at the prospect) and nodded. “Alright…” he muttered.

“Wonderful,” Tyr said as he got to his feet. “Come and find me on the training grounds after you’re done in the library and we’ll have a fun brotherly outing. Just us three.” Thor promised they would. Tyr gave them a smile before bending down and kissing their mother on the head and leaving the dining room. Thor watched him go and did his best to think back. When had Tyr taken him and Loki to Noatun? It seemed a rare enough occurrence to perhaps place when in his life Thor was now living.

And yet he was still struggling some to come up with an answer. Damn it all, he just couldn’t recall a day where they had gone to the famous beach with Tyr. He was still trying to wrack his brain for the answer as he finished off his meal and followed behind Loki towards the library. It took him half the walk before he finally managed to place the day. It was only a few weeks after Odin had taken the two young princes into the vault and promised one of them would take the throne although they were both born with the ability to rule. The reason he hadn’t remembered this day, though, was that Loki hadn’t gone with them. Loki had not really wanted to go so Thor had left him home and gone off with Tyr by himself.

Thor frowned and glared at the polished floor beneath him. So that was it then. He’d asked Angrboda to send him back to when Loki had trusted him and apparently this was the day when that precious trust had started to be worn down. But had the problem been that Loki really had wanted to go or just that he hadn’t wanted to be left alone as he had been? Thor had to admit that being left behind alone quickly and unfortunately became quite the theme in his brother’s life. It was something he resolved to fix.

“You are being very quiet,” Loki said.

Thor’s head snapped up. “Am I?”

“Considering you’re not talking off my ear about going to Noatun later on… or complaining about being in the library most of the day, yes,” Loki said as he fiddled with the edge of the book he had
been reading that morning. “I’d have thought you’d complain a bit more. You hate studying.”

“I do,” Thor agreed softly. That acknowledgment made Loki appear even more surprised. Usually, Thor would have denied it, if only because he felt he should deny not liking something he knew he had to do. He had always tried to be the perfect prince after all, and princes didn’t outright say they hated lessons. “I’m not smart like you, brother. I’m not good at knowing Runes and History and Law. And I don’t like doing things I’m bad at.”

Loki blinked a few times -as if trying hard to process that- before smiling. “You can’t be good at everything, brother.”

“I know. But I still want to be,” Thor said as he reached up and rubbed the back of his head. Suddenly, Thor had an idea. Something that would have never occurred to him before due to his pride. “I’ll try to do better, but a lot of these lessons are just… so hard. Could you help me with them?”

His brother actually stopped in the middle of the hall and stared. “You’re asking my help?”

Thor couldn’t quite stop from scowling a little. Surely, it couldn’t be that shocking of a thing to say? “Well, if you don’t want to…”

Loki grabbed at Thor’s arm. Thor hadn’t even realized he’d started to walk again. “That’s not what I meant. I’m just surprised. You never ask me to help you with schoolwork. You usually just… ignore it,” Loki explained. “But if you really want me to help you with it I will.”

Thor smiled and -before he could stop himself- pulled his brother into a hug. Loki couldn’t help but let out an indignant squeak and drop his book as Thor lifted him several inches off the ground. “Thor!”

“Sorry, brother,” Thor said through his smile. “But I am just glad that you agreed.”

He finally put Loki back down and stepped back. Loki nodded some and straightened his clothes before getting his dropped book. “Yes, well, you didn’t have to bruise my ribs, you know. You need to control that stupid amount of strength you have. I swear I don’t know who is worse, you or Tyr…”

“Tyr, surely,” Thor supplied instantly.

Loki snorted a little. “I’m not so sure, brother. Tyr doesn’t nearly suffocate me with his hugs,” he pointed out as they began to walk again. “Of course, Tyr doesn’t really hug much of anyone…”

“He’s old and boring,” Thor said cheerfully. “But at least he’s taking us to Noatun today. You do actually want to go don’t you?” Thor asked. He made sure to keep a close eye on Loki. He had never been able to read his brother particularly well, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t try. He didn’t want to go around making mistakes this time.

The quieter Odinson frowned at the ground a little. “I don’t know… I’m not as fond of the beach as you are, Thor.”

Thor bit his lower lip as he tried to read what Loki actually wanted. “Well, if you don’t want to go that’s fine. We can do something else instead. It’s not like Noatun is going to go anywhere,” the not-yet wielder of Mjolnir said as casually as he was able. He didn’t want to push Loki one way or the other, but he wanted it to be clear he would follow his younger brother’s lead.

He didn’t get a chance to get Loki’s reply as they reached the library and were almost instantly set
upon by Vor. The mature Asynja had surprisingly unimpressive features compared to most Asgardians. Her brown hair was peppered with streaks of silver and held back in a simple knotted braid. She wore a simple gown the color of a dusty rose, which was hemmed with dark olive. Her face was pleasant with a slightly too thin mouth but otherwise well-proportioned features. The only truly remarkable thing about her was her eyes. They were piercing like a bird of prey in the exact same shade as a steely ocean under a storm. Deep in the depths of those sharp eyes seemed to lurk a hidden light of knowledge that Thor had absolutely no hope of comprehending.

The only eyes that had ever come close to holding that much knowing had been his father’s singular one when he was sitting upon Hlidskjalf (or perhaps his mother on the rare chance that she sat upon it in Odin’s stead). But then Vor was renowned for her immense wisdom so perhaps it made sense her eyes would be so unforgivingly perceptive even despite not having the far-reaching gaze of Hlidskjalf to bolster it. Still, it was unsettling, and Thor wasn’t sure just how much Vor would know or see.

Vor let those terribly insightful eyes linger on Thor for several long minutes before gesturing to a table already set up for their lessons that day. “My Princes,” she invited.

Loki didn’t waste any time as he sat down in his seat and put his book on a pile of equally esoteric ones next to him. Thor knew that his brother’s lessons would be quite a bit more advanced than his own despite being on the same general subjects. Rune Lore could range from very simple to mindboggling complex, especially once Seidr and spell casting got involved. Thor followed his brother with a bit more reluctance and cast their teacher a wary gaze. Vor was still looking at him with that strange stormy light of just knowing, but she didn’t say anything. Vor was always exceedingly careful before speaking. She was one of the wisest but didn’t share her insights easily. The fact that she had even agreed to teach him and Loki had been surprising as she so rarely shared information. But, Thor could now realize with the clarity of looking back, that Loki had flourished under her teachings. That and the tutelage of their mother. Thor had not but he was beginning to think Vor had not been picked for his benefit.

The lesson was as dreary and incomprehensible as Thor feared it would be. He tried more than he would have before at any rate. He even listened in on what Loki was discussing with their teacher once and found he was completely lost after only the first sentence said. After that, Thor turned his attention to his own work and tried his best to make some sort of headway with it. If Vor found his new attitude towards book learning strange she didn’t mention it. She just came over and helped as much as she could to get Thor to understand, which took a bit of work on her part, admittedly. Something about the concept that ‘words create reality’ just was not easy for his mind to grasp. After all, they named things that already existed so how did the words change reality in any way? It was mind-boggling, and it gave him an enormous headache just trying to figure it all out.

Loki was practically devouring his lessons. Something about how runes change and alter destiny and how they worked together or some such that sounded like complete gibberish to Thor. The older prince tried to figure out how writing would do all that and came up short. Maybe it was his utter lack of Seidr that prevented him from truly being able to understand. Objectively, he could remember what Vor was telling them, but the understanding was out of his reach. It was as if he was missing an essential translation in his mind to be able to comprehend the language that was being spoken.

For the first time in what felt like far too long, Thor found himself prideful of his brother. For Loki to be able to actually understand and hold long increasingly obscure conversations about a topic Thor could only scrape the basics of was quite impressive indeed. Loki was smart enough to actually comprehend what Thor’s somewhat spiteful mind couldn’t help but call nonsense. Because, to Thor, it was nonsense and he had a feeling it always would be. Though, he did
understand it was anything but to beings like Loki who could actually use their brains for more than just battle planning.

Thor didn’t know just how far behind his brother he was in terms of such topics, but he had a feeling it would be best to not know. It wouldn’t really help anything much less his attempts to not be jealous. It was a little surprising that he found he was jealous. He’d never thought he would be, especially for something he’d always largely ignored, but he was. Perhaps he always had been, and that was why he’d ignored and derided Seidr as much as he had before. Thor scowled at his book in front of him. He didn’t like that revelation much. He’d always considered Loki to be the jealous one. Realizing perhaps he was not as free from that shortcoming as he would like was a bitter thing indeed. But, Thor just let that bitterness go as best he could and added yet another thing to his seemingly ever-growing list of things to improve upon this time around.

Perhaps there was something to be said for actually trying in his schoolwork, Thor realized as the day in the library seemed to pass by much faster than he’d remembered them going by before. He’d been so consumed with trying to understand what was in front of him the day flew by at an almost alarming pace. When he had simply complained and grumbled about his work, the lesson had always seemed to last forever.

Vor had let her eyes linger on Thor again as she called an end to their lessons for the day and they packed away the various tools and books they had been using. Thor’s strange new attempts to actually understand the topics presented to him had not gone unnoticed by her, and she couldn’t help but see that some fundamental change had come over the fledgling God of Thunder. She wasn’t quite sure what that change was or even what had caused it, but she could see it. It worried her some, mostly because such changes were either caused from unrest or led to it and she had not been aware of any unrest recently. Still, she had little cause to speak up about it. Not at the moment anyway. If anything it was an improvement where she was concerned, seeing how he was actually doing his work for once. Despite that, her instincts told her to be wary, so she resolved to keep an eye on the situation.

“So?” Thor prompted as he and Loki left the library and entered the slightly less stuffy air of the corridor.

“So, what?”

Thor sighed. “So did you want to go to the beach or stay here?” he asked. “You never answered.”

Loki was quiet as he walked and Thor saw a slight frown on his face, most likely he was trying to decide on his answer. Thor let him have his time to think, nothing good ever came of pressing his brother before he was ready. He’d learned that the painfully hard way. After what felt like an eternity Loki sighed. “I don’t know, Thor. The beach hasn’t really been high on my list of places to go.”

He wonders if there’s more to it than that or even if Loki was being entirely honest. It was really quite impossible to tell and –not for the first time- Thor wishes he were better able to read his brother. “Alright then. We’ll stay here.”

“You’d really give up going to Noatun to stay here with me?” Loki asked a touch incredulously.

Thor made a show of shrugging as if it weren’t a big deal. Loki obviously thought it was a big deal, but it shouldn’t be. Thor hated that it apparently was. “I want to spend time with my brother. Like I said, Noatun will still be there some other day. And if you don’t want to go, I’m not going to drag you along.”
“You could go without me,” Loki pointed out.

“But I don’t want to,” Thor countered. He had done that before. Only too happily he had left his baby brother behind. He wouldn’t be so careless again.

Loki scoffed as if offended. “Sap. Fine. You’ll probably whine all day if we don’t go. Let me just… get something,” he muttered as he stalked down the hallway. Thor couldn’t help but grin as he followed his brother. Judging by how quickly Loki had given in and decided to go to Noatun, Thor was relatively certain he’d wanted to go, to begin with. Ergo, his mistake last time had been to just dismissively leave Loki behind without being certain his taciturn brother had really meant what he said. He should really know better than to take everything Loki said at face value. He had always thrown words he didn’t necessarily mean up as a distraction when he felt unsure or vulnerable.

Thor waited as patiently as he was able outside of Loki’s room. It took quite a while, and Thor was suspicious that Loki was forcing him to wait an exorbitant amount of time to test him in some way. A test he would pass, because Thor wasn’t so stupid and self-absorbed as he used to be. His brother could be as doubtful as he wanted to be, Thor would finally be the one to prove Loki wrong. He hadn’t been able to do it before because Loki hadn’t been wrong. But this was a new Thor, and he would be damned if he made the same mistakes.

After another few moments of waiting, Loki poked his head out of his door. He looked a little surprised but quickly hid the expression and came out of his room, closing the door gently behind him. “Sorry,” Loki muttered.

“Don’t worry, brother,” Thor said cheerfully. “I didn’t mind.” He wasn’t sure if Loki was apologizing for making him wait so long or for thinking Thor wouldn’t still be waiting or for needing to apply potions and salves to his skin before daring to expose it to so much sun in the first place. Thor didn’t care what he was apologizing for at any rate. It didn’t matter because Thor didn’t mind any of the possible reasons.

Loki rewarded his efforts with a genuine –if somewhat shy and unsure- smile that Thor had almost forgotten the sight of. It made his heart melt, and his own smile grew even larger. It had been so long since he’d seen that smile. Loki’s usual grins and smirks were all shields, and Thor had grown so used to them he’d forgotten that. But now he saw a genuine smile, and he could beat himself that he’d ever let himself forget the sweetness of his brother. He took Loki’s hand in his and practically dragged him through the halls towards the training grounds. Tyr would be expecting them, and Thor was beyond happy to have a chance to enjoy the afternoon with two of his brothers. He could worry about how to broach complicated topics later. For now just ensuring Loki didn’t feel left out would do.
Minor Consequences

Chapter Summary

The first, albeit minor, consequences of changing the past arise.

Chapter Notes

This was inspired by my own experience as a kid where what happened to Loki here happened to me. I was wearing sunscreen but that apparently didn't matter and for the rest of the vacation I had to wear Zinc Oxide on my face (that thick white stuff lifeguards sometimes use on their noses).

Tafl here is used more of a general term like 'cards' would be. I decided to not mention which specific game they were playing as most of the older ones that I can see the Asgardians playing the rules are no longer known for.

Thor winced a little in sympathy as he saw his brother lying on his bed. Loki looked downright miserable. Despite taking precautions about the sun, Loki had suffered under the bright rays. His face specifically had received the worst of it for some unknown reason. It wasn't as if Loki would have forgotten to protect his face. Giant chunks of pale skin had peeled off before they'd even gotten home and now Loki's entire face was a bright cherry red and swollen. Heat was radiating from every inch of fresh and raw skin while natural oils made his face somewhat shiny under the dim light of the room, obviously an attempt by his body to rehydrate the area. Their mother had just tsked lightly and made a medicinal cream that was supposed to help. The problem with it being that to put it on, Loki had to endure having the oils and dead skin cleaned off first. Considering just looking at his bright red face made Thor's tender in some odd sympathetic way, he was sure it would hurt.

"I shouldn't have gone with you," Loki muttered as the light breeze from outside brushed uncomfortably across his delicate skin.

"I'm glad you did," Thor said. "And we had fun didn't we?"

Loki grumbled a little in response but didn't argue any more than that. Just then their mother came back in with a basin of water in her hands. "Alright," she said sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Just try and lay still, Loki." She took a soft cloth out of the water and gently wrung it out over the basin before taking it to Loki's face.

She barely touched it to the fresh skin at all, but it was enough to cause Loki to whimper a bit. Thor winced again. He wasn't prone to sunburns being Aesir, but he had gotten one that he distinctly remembered. It had been on his shoulders when he was younger. The fresh skin that had been exposed had been uncomfortable for several days when anything vaguely rough had been brushed over the area. And that sunburn had been many degrees lesser than the one his brother was currently sporting. Considering how every little touch of the soft cloth their mother was using caused Loki to shy away just slightly, Thor couldn't imagine how delicate that area of skin must
Their mother shushed him gently as she very carefully dabbed at his face and continually rinsed out the cloth in the cold water beside the bed. It seemed to take forever for her to clean the fresh skin on his face. Then came the rather unpleasant task of spreading the very thick cream all over his face. Because of how thick and sticky the white cream was it took a bit of effort to get it from her fingers onto Loki's face and making it stay there. It was obviously painful as Thor saw tears welling up in his little brother's eyes. He took Loki's hand in his to help though he felt very inadequate. Perhaps he should have stayed here with Loki rather than them going to the beach. Then again, he'd rarely seen Loki enjoying himself like he had that afternoon. Sure, he wasn't one to be overly rambunctious and brain himself tumbling through waves but Thor had managed to coax Loki into the surf several times. Not as often as he would have liked but often enough that until he'd noticed how red Loki's face had turned he'd felt quite proud of himself.

It seemed to take forever for their mother to get the cream on when really it was only about five or so minutes. She wiped her hands of the leftover ointment and gave Loki a smile. "There we are. That should help. Don't take it off now and don't try to rub it in. It's working just fine how it is."

Loki reached up but managed to catch himself before touching the cold white layer over his face. "I'm not about to try it," he said, his voice somewhere between a pout and a whimper. Thor couldn't quite help but smile at the tone. Luckily, Loki wasn't currently giving Thor any attention and so didn't feel the need to retaliate. "I put the cream on before going..."

"He did," Thor piped up. He may not have actually seen Loki do it but he doubted that he would have made Thor wait while Loki did something completely different.

"I'll get you a new batch of it then," Frigga said before leaning down and kissing Loki's hair since his face was covered in the protective layer of lotion. "It's odd that it would only fail to protect your face but hopefully a fresh supply will keep it from happening again. Now, is there anything else you need, darling?"

Loki shook his head a little. "I'll stay here with him," Thor volunteered.

"I'm not a baby to need company, Thor," Loki grumbled, which the not yet grown God of Thunder blithely ignored.

Frigga smiled again and leaned over to kiss Thor's cheek. "Call me if you need anything," she commanded before getting up and taking her basin of water and jar of ointment with her. She gave them one last smile before closing the door to Loki's room behind her.

"You're acting strange today, Thor," Loki murmured.

"Am I?"

"Yes. It's been months since you spent so much time with me outside of lessons."

Thor frowned. "Perhaps I just missed you then."

Loki snorted some. "Sap," he accused although Thor could still hear affection behind it. "Are you just going to sit here beside me all night?"

"Well, we could do something instead," Thor suggested.

"Such as?"
"Tafl?"

Even through the thick cream all over his face, Thor could see his brother raise an eyebrow. "You're not going to complain when I whip you?"

"No! And you never know... maybe I'll beat you for once," Thor claimed, although he rather doubted it. He'd never been the strategist that Loki was. He'd hated losing such strategy games and so stopped playing them relatively young. Hence he'd never gotten better at them.

Loki’s expression told Thor precisely what the younger prince thought of the chances of that. He also doubted that Thor would actually beat him. "Get the board then," he said pointing to one of the many bookcases in the room. "It's on the lower shelf."

Thor obeyed and sprung up from his seat to go get the board. He took a moment to examine the room he rarely visited anymore. He couldn't even tell what color the walls were anymore since they were covered with bookcases. The only wall left not covered was the wall that the bed was against. The only other wall was primarily all glass and was located directly across from the bed. Two large doors were in that wall of windows and led to Loki's balcony. Loki's desk was between the two doors where there was always plenty of natural light and was stacked with papers and a few books that Thor realized were for their schoolwork. Thor suddenly realized that he didn't even have a desk in his room. That seemed odd now that he thought about it.

The thick golden brown carpet that was woven with vines of green and silver decorations muffled Thor's footsteps as he ducked down beside one of the shelves. It was only half crammed full of books but Thor knew that would eventually change. By the time he had been fully grown, Loki had filled each one of the bookcases to the brim and even managed to add a few more shelves for books in the corners and above his bed. Thor wouldn't be surprised if he had a more impressive collection than the library despite the difference in size.

Shaking his head at how obviously different his brother was from himself, Thor turned his attention to picking up the game. It was a lovely set carved out of three different kinds of wood set in intricate patterns. The lightest shade of timber was from Vanaheim and was also the color of the defending army. The darkest was some wood that Thor couldn't remember the origin of and was also used in the attacking force. Thor admired the construction for a moment before bringing it over to his brother. "Attack or defend?" Loki asked as the board was spread out beside him on the bed and the different pieces placed in their spots.

"Attack," Thor said instantly.

"So surprising," Loki drawled with a half smile. "One of these days I'm going to make you be the defender... just to mix things up."

Thor smiled and did his best to shove down his initial reaction to that. It was only because of the life he already lived that it sounded so terribly ominous. This Loki wasn't hiding threats in casual comments like that Loki might. "Maybe I'd be a good defender," Thor offered.

"Well, it seems we will never know," Loki said as he put the King in its spot. "Since you never take over the defender spot." There was an irony here. Thor was sure of it.

The game proceeded much like they both expected. With Thor utterly failing to capture Loki's King. Loki didn't seem to have any trouble at all in opening a way for his King to flee through Thor's troops. "I never understand how you do that," Thor muttered as they set the board back up. Since their games were usually so short, they almost always played a few in a row.
"You attack in the most obvious way possible, Thor," Loki said. "Plus you always do it the same way. Try something different for once."

"But you can't move diagonally!"

Loki gave a long-suffering sigh. "It's not about the way the pieces move, Thor. It's about how you get them positioned around the board. Here. You defend this time. I'll show you what I mean."

Thor was a little apprehensive but did as he was told. He found defending much harder than he was expecting, and he wasn't even expecting an easy time of it. He'd barely gotten the King out of the center when he was surrounded by attackers and summarily lost. He scowled at the board a little. "You made it look easy," he complained.

"Well, you've never played defender before," Loki said with a shrug. "Nobody starts out good at tafl."

"You did."

"I did not. Father and Tyr both still beat me when we play," Loki argued. "You've just never seen me play against anyone else but you. And you're rusty."

Thor made a face but didn't protest the 'rusty' comment. He hadn't played any games of tafl in... well, probably a century. To be honest, he hadn't even known Tyr played at all, although he should probably have known better. Tyr may not be as subtly clever as Loki was but he had always been a genius when it came to war games of any sort. Thor's ability to strategize really only seemed to kick in when he was in the midst of a battlefield and could really see what was going on. He couldn't seem to make the leap to a board with little pieces that had rules about how they could move and what meant they won a battle. It just didn't seem natural to him since that wasn't how real fights went. Real fights weren't determined by on what side of the opponent someone was standing. It was determined by the strength and skill of the combatants. "I think I'd rather go back to being attacker..."

Loki chuckled some and set up the board again. "Alright. But just try and be more creative and you might last longer."

He tried to do as Loki suggested. He lasted even less time than the first game and scowled darkly at the board. Loki laughed at him and, though Thor was glad to hear the laugh, he wasn't fond of it being at his expense. "This is what happens when I try and get creative..." he muttered.

"No, no, it was good, brother," Loki denied. "It's just you forgot to block this side over here. It happens when you try out new things. Don't feel so bad about it." Loki pointed to the gap that Thor had accidentally left and the King had escaped through. "I'm glad you tried something different, though. It might not work but at least it wasn't the same game we usually play all over again."

"We don't play the same game over again," Thor denied in confusion.

Loki snorted. "Oh yes we do, Thor. That's how I always win so quickly."

Thor frowned. "I think I'm done playing tafl for now..."

"Yes, I figured," Loki said, still looking amused despite the strange covering of white all over his face. "This is about as much as you usually want to play with me. Are you going to go off and practice fighting now?"

"It's kind of late for that," Thor mused.
"Never stopped you before," his brother pointed out as he put the game pieces back in their slots.

Well, that was certainly true. Thor could easily remember spending half the night practicing with all sorts of weapons. Then, once he'd gotten Mjolnir, he'd spent just as long with her. "Maybe I just feel sorry for dragging you to the beach and you got all crispy."

Loki rolled his eyes. "You think you're funny," he muttered. "I decided to go so don't go getting all guilty over nothing."

"You wouldn't have gone if not for me."

"You don't know that."

Thor opened his mouth to say that 'yes' he did 'know that' and knew it for absolutely certain but then managed to stop himself. Blurt out that he was aware of the future probably wasn't the smartest thing to do. Especially considering how Strange had reacted to the very idea of this. He wasn't even certain if Loki would believe him. So, instead, he just smiled. "Alright. But I still feel bad about it."

"Fine, feel bad. It's not like I can stop you. But you don't have to hang around keeping me company."

"And what if I want to?"

Loki gave him an odd look but seemed to decide to not argue with that. Thor decided to count it as a victory for him, even if it was really just him outstubborn his brother. After another few minutes of silence, Loki nodded to the bookshelf. "Grab me one of those books and put my game back."

Thor sprung up to do as his brother asked. "Any book you want, in particular, brother?"

There was a moment of silence. "No, Thor, whichever," he finally answered. Thor wasn't sure he liked the tone of Loki's voice but decided to ignore it. It was almost as if Loki was suspecting something although Thor wasn't entirely sure what he'd done to cause suspicion. Surely he hadn't been that distant from his brother in this time had he? He'd felt so incredibly close to Loki when they were first this age.

He got one of the books off the shelf and brought it back over to Loki, who he now saw was looking at him curiously. "What?"

"Nothing... It's just you've been so strange all day. You didn't even speak about Fandral or Hogun or the others all day."

"They weren't here," Thor replied as if it were obvious.

"You say that like it's stopped you before. Come on, Thor. Tell me what happened... I know something happened," Loki said, leaning forward slightly.

Thor shook his head. "I told you. I had a dream where you weren't there."

"It has to be more than that," Loki argued.

The fledgling God of Thunder sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Obviously, he would have to come up with something. His brother was not one to be put aside with unsatisfactory excuses, and he apparently thought Thor's first explanation was one such. "You're right," Thor admitted. "It
wasn't just that you weren't there. You were standing right there in front of me. Just an arm's length away... and a monster came and killed you. Right in front of me... and I couldn't do anything at all."

There were several moments of silence. "What sort of monster?"

"One I've never seen before... a nightmare that I doubt we'll ever see the likes of," Thor muttered. He would do his absolute best to never allow them to see the twisted Dark Elves, although he might not be able to avoid that particular situation. "And it matters little. To see you perish in front of me... to not be able to do anything to save you made me realize I wasn't acting as a very good brother."

Again, Loki didn't say anything right away. Thor didn't dare look up to see the expression on his brother's face. "It was just a dream, Thor. And you are a good brother. Even if you are a giant lump most of the time," he finally said with a bit of amusement seeping into his voice near the end. "Don't be too hard on yourself. Nothing is going to happen to me."

Thor nodded in agreement because there wasn't any other reply he could possibly give. He couldn't say that it wasn't a dream. He couldn't admit that he'd been far from a good brother and led directly to Loki's demise. Even if Loki did believe him to have such future knowledge, Thor would never be able to voice the truth. He couldn't take losing his brother again in such a way, and he just knew that such an admission would lead to just that. "I just wanted to be sure you know I regret not being as close to you as we used to be," Thor said, finally looking back up.

Loki smiled a little. "You are such a sap," he said. "Don't worry so much, Thor. I know you. I know you get all single minded about things. The way you play tafl reminds me if I ever forget. Now, it's getting late. Head off to bed before mother comes and makes you."

He had half a mind to protest but then decided he couldn't spend every second of every day with Loki. He laughed a little, more at himself than anything, and got to his feet. "Alright. I'll see you in the morning."

"Try not to ambush me with back breaking hugs this time," Loki drawled.

"No promises," Thor said with a wide grin.

Loki groaned a little. "You are impossible."

"Goodnight, brother."

"Goodnight, Thor," Loki said with an eye roll.

Thor chuckled before leaving his brother's room. It was surprising how much more expressive Loki was. He hadn't realized how incredibly closed off his brother had become over the decades until he wasn't that way any longer. He was glad that his first day back had gone so well. Hopefully, he'd be able to keep fixing things. He had time to do so. Not slipping was going to be the hardest part, he figured. Because not every day was going to have something for him to do differently.

In fact, most days he was most likely going to have nothing to do but just live out his life again. Thor paused in his doorway as he thought about that. He hadn't really realized how long an Aesir lived until he was suddenly faced with living his childhood all over again. It was a little daunting. It wasn't like his mortal friends were yet born to visit. Although, he did still have Sif and the Warrior's Three. Well, it would be five currently. And not warriors. Oh, that wasn't even something
he'd considered at all. The original group was still together. Some of those he used to play with at this age he hadn't seen since before the fledgling God reached his majority and now he'd suddenly be faced with them again. Thor wasn't entirely sure how to handle that.

Thor shook his head hard and went into his room. There was little to do but deal with these sorts of things as they came around. It might actually be fun to see those old friends again-

Oh.

Thor paused again when he realized that meant that she would still be around as well. Amora. He shifted uncomfortably at the very thought. The first time around, Thor had depended greatly on Loki and Sif to keep the overly affectionate girl away. She just had always left Thor uneasy. Perhaps some strange instinct of his had let him know she was a little too affectionate. She did border on obsessed although, at this age, she hadn't been so terrible. But then, Thor hadn't been all that interested in girls that way at this age. He supposed that neither had Amora and that was why she hadn't been as bad when they were young.

He rather hoped he wouldn't have to deal with all of that again. It had been awkward and uncomfortable most of the time. Somewhat dangerous at other points when Amora had been scheming. Loki had always managed to out think her but she had caused a bit of collateral damage and pain. Perhaps he should break off with Amora now before it got to that point. Surely, nobody would question if he just stopped being around Amora as much. Then again, she hadn't done anything yet. Was it really fair to cut ties with her when she hadn't actually done anything to deserve it? Oh, that question was giving him a headache. It seemed much easier to answer when he was considering that Loki hadn't done anything against Midgard now so shouldn't be punished for that. It seemed very obvious when it was in that context...

When it wasn't Loki though, things were a bit muddier. Thor groaned and went to go get ready for bed. Perhaps he'd be better served to not think about such things too much. He was here, really, to do one thing. Make sure his brother didn't go down the same path he once had. Amora, and his other brothers, and even his own education were all a backseat to that one task. Something to keep him busy while Loki didn't need him.

Thor sighed and quickly washed up before heading into his main bedchamber. He was again struck by just how different his room was from Loki's. Thor had a bookshelf... it was mostly untouched. A few loose daggers had ended up on the shelves along with a whetstone and a few other random items. Out of curiosity, Thor moved over to the rarely used bookcase to read the titles of what was actually there.

He tilted his head to the side to read along the spines and was actually a little surprised at what was there. "Huh... are these my schoolbooks?" he asked to nobody. That would make sense although he had no idea how they would have made it onto his shelf. Obviously, he used the ones in the library for his actual study but he couldn't remember even getting these copies. Thor shook his head and straightened again. He would have to at least try to use the books this time around. Maybe it would help him not be quite so lost during lessons. He'd liked that they had sped by faster today.

Not having much else to do, Thor went over and turned his lights out before climbing into bed. The moon was bright outside his window and cast spindly shadows over his walls. He stayed up for quite a while just watching the shadows slowly move while trying to silence his mind enough to sleep. It was unusually difficult for him, though. He was not one to often have trouble sleeping but then he rarely had such things as time travel and questions of morality relating to things that hadn't been done yet on his mind. These were always the sorts of thoughts that he left to the thinkers in his family and later the thinkers among his friends. He imagined the son of Stark would find such
questions to be quite entertaining. Thor, however, simply found them tiresome and ache-inducing.

It took him quite a while to finally get to sleep. His mind was just too full of complicated and sometimes contradicting thoughts to really get to sleep too quickly. That, of course, resulted in him waking up very late the next morning. So late in fact that he only actually woke up when he was slapped upside the head with his own pillow.

Thor sat upright and blinked owlishly at his brother. "Nice to see that you're feeling more like yourself," Loki said with amusement. "Mother sent me to get you. Breakfast is getting cold." Thor could only groan and fall back over. He heard Loki's sigh and could just imagine him rolling his eyes. "Bright as the sun, indeed. Get up, Thor, before I put snakes in your bed again."

"I will dye all your clothing pink if you even think about doing that again, Loki," Thor grumbled as he pushed his frankly terrifyingly messy hair away from his face. That had been one of Loki's more cruel pranks and Thor was not interested in a repeat of that incident. He'd had to check his bedding for weeks after to ease his fears of snakes climbing up him.

"Pink, brother? My, I have been a bad influence on you," Loki said with a chuckled. "Too bad for you, I could just change it all back with a simple spell."

Thor groaned and tossed his pillow at his brother. He couldn't help the smirk of satisfaction when he heard the dull thunk of it impacting his brother's face. "You are so childish, big brother," Loki grumbled. After a little more prodding, Thor relented and got up despite his tiredness. He noticed Loki's face was still red and peeling in several places but was already looking better than it had the day before. It wasn't as swollen as it had been. He felt a little bad about throwing his pillow at Loki's healing face but, since Loki didn't mention it, decided to just not bring it up again. If it had really hurt, Thor had no doubt that Loki would have done something in retaliation.

"What is for breakfast?" Thor asked loudly from his washroom.

"The usual," Loki replied casually and Thor wondered just what he was doing.

A thought suddenly occurred to him. An absolutely terrible thought. "You had better not be putting snakes in my bed, Loki!" There was a rather disconcerting chuckle and Thor resolved to check his bed tonight to ensure that he didn't encounter any... unpleasant surprises. His brother did have an unfortunate tendency to take jokes just a little too far.

When he finally came out again ready for another day in his own past life, his brother was looking suspiciously innocent. "Why, Thor, that look!" he said in mock surprise. "One would think you don't trust me!"

"No, Loki... I just know you too well," Thor replied. "Now come, before Mother sends someone else after us."

"If you got up at a decent time this wouldn't be an issue," Loki pointed out lightly.

Thor frowned. "I get up at decent times."

"A rarity, not the rule, Thor."

Thor glared a little and gave Loki a hard shove. His brother only laughed despite getting sent
several steps to the side. "Truth hurts, brother." Thor felt his good humor sober a little at the usually innocuous saying. *Truer than you know, Loki.*
Thor quickly found that his assessment that the hardest part of his task would be remaining vigilant was terribly, dreadfully true. After that first day, it seemed as if he was always waiting for something else to happen. The first week passed by with Thor tense as a bowstring. And yet nothing significant happened. Another week passed and still his days were filled with lessons, Loki’s minor childish pranks, and mock adventures with his friends. Usually, at this age, his group had consisted of Loki, Hogun, Fandral, Svipdagr, and Astrild. The boys five, his mind supplied in place of Warriors Three.

Hogun was as quiet as he ever was although at this age it was because he didn’t like anyone to take note of his Vanheim accent, which Thor still couldn’t wrap his head around (why should Hogun be embarrassed about such a thing was beyond Thor). Fandral was missing his signature goatee but was no less calf-eyed around a beautiful girl and tended to do stupid things to try and get attention away from Thor and onto himself (odd how Thor hadn’t noticed that the first time he was this age).

Svipdagr, who usually insisted on being called simply Dagr, was the middle child of councilman Dellingr making him brother to both Sif and Heimdall. Dagr too could see much beyond what he should be able to see although not to the extent of his elder brother, this made him an excellent lookout for any pranks that the group may wish to engage in, usually pranks thought up by Loki and led by Thor. Thor had not seen Dagr in many centuries. Not since he’d left Asgard just before their majority, for reasons Thor did not know. He had, as mentioned, the same golden eyes that Heimdall possessed but the fairer skin of Dellingr and Sif. Which was understandable as Heimdall was a product of their father’s first marriage and had inherited his dark complexion from his mother who had died many years ago.
Astrild was, rather like Hogun, not the son of any councilman or dignitary but a commoner. He and Fandral however, were nigh inseparable. Unfortunately, Astrild had gotten on the wrong side of a maiden’s father and had to find somewhere else to live just after Thor had gotten Mjolnir. He looked typically Asgardian with sandy blonde hair and a healthy glow accompanied by dark blue eyes. He was not the best fighter in their year but made up for it with pure effort and determination. Where Loki simply focused on what he was actually good at, Astrild stubbornly pushed forward no matter how many injuries he received and as such was rewarded with more acceptance than Loki had gotten.

Sif (her hair still golden blonde) was on the very edges of Thor’s friendly group. Not quite yet daring to break the traditional placement of girls to join with Thor’s friends, but Thor knew that she would eventually approach them and Thor would skip the disbelief and jibes this time around and just welcome her. Amora too was on the edges of the group and yet was quite happy to trail after the boys albeit for different reasons than Sif (currently she didn’t seem to have a favorite, but Thor kept a watchful eye out for that possible problem). Volstagg was older than Thor and his friends and therefore took little notice of them (instead he was chasing after his yet-to-be-wife like a lost puppy, which Thor found incredibly amusing). Thor knew that soon enough the makeup of the group would start to change and eventually Volstagg and Sif would join them so he tried to not worry himself over it. He couldn’t force things, besides Volstagg wouldn’t care to be around those so much younger than him for long periods. Oh sure, he joked around with them and happily entertained them during feasts but that was not the same and Thor knew it.

But the weeks continued to tick forward without anything of note happening. Thor struggled with his schoolwork with the help of Loki, he kept wracking his brain for a way to tell Loki the truth about his heritage (and continually came up with less than satisfactory answers), and he tried to ensure nobody teased his brother for his pursuit of magic. As a full year passed, and then another, Thor couldn’t help but wonder if he had been sent back too far. Certainly there had been that first day where Thor had made sure to include his brother, but after that very little had happened at all. Had that really been the beginning of it all or had Angrboda’s potion simply sent him back too far?

He assumed it was entirely possible. After all, what did he know of magic? And Angrboda hadn’t even had a definite time to send Thor back to. He supposed that missing the target by a few years wasn’t too bad. So long as it really was only a few years and not a few decades.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Thor began to relax. Keeping his vigilance for so long was near impossible, even for a God. Five years slipped by and felt closer to five days before anything else happened at all that Thor noticed.

“Where is he?” Fandral asked in annoyance as he leaned back across the bench.

“He will come,” Thor replied.

“Oh come on, Thor, it’s been almost three hours,” Astrild pointed out where he was perched on the back of Fandral’s bench, looking rather like a golden haired eagle. Astrild was rather scrawny for an Asgardian but he was deadly fast, which allowed him to keep up quite well on the training ground now that he’d built up stamina through training.

“It’s been one,” Hogun corrected softly where he was leaning against a tree where it was shady.

“That’s still a whole hour we haven’t been doing anything,” Fandral complained.

Thor sighed. “We are waiting for Loki,” he insisted.

It had taken some effort on Thor’s part to get Loki to agree to a deal. Thor thought the agreement
very generous really. So long as Loki left the library for half the day when he didn’t have lessons, Thor would not retaliate for one of Loki’s pranks that week. Considering Loki could spend literally all of his time in the library if allowed, Thor thought it a good first step in getting Loki friends of his own. Or at the very least better friends with Thor’s own. Even if it did leave Thor open to pranks. At least Loki hadn’t been terribly cruel with them. The worst so far was when Thor’s soap turned his skin a truly spectacular shade of green for a day.

“I see him,” Dagr said from up in the branches of Hogun’s tree.

Thor looked around instantly but did not see his brother. “Where?” he called up to the golden-eyed boy.

Dagr nearly fell from the tree but caught one branch with his leg at the last minute to hang down, nearly colliding with Hogun’s head in the process. Thankfully, Hogun was smart enough to dodge out of the way. Once Dagr had stopped swinging from his fall but was still hanging down, he pointed off towards the palace. “He’s coming out now but he’s with someone.”

“With someone?” Fandral echoed as he sat up. “Loki?”

Dagr nodded. “Yeah. A girl.”

Fandral perked up even more and looked over at Astrild for just a moment. “Is she cute?” Fandral asked. Thor cast Fandral a bit of a glare. He didn’t want his friend scaring away what might be Loki’s own. “Let’s go look!” Fandral said, and before Thor could protest he was off like a shot. Astrild was right behind him, of course, but Dagr and Hogun looked to Thor.

Thor sighed and hurried off after the two other blondes. He didn’t want the two of them upsetting his brother in some way and usually when a girl was involved Fandral and Astrild were oblivious to anything else. The Prince heard Dagr finish his fall (probably less than gracefully) but then two sets of feet were running just behind him. Thankfully, Thor managed to catch up with his two friends before they reached Loki and even grabbed them by the shirt to stop them from just running over like lunatics. Thor dragged them behind a tree where they wouldn’t be spotted. “What are you two thinking?” he demanded.

“We just wanted to see what girl would be hanging around Loki!” Fandral said.

Astrild nodded. “I mean, he’s in the library all day. Where would he have met a girl?”

Thor scowled a little at those answers and, despite himself, was a bit curious as well. He leaned around the tree as subtly as he could to take a look at who it was that Loki was speaking with. Fandral and Astrild bent around as well even as Hogun and Dagr caught up. Thor blinked in some surprise as the very attractive girl that seemed to have her full attention on Loki.

“Oh, she is pretty,” Fandral said leaning further out.

“I don’t think I’ve seen her before,” Astrild offered.

“Sigyn,” Dagr said, causing the others to look at him. “Her name is Sigyn. She’s one of the new apprentices under Eir.”

Thor looked back around and wracked his brain. Sigyn. Yes, he did remember her. Sort of. He hadn’t actually known that she was around when she was this young though. Hadn’t she come to the castle when they were nearly men already? Thor shrugged that off, it wasn’t as if he’d been paying attention the first time around. She was indeed beautiful. With long platinum blonde hair kept back in a simple braid and a lovely heart shaped face. He couldn’t see much else from where
he was but for her clothes, which were straightforward and practical. A bright red tunic over a cream colored dress, all of it belted around he waist with a golden strap.

Thor let his eyes move from the petite girl to his brother and was a bit surprised at how relaxed his stance was. “Ooh, looks like Loki’s got a bit of a crush,” Astrild observed. Apparently noticing the same thing that Thor did.

“She’s too pretty for him,” Fandral objected.

“Hush!” Thor snapped. If Astrild was right and Loki was interested (and Thor acknowledged that Astrild did have an uncanny knack of being correct about such things), Thor was not going to allow his friends to ruin it. Loki had precious few people in his life that he’d ever shown interest in. Or, perhaps more appropriately, had shown interest back.

“Oh, come on, Thor,” Fandral whined. “At least let us go over there and say hello.”

“No,” he said firmly. He was not going to allow them to ruin it.

“What are you boys doing?”

Thor couldn’t quite help but jump in surprise and turned around quickly. “Sif!” He had not been expecting her by any stretch of the imagination. He wanted to come up with something to say so that he wouldn’t be staring stupidly, but nothing seemed to be coming to him.

Sif sighed and leaned to the side to look beyond them. She blinked in surprise. “Who’s that with Loki?”

“Her name’s Sigyn,” Fandral supplied as he turned back around to stare. “She’s a new apprentice…”

“They must have come from the library,” Astrild added.

“How can you tell?” Fandral asked.

“They both have books with them,” Dagr said with a bit of an eye roll. “Honestly, don’t you pay any attention? Why are you here, Sif?”

Sif crossed her arms over her chest. “I came looking for you,” she said as if it were obvious. “Mother tells me you need to return home.”

Dagr nearly fell with how fast he spun around. “What? Why?”

A smile crossed Sif’s face. “Something about your room and how embarrassing it is for all of Asgard that it even exists in the same realm?” Dagr scowled at his sister. “What? I keep my room clean, unlike some people.”

“You’re such a brat.” Sif just raised an eyebrow and looked entirely too unimpressed. Dagr sighed in annoyance. “Tell mother I’ll be back tonight to clean up. I’m busy now,” he said gesturing to his friends.

“Right sure, I’m sure Mother won’t tell Father you’re ignoring her wishes,” Sif said entirely too casually.

Thor wished they’d stop arguing right behind him. He was trying to see what was going on with his brother and Sigyn. Loki was actually smiling in that genuine sweet way he had. Not the fake way
he used as a mask. Thor truly wished he’d noticed this before.

“You are so impossible,” Dagr huffed. “Fine. I’ve got to go,” he told the others. “I’ll try and hurry back.”

“We won’t hold our breaths for you,” Astrild said absently. He and Fandral were still staring at Sigyn and Thor made a mental note to tell them to back off. He didn’t want the far more forward pair of Asgardians to move in and push Loki to the side. Loki was never the best with direct competition. It just wasn’t his strong suit.

Dagr sighed heavily and hurried off back towards councilman Dellingr’s house. Thor cast his friend one last glance before turning back to Loki and Sigyn. “What do you think they’re talking about?” Fandral asked.

“Boring things,” Astrild offered with a satisfied nod. “Books or something.”

Fandral made a face. “That’s a shame.”

“Would you two give it a rest?” Thor asked. Sigyn was definitely pretty but there were many lovely maidens in Asgard. There was no reason for them to focus on her. Plus, just the other day they were both gushing over how pretty one of the daughters of Rán was. Well, really, they’d been gushing over how pretty they all were, but that was besides the point really.

“You’re no fun at all, Thor,” Fandral complained.

Thor rolled his eyes at that. “Look! They’re breaking it up,” Astrild said eagerly. Sure enough, Sigyn and Loki were slowly moving away from each other; Loki towards them and Sigyn back towards the palace. Thor was a little amused to see that Loki wasn’t even really looking where he was going. It seemed his brother really was taken with the young maiden.

Sigyn gave a little wave before she disappeared back into the palace and Loki just stood there. Suddenly, Fandral and Astrild left the safety of the tree. Thor couldn’t quite grab them in time, and the two blondes instantly fell on Loki. “Who was that? What were you talking about? Where did you even meet her? Is she going to be here long?”

Loki, trapped between two arms over his shoulders, looked utterly bewildered by the rapid-fire questions. Thor sighed in annoyance and hurried over. “Back off!” he said, pushing the other two blondes away from his brother. “None of that is any of your business.”

Loki sent his brother a thankful look even as he shifted his grip on his book that he’d brought with him. It only took him a quick glance to notice the absent number though. “Where’s Dagr?”

“His sister came and got him,” Astrild said.

“Sif?”

“Yeah. He said he’ll try and come back soon, but we’d best just go on without him,” Fandral explained. “What are we doing by the way? You know, we’ve been waiting for you for an hour.”

“I was in the middle of something,” Loki said with exasperation.

“Yes, we saw that,” Fandral said with a sly grin. “You still haven’t answered our questions, Loki.”

Thor was a little surprised to see Loki turn a little pink at his ears. He tried hard to bite back a smile and failed rather spectacularly. Still, he would at least try to save his brother from Fandral’s
teasing. “Alright, alright, let’s just go. I thought you two were bored.”

“We were. Then we saw a pretty girl,” Astrild replied.

Loki frowned a little. “She’s not just a pretty girl,” he said.

Astrild and Fandral exchanged a glance at that. “Oh?”

Loki looked about ready to reply again before closing his mouth. Thor thought he was debating with himself about something. “Let’s just go,” he finally said after a moment of silence. Thor nodded in agreement and led the way back.

“What are we doing today?” Hogun asked quietly.

Thor shrugged. He didn’t come up with the plans usually. Loki smiled a little bit and glanced back at the quietest of their party. “I overheard that Idunn and Bragi were visiting Vanahiemi… I figured with only Beyla and Byggvir there we might sneak into Idunn’s garden.”

Thor’s eyes widened a little at the boldness of that idea. “If we’re caught, Father will be most displeased,” he pointed out. Everyone was forbidden from the garden, but the very few Idunn had given permission. That included herself, her husband Bragi, her two servants Beyla and Byggvir, and Frigga.

“Well then, we should do our best to not get caught,” Loki replied casually.

It was then that Thor recalled another time (that hadn’t actually happened yet) where they’d sneaked into Idunn’s garden. They hadn’t had any particular reason other than it was a place they were not meant to go. They had, of course, overstayed their welcome and gotten caught. He recalled quite well how that punishment had occurred.

Thor and the others hadn’t thought twice about shifting all the blame to Loki. And while, yes, it was Loki’s idea they certainly didn’t need to just go along with it. He hadn’t had to do much convincing to have them join him. Perhaps Thor could… adjust things a bit. “What are we even going to do there?” Thor asked as he walked beside his brother.

Loki shrugged a bit. “I don’t know. I’ve never been in the garden to know what there is to do. Have you?”

“Of course I haven’t,” Thor said. “Not even Father’s allowed in.”

“My point exactly. I want to see what’s in there.”

“Probably just apple trees,” Thor said.

Loki gave him an exasperated look. “Just apple trees that make fruit that grants eternal life,” he pointed out. “Doesn’t that interest you at all?” Thor could only shrug in response. He didn’t really think often of Idunn’s apples. Why would he? He ate them like he was supposed to, end of story.

Loki sighed. “You are hopeless.”

“Can’t we do something else?” Thor asked, using his best pleading whine that usually got Loki to give in.

Their other three friends were looking between the brothers curiously. It wasn’t really like Thor to turn down going somewhere that he shouldn’t necessarily go. But here he was asking for something else. Loki frowned at his older brother. “Why so reluctant, Thor? Scared?”
Thor couldn’t help but be affronted. “I’m not scared.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Thor paused and thought about the situation for a minute. That drew him four very surprised looks but he ignored that. If he couldn’t talk his brother and friends out of this perhaps he could just make them leave sooner so they didn’t get caught. “Fine,” he agreed. “But only for a bit. I don’t fancy getting punished by father.”

Loki snorted a little. “Where’s the fun if there’s no risk?” he asked.

The Golden Prince of the Aesir sighed and followed along behind his brother. He would have to pester Loki to get them to leave before they got caught but that was alright. He was fairly used to harassing Loki. Thor was resigned to becoming even more used to it and even better at it as he made it his mission to keep Loki out of trouble as best he could.

The five of them headed across the city to where Idunn and Bragi’s home was located. It was one of the more distant estates due to the amount of space Idunn’s orchard took. Even the front of the property was lush with greenery but most was hidden behind a wall at least twelve feet tall. Vines were crawling up the sides of the wall and flowers spilled over the top of it like drapery. “How are we even going to get over that?” Fandral asked looking up.

Loki smiled mischievously and held up a hand glowing with green tendrils of magic. “I can get us over a wall,” he said confidently. “So long as you don’t move too much… I might accidentally blow you up.”

Fandral paled considerably. “Loki,” Thor said in warning. “Don’t tease.” He was all but positive that Loki wouldn’t actually suggest a spell he didn’t have complete mastery of. He was too proud of his own magical prowess to risk mistakes. Nor would he seriously admit to the possibility of making a mistake with his magic.

Loki pouted some. “You’re no fun today, brother.”

“Yes, well-”

A horn sounded out across all of Asgard and all five boys froze where they stood. Loki and Thor looked to each other with no small amount of trepidation. Though that had not been the call of Gjallarhorn, it was no less unexpected and serious a sound to hear. It was the sound of Olifant Horns of the royal guardsmen and only to be sounded if there was something serious going on. The magic flicked away from Loki’s upraised hand as the last of the horn call echoed softer and more distant.

Thor didn’t pause to think and reached out to grab Loki’s wrist before running back the way they’d come. If a guard was using his Olifant Horn then they needed to get to the protection of the castle in all haste. Thor didn’t have a weapon on him and Loki wasn’t likely to be able to cast many strong spells currently.

“Thor! You’ll pull my arm out!” Loki snapped, but he didn’t try to free his wrist.

Thor’s mind was racing. There was no time in his childhood that he remembered something like this happening. Surely, things couldn’t have changed that much from him doing so little? What could have possibly happened?

He heard behind him, his friends and brother rushing to keep up with him, but Thor didn’t even think of slowing down. Whatever was going on, he didn’t want to be caught so far from home.
during it. Thor raced through his memories again for anything that might warrant the sound of the guard’s horns. But no matter how hard he tried he simply couldn’t think of any reason.

Something had happened. Something that wasn’t supposed to happen. And Thor couldn’t help but worry. If it was changing so much so fast… how was he going to ensure his brother’s safety?

Chapter End Notes

Svipdagr- A hero mentioned in Norse Poems Grógaldr and Fjölsvínnsmál. It has been suggested that the god Dagr (meaning 'day' and son of Dellingr and Nótt) is the same character. I am choosing to use this as my canon and having Dagr be a nickname for Svipdagr.

Astrild- Not originally from the Poetic or Prose Eddas, Astrild was created by Rococo authors as a Norse equivalent to Cupid or Amor. I am choosing to add him for variety's sake.

Heimdall and his Family- In the original myths Heimdall is not listed as having a father but Nine Mothers. He is also described as being 'whitest of the Gods'. This rather obviously clashes with the Marvel verse as in the movies he is dark skinned and in the comics is explicitly stated as being Sif's brother. I've decided to reconcile all of this by saying that Heimdall is from Dellingr's first marriage while Sif and Dagr are from his second. This allows both for Heimdall's age being much older than his siblings and his obvious difference in appearance. (I like that some variety was added to Asgard despite the contradictions it causes).

Sif's Hair- In both Marvel and the Myths, Sif's hair is cut by Loki though it is only in Marvel that after Loki replaces it, it turns black. I rather liked the idea that it changes color and so I kept that version.

Aging in Asgard- The suggested aging for Asgardians is a 50:1 ratio, meaning 50 years for a human is like 1 for an Asgardian. I'm keeping this as it's simple to use. That means that Thor's example of five years to five days is not entirely correct but used for effect instead.

Eir- In Marvel, Eir is the healer in the palace, this works quite well with her traditional role as a healing Goddess so I saw no reason to change it.

Sigyn- Sigyn is, of course, Loki's wife both in Marvel and in Mythology. In Marvel Loki tricks Sigyn into marriage and she accepts it but here, seeing how this is a fix-it story, I'm going to be going a bit more romantic. Not much is said about her in Myth that I've found other than she is Loki's wife, they have two children, and she soothes him with the serpent dripping poison on his face.

The Daughters of Rán- The Goddess Rán and her husband, the Jotunn Ægir, have Nine Daughters all of which are named after waves.

Idunn- The Goddess that grows the life giving apples. It is suggested in one Poem (Hrafnagaldr Óðins) that she is descended from Elves. Her role of growing the apples is the same in myth and Marvel.
**Bragi** - Idunn's husband. God of Poetry.

**Beyla and Byggvir** - Named in the Poetic Edda as being married to each other and servants of Freyr. I have moved them to being servants of Idunn as they are associated with Agriculture and Idunn grows important crops to Asgard.

**Gjallarhorn** - The magical horn that Heimdall carries. He is to blow it when Ragnarok comes so that the Gods and Goddesses can fight.

**Olifant Horns** - This is a real instrument. It is a hunting horn made from elephant tusks. I have included them here as a type of horn used to signal problems that aren't as serious as Ragnarok but still require immediate attention.
Hints

Chapter Summary

Thor begins to get an inkling for both what is going on in the world around him and what began his brother down a darker path.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Thor and Loki arrived back at the palace, they immediately noticed everything was in disarray. Servants were only seen for brief flashes of time as they rushed between rooms. Thor assumed that they were delivering messages between various senators and council members. Most of the rooms near the front of the palace were populated, at least some of the time, by those influential politicians. The guards were seemingly on high alert without the usual casual attention that Thor tended to see. There were also more guards than usual. An entire extra squadron had gathered and was milling about in the entry hall before the throne room talking quietly amongst themselves. Thor tried to overhear something as he passed by with Loki still in tow but the guards were keeping their voices too low to hear more than a few words.

Thor was about to just hurry into the throne room to ask his father what was going on when he spotted Volstagg sitting on a stair looking uncharacteristically severe. Thor adjusted his path to that side of the room. Though Volstagg was one of Odin's guards, Thor couldn't recall him being in any special squads or patrols the first time around. "Volstagg, what's going on?"

The bearded guardsman frowned. "I am not certain I am allowed to tell you, My Prince," Volstagg answered.

"The warning horns would not have been used for no reason," Loki pointed out. "What harm is there in telling us what that reason is?"

"It is not my place," Volstagg argued. "And I doubt I know as much as Odin All-Father knows."

Thor figured that Volstagg had a point there, but he didn't really think their father would tell them too much information. Odin rarely informed Thor or Loki of anything at this age. The King of Asgard much preferred to keep his youngest sons away from anything that could be considered dangerous. Thor couldn't be a hundred percent certain, but he felt chances were excellent that Odin would believe the reason for sounding the alarm to be one of those dangerous things he didn't share. "You could at least give us a hint," Thor said.

Volstagg sighed heavily. "I truly do not know much."

"You know more than we do at this point," Loki said. "Surely, if you and the rest of your men have been told something about what's going on, then it is something not so sensitive we cannot know it as well."

Their red-headed adult friend looked skeptical for a moment before sighing again. Thor resisted the urge to smile as Loki used that silver tongue of his with incredible ease, even at such a young age. "Very well, there has been an attack near our borders."
"An attack?" Thor echoed. "An attack by who?"

"That, we do not know," Volstagg admitted uneasily. "It was a small farm that was razed. It was very remote, the owner was not the most sociable of Aesir. No survivors were left, and though we found some tracks, they could have belonged to several species that we have been ill at ease with over these last centuries."

"So, Father will be sending your group to track whoever did this?" Loki guessed.

"He has not given us our orders yet," Volstagg answered. "But that is what we think, yes. The scouts that were first dispatched are reporting to your father now."

Loki nodded a little. Thor supposed that coming back for assistance made sense. Scouts were quick and good at tracking, but if they were outnumbered, they would find themselves in a dangerous situation very quickly. If there was any evidence in the tracks of a vast number of these bandits, Thor would see why the Scouts came back first. Thor and Loki exchanged a brief look before turning towards the throne room doors. Volstagg wouldn't know much else besides what he'd already shared. If the Princes wanted more information they would have to ask their father, or perhaps their mother.

Thor led the way into the throne room. Hermod and Meili standing before Odin. Meili was a half step behind Hermod and seemed content to let Hermod do all of the talking. Thor figured that whatever had happened was most important for Odin to have sent Hermod and Meili out to investigate. He would have just walked up without thinking, but Loki caught his arm. "Wha-

Loki's hand muffled his question quickly. "Hush. We'll wait," Loki murmured so softly that Thor almost didn't hear the words at all. Loki jerked his head slightly to the side, and Thor nodded in agreement. The brothers carefully moved over to the side to cross the expanse of the room in front of them. After crossing half the chamber, Thor could finally make out what Hermod was saying.

"-of the tracks rule out all but the largest of peoples," Hermod said. "The attack seemed too organized for Trolls, but the Giants don't usually raid our farms like this."

Odin was silent for a moment before fixing his one eye on Meili. "You share this opinion?"

Meili seemed mildly uncomfortable under Odin's gaze but, after a moment, straightened fully. Thor was suddenly struck by how much Meili looked like Steve Rogers. The golden light of Asgard seemed to match the blonde of Meili's hair, and his blue eyes were just as honest as the Captain of the America. Although, Thor had to admit, Meili was not quite as muscular as Roger's son and was several inches taller. "There was no obvious signs of Giants, All-Father, Frost or Fire. But we cannot rule them out for that alone. The destruction made it difficult to tell for certain. As Hermod said, it seems unlikely to be caused by Trolls, but I cannot think of who else would want to attack a small farm."

"Judging by how many tracks there were, the group of attackers was either an entire tribe of Trolls or a squadron of Giants," Hermod added. "A full tribe is not the usual attacking force for Trolls."

Thor found himself nodding in agreement. Trolls were large and brutally strong and sometimes quite dim-witted, but they were also tribal and stayed in small groups. If Trolls attacked or raided, they were most often in pairs or sometimes three at a time. An entire tribe attacking was virtually unheard of. The only time such attacks happened at all seemed to be between themselves when fighting over territory.

"Was there any evidence of sorcery?"
Thor nearly jumped at the question but managed to catch himself. Frigga stepped out from the shadows to stand beside Odin. Thor hadn't even realized she was in the room. Meili and Hermod bowed to the Queen. "We did not notice any signs, but neither Meili or myself are well versed in such things, All-Mother," Hermod answered.

Loki stirred slightly, as if he wanted to say something, but managed to stop himself from actually voicing whatever was on his mind. Thor was almost willing to bet on Loki thinking something disapproving about the two grown Aesir's lack of basic knowledge about Seidr. "Trolls know little offensive magic, however, if they were behind this attack and you find an entire tribe during your search, Seidmadr or Seidkona will undoubtedly be with them. Be cautious," Frigga warned. Usually, Trolls were led by a user of Seidr as they tended to also be the more intelligent in any given group. Sorcery couldn't be used by the entirely stupid. Ignorant, perhaps if given guidance (Thor tried hard to not think about his own situation being a good example of such a thing), but the outright stupid would never be able to stumble their way through the use of Seidr.

"Be sure to be careful as you follow the trail," Odin said. "There is a squadron outside waiting for you, as well."

Hermod and Meili bowed low before following the unspoken dismissal. Thor watched as the two scouts left the throne room without so much as a backwards glance. "Boys." Thor and Loki both flinched at Odin's voice. Though they hadn't exactly been hiding (something that would have been hard to do considering the door they'd come in through was so vastly tall), neither had they been expecting to be called out.

The two princes exchanged an uneasy look before shuffling out from the shadows to stand in front of the King and Queen of Asgard. "It is good you came back as soon as the alarm was called," their Mother said with a smile. "But you should have waited until your Father was done speaking with Hermod and Meili before entering."

"As I'm sure you can understand, this attack is very concerning. I don't want either of you leaving the palace grounds until it is resolved and those responsible are dealt with," Odin said firmly. "Especially you, Loki."

"Father-"

"No arguments. You tend to wander, and I do not want you to be caught by whoever committed such a crime," Odin said. Loki looked mutinous but folded his arms across his chest and said nothing else. "Pout all you wish, Loki, it will not change my mind."

Thor thought that this conversation would go best if he stepped in before Loki could protest with words as well. Loki never liked being accused of 'pouting.' "How many people perished, Father?"

Odin was quiet for a moment as he seemed to consider the question. "More than should have. It was not a large family, but there were several farm hands as well that were slaughtered. But any loss of our citizens is more than it should be."

"Trolls attack mostly at night," Loki pointed out. "It isn't as if I wander the countryside in the dead of night."

"There is no guarantee it was Trolls, Loki," Odin pointed out, sounding a bit exasperated. "If this attack was caused by Giants then they will not care about night or day."

Loki looked off to the side, and Thor hoped that, for once, Loki would just do what their Father asked. Odin only wanted Loki to be safe, it was unfortunate that Loki hated to be told he couldn't
do something. Thor's little brother loved being contrary to rules he thought were unnecessary and this was just the sort of decree that Loki would find pointless. "It shouldn't be for long. Right, Father?"

"Just until the culprits are found," Frigga assured, apparently seeing the displeasure on Loki's face as quickly as Thor now saw it.

"With an entire squadron and Hermod searching, it should not take long," Odin agreed.

Thor understood what Odin meant instantly. Hermod was the fastest Aesir in Asgard, and with him in the lead, he would ensure that the others kept a quick pace. Thor hoped they wouldn't have to search too far or too long. For the good of everyone. Loki's pranks would get incrementally worse if cooped up for more than a few days.

"Stay near the palace until this is resolved," Odin repeated. "You can go now."

Still wearing an unhappy look on his face, Loki followed Thor's lead to bow to their parents before leaving the throne room. Thor didn't particularly like the feeling of ushering his brother away in case of emergency but he'd rather that than watch his family start arguing. They only got halfway down the corridor leading to their rooms however when Loki shrugged his arm out of Thor's grip.

"Thor! I'm fine! You act like I'm going to explode or something with how quickly you dragged us out of there."

"What? No! Nothing like that," Thor said quickly. He hadn't realized until that precise moment he had more than half expected Loki to become violent, which was only something he'd done during the whole... banishment incident. Thor hadn't realized how easily his sense of which Loki was beside him could get thrown off. Just one scowl from Loki set off far more alarm bells than it really should considering this Loki still thought he was born of Frigga and Odin. "I just knew you weren't happy and thought we could find something to do that'll cheer you up!"

Loki gave him a look that reeked of suspicion but finally gave a single nod. "Fine. But one of these days you really must tell me why you seem to think I'll lose my temper all the time..."

Thor felt some alarm build. "I don't look at you like that!"

"You do," Loki insisted as they continued their walk, although at a slower pace than what they began with. "Sometimes this look just comes over your face like you're worried I'm going to do something. Especially when we're talking to Father."

The alarm Thor was feeling multiplied. He hadn't thought he'd been so obvious about his concern. Now he had to find a way to disguise his residual fears and lies did not come nearly as natural to him as they did to Loki. Thor turned his gaze to the ground as they walked and struggled to find some way to vocalize his thoughts that were lies mixed with half-truths and genuine concerns. "I just... I know you do not always tell people when something bothers you,” Thor began, "I suppose... I simply worry that one day you may try to hold back too much."

There were several moments of silence. "I wouldn't do that, Thor."

The fledgling God of Thunder looked over. Loki was staring off at nothing while they walked, his green eyes fixed forward. "I don't know why you're so worried about me lately, Thor. But you shouldn't. After all, I don't keep secrets from you, Brother. And I know you don't keep them from me. Well, you do, considering you won't tell me why you sometimes act so strange... but you're such a bad liar I imagine you can't keep any real secrets for long," he said, smiling some near the end from his own light jab.
Thor felt his throat clog instantly and quite painfully. Hot tears tried to build in his eyes, but he ruthlessly fought them back. He felt terrible and thankful all at once. A terrible conflict of emotions that were fighting for dominance. He loved that Loki trusted him and hated that he knew things that he had yet to tell his brother about. Keeping secrets was what caused all the problems, and yet here he was doing the same thing all over again. He had to find some way to get the truth known. Before what he kept fearing would happen did happen.

He wrapped his arm around Loki and brought him into a hug. "I worry about you only because I care for you, brother," Thor said.

Loki rolled his eyes. "You giant sap, get off me," he ordered with an elbow to Thor's ribs. "I swear you get softer and softer with each day that passes."

"I do not," Thor protested. "I simply wish for my brother to know I love him."

"Yes, yes, I know. And I, you. Now, come on, if we're going to be trapped inside, I'd rather be spending our time doing something actually entertaining," Loki said as he finally escaped from under Thor's arm.

"What do you have in mind?" Thor asked.

"Oh, nothing too serious, I promise you. Just a bit of fun," Loki said with a grin.

Thor suddenly had the impression that until this situation with the attack was sorted, he and his brother would be getting into quite a lot of trouble. He probably shouldn't enjoy that realization as much as he actually did. So, Thor found himself trailing after Loki into the kitchens and watching with some amount of awe as Loki sweet talked Ilmr, the old Asynja in charge of the kitchens, into giving them a truly remarkable number of desserts. Then again, Ilmr seemed rather fond of Loki, and it hadn't taken the fledgling silver tongue much at all to convince her.

As Thor and Loki walked down the hall with a basket each full of pastries of all sorts, Thor couldn't help but fix his brother with a questioning look. "How often do you go in there and get snacks like this?"

Loki painted the most laughably innocent expression on his face that Thor had ever seen. "Why brother... you have your late night activities... I have mine," he said. "You sneak out to the practice grounds despite Tyr telling you to rest... I sneak out to ensure the kitchens are up to the standards befitting a royal palace."

Thor snorted. "Yes, I'm sure they're quite glad for your quality control efforts, Loki."

"Oh, they are," Loki replied loftily.

"What are we going to do with all these snacks anyway?"

"Watch the show, obviously."

Thor wanted to ask what Loki meant by show. But considering the mischievous smile on his face, the elder prince had a feeling he wasn’t going to be told. He hoped it wasn’t anything too outlandish. He probably shouldn’t allow himself to get roped into any pranks but Thor found himself unable to resist. Plus, when Loki stopped by his room to pick up a large jar that Thor was sure he’d never seen before, his curiosity couldn’t help but be piqued.

The 'show' as it turned out, was greasing all of the recruit's weapons before the afternoon practice. Loki had targeted he class several decades above their own. Most of the warriors were nearly full
grown and had picked weapon specialties already. Every swing sent weapons flying off into the
distance, usually at the very end of a swing or at the very peak, which was a good thing as it kept
the weapons either going much too high and far or much too downwards to actually hurt anyone.
Loki had found them a safe and well-hidden spot to watch on top of one of the lower balconies
while they munched away on their snacks. Thor glanced over at the smiling and giggling Loki. He
seemed so very amused by the flailing and curses down below. "Don't ever do that to me."

"No promises," Loki replied in a sing-song voice without even looking away as one, particularly
large, recruit dropped his own battle axe on his foot.

"Loki..."

"Oh, alright, fine. Big baby."

Thor rolled his eyes and shook his head at his brother before turning his attention back to what was
going on down below. Really, he was surprised that none of the recruits had questioned why they
couldn't hold their weapons yet. They had been watching for almost half an hour already.

Eventually, Tyr came over to see what all the commotion was. After only a few seconds of
watching recruits lose weapons mid swing and dropping them all over the place, he seemed to put
the pieces together. He put his fists sternly on his hips and scanned the grounds with his eyes,
"Loki!"

Loki winced and nearly dropped his pastry with a curse. "Quick! Run, you idiot!" Loki hissed as he
jumped up and dashed back inside. Thor was left blinking in confusion for another two heartbeats
before his brain caught up and he scrambled after his brother.

"Loki! Don't leave me to take the blame!"

"I thought you loved me!"

"Not that much! Take your own lumps!" Even before Tyr had a metal hand his knocks upside the
head could give more than just a few bruises. Thor wasn't eager to re-experience that sort of
brotherly discipline.

"Traitor!" Loki accused.

Thor reached out and pushed Loki with one hand. The lighter boy gave a yelp and nearly toppled
into a suit of armor before managing to save himself. "You can't call me that when you were going
to use me as a scapegoat!"

"I thought you liked goats!"

"Oh, shut up!"

That only got a laugh in response.

The two brothers ran straight through several halls until they came out in their mother’s garden.
Frigga didn’t even look up as her sons came tearing into the lush flowering yard. She only sighed
and pulled her thread through the piece of cloth she was embroidering. Loki and Thor both dove
behind a hedge. “Shh, quiet!” Loki hissed at Thor, who was trying and failing to scold his brother
for getting him into this. He conveniently ignored the fact that he’d cheerfully gone along with the
whole thing.

Loki clamped a hand over Thor’s mouth as he heard footsteps approaching. There were several
moments where the only thing that they heard were those steps growing steadily louder. “Mother!” Tyr called as he came to a stop just inside of the garden. Loki shrunk down with Thor behind the hedge and peered through the branches of the bush as best he could. “Have you seen Loki and Thor?”

“Why? You look upset Tyr, darling.”

Tyr made a face. “The little brats thought greasing my recruit’s weapons would be funny,” Tyr complained. “I plan to teach them otherwise. One should not disrespect a weapon in such a way. It is unbecoming a Warrior or a Prince… much less a pair.”

Frigga’s lips twitched a little. “Perhaps your recruits should be respectful enough of their weapons to notice when the handles have been greased,” she said mildly. “Did anyone get injured?”

“No,” Tyr answered almost reluctantly. “That’s the only reason I won’t be tanning their hides,” he added in a growl. “Honestly, whoever heard of such a thing?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Darling… I seem to recall a young Prince that made a paste of flour and water to replace the leather polish in all the barracks…” Frigga said without looking up from her work. “He seemed to think such things were quite hilarious.”

Tyr turned bright red. “That’s not the same,” he grumbled. “Nobody could have gotten hurt from that.”

Frigga hummed a little and pulled her bright green thread through the cloth in her hands again. The golden tunic had just needed that extra touch and some beautifully embroidered vines were working perfectly. “If I see Thor or Loki, I will be sure to send them to you for your punishment, Tyr. But nothing too severe. Nobody got harmed.”

The oldest of Odin’s sons huffed a bit but nodded in agreement. “Very well. I promise I won’t actually give them a lashing.”

“Very good.”

Tyr bent down and gave his mother a kiss on the cheek before turning and leaving the garden, still looking displeased but at least mildly less explosive. Loki could only barely wait until Tyr was out of earshot before springing up from behind the bushes, “Did Tyr really do that?”

“Loki, that was not the point,” Frigga said calmly.

Loki frowned a little. Thor popped his own head up over the hedge to look at his mother, still looking as beautiful and serene as she always did. How many times had he seen her precisely this way? Sewing or weaving or just reading in her garden with the warm Asgardian sunlight shining all around? Thor found himself smiling before he could stop himself. “Are you really going to send us to Tyr, mother?” Loki asked a little petulantly. “It’s not our fault his men don’t have two brain cells in all their heads put together…”

“Yes, Loki,” Odin’s Queen replied. “Because even if you are far cleverer than anyone else doesn’t make it acceptable to be cruel to them.”

“It was just a little prank,” Loki protested. “It wasn’t even close to cruel,” he added in a low mutter.

Thor quickly looked over, but Loki wasn’t paying him much attention. Something about the way Loki had said that triggered an alarm of some sort in Thor’s head. Normally, he’d have just brushed
off the comment as Loki’s mean-spirited streak raising its head, but now Thor wasn’t so sure. He couldn’t really ask what Loki meant however as Frigga had finally looked up at them. “Loki, Thor, I expect you both to accept your punishment gracefully. And to actually voice an apology,” she seemed to direct the second part of that solely to Loki, who again just huffed in response.

“Yes, Mother,” Thor agreed softly.

There was a moment of silence before Loki sighed. “Yes, Mother,” he also agreed.

Frigga smiled. “There’s my boys. Come give me a kiss and then go back to Tyr,” she commanded, holding her arm out.

Thor and Loki knew it was best to just do as their mother said. Loki was obviously far from happy but accepted Frigga’s embrace without protest. Once they’d given her the requested kiss, Frigga gave them both a gentle but firm swat on the backside with her sewing frame to get them moving. Both Princes left quickly before that could become something slightly more forceful. “Do you think they’ll tell Father?” Loki asked as they walked.

Thor winced. “Probably.”

Loki sighed but nodded. Such a thing wouldn’t be surprising, which meant that depending on how Tyr decided to punish them, they could be in store for two. Thor couldn’t help the slight rush of fear and shame at the very thought of upsetting his Father again. Though he understood now why Odin had banished him the whole ordeal was still a rather painful memory. He’d been punished before that, of course, but never so firmly. That might have been part of the problem, he reluctantly admitted. He couldn’t really be certain; he just knew he didn’t want to ever see that look on his father’s face again. The sheer disappointment had carved out his insides remarkably well and was without a doubt the worst part of the punishment. Mjolnir’s rejection following closely behind that and then Loki’s lie while Shield had kept Thor prisoner. In truth, Thor had rather enjoyed the rest of his banishment. He’d never before been able to talk about the most basic of Asgardian concepts and been considered highly intelligent. He wasn’t stupid, but he certainly wasn’t like Loki.

Thor didn’t attempt to direct Loki to a more direct path down to the training yard despite having passed by the same statue of their Grandfather Bor three times as they walked. Loki was obviously delaying, and Thor wasn’t going to stop him from doing so, as he didn’t want to face Tyr’s punishment either. Instead, he turned his attention away from punishments both past and future and focused on what Loki had said earlier. Rather than Loki’s usual light tone, he’d sounded bitter and unhappy, too much like how he’d been before Thor came back. Thor had hoped he’d never hear his brother’s voice like that again.

Loki wasn’t really paying Thor any attention at all. He was just focused on the ground as they walked. “Loki…” Bright green eyes instantly snapped to Thor. “What did you mean when you said what we did wasn’t even close to cruel?”

Loki’s eyes slid away. “Just what I said. What we did was harmless. It wasn’t cruel. And even if it were cruel… there are people that deserve such things.” Thor wanted to ask. To find out what exactly Loki was talking about because he had the feeling it was important. But the words just wouldn’t come. Thor tried several times but didn’t get any further than opening his mouth and then staring blankly like a fish. Thor dug his fingernails into the palm of his hand and swore, even as they finally made their way to Tyr again, that whatever had happened or had been threatened or whatever it ended up being, did not happen again.
**Hermod** - Hermod is in mythology yet another listed son of Odin although a few phrases seem to consider him more a servant of Odin than a son. I decided to make him a servant of Odin as there are plenty in the immediate family as it is. Hermod is noted as being the fastest of the Gods and often serves as the messenger. He is the one who went to Hel after Baldr died to see if he could be brought back in exchange for anything. The attempt ultimately did not work. In Marvel, Hermod is again the messenger of the Gods.

**Meili** - Meili is again listed as a son of Odin and brother to Thor. Though there isn't much beyond that about him. Because of the general lack of information about Meili, I decided to make him a character that is generally quiet.

**Trolls** - Trolls, giants, and the like were often used interchangeably for the earliest myths and folklore. However, they slowly grew into being considered different races. Trolls weren't always described as large or ugly or even stupid but considering they were considered this quite often and even more so in modern times, I decided to stick with it.

**Seidmadr and Seidkona** - Men and women respectively who use Seidr. Seidmadr were much less common as men who practiced it were considered to be weakening themselves. An interesting little fact, in the poem *Lokasenna* where Loki essentially goes on a long flyting (or contest of exchanged insults) with the other gods Loki actually insults Odin for using Seidr, which I find a delightful little change of pace from what has become Canon/fanon in the Marvel Loki lore.

**Ilmr** - Ilmr has been considered both a Goddess and a Valkyrie and it's unclear which was the original intended interpretation. Her name might be connected to the word *ilmr* which means, roughly, pleasant scent though it could also be related to Elm trees. She isn't really mentioned more than her name and even then not in Eddic poetry. Using the 'pleasant scent' interpretation, I figured Ilmr would make a good cook, because food smells good, right? I particularly like fresh baked bread.

**Thor and Goats** - The little quip Loki says in this chapter about Thor liking goats is a reference to the goats that pull his cart, Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjostr, both of whom shall be making an appearance later on in this fic. Thor has a habit of eating his goats and then resurrecting them then next day and so long as the goats' bones aren't harmed they seem to make a full recovery. (Although what a life...)

**Thor's Intelligence** - While in this story I'm going with the popular canon/fanon that Loki is the more intelligent brother and Thor is the 'jock', I'm going with the idea that Thor is not really that unintelligent. Just compared to Loki he appears that way. Compared to the average knowledge of humans, Thor would be quite smart indeed, if rather naive. He strikes me as a really giant puppy. Really sweet and trainable but sometimes you just have to shake your head at his antics.
Go to get their punishment from Tyr didn't turn out to be so terrible. The oldest son of Odin ranted and raved for a little while (something to which neither of his baby brothers paid much attention to) and then sent them to go clean up all the weapons they had 'vandalized'. Cleaning the weapons was far from fun but wasn't difficult per say. Not even unexpected really. Loki hated the punishment more than Thor did. "Surely there is cleaner that does not smell so foul," Loki muttered as he gingerly dipped his cloth in the small bowl beside him. He was trying his utmost best to avoid getting even the slightest residue on his skin. Thor would have told him that it was a pointless thing to try and do but didn't think Loki would appreciate the observation.

"I've never found any," Thor commented as he scrubbed the grease off the handle of a particularly heavy sword. Despite the cleaner and conditioner being specifically made for the leather wraps of weapons, the grease was clinging stubbornly. "Where did you get this grease from anyway, Loki?"

"The docks," Loki answered as he flung his rag over the handle of a mace and tried to scrub it with as little touch as he could manage. "It is used for weatherproofing the ships. Keeping water out of the engines and all."

Thor grunted a little and adjusted his grip to scrub harder. "Well, it certainly is stubborn."

"I suppose it needs to be," Loki replied. "Sea water is quite corrosive."

"Next time, how about we use something... a little less industrial," Thor suggested. They had already been working for hours and hadn't quite finished half the weapons yet. The sun had set about an hour and a half ago so now they also had to contend with working by lamplight rather than sunlight. "That way we won't be here through dinner again."

"Oh, please," Loki said. "As if I would ever stoop to doing the same thing twice. I'm not nearly that predictable."

Thor shook his head a little and suppressed his urge to laugh. "Apologies, Brother, I don't know what I was thinking," he drawled.

"You weren't," Loki replied. "It's a common affliction with you. I've learned to just do the thinking for both of us," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "Everything is so much easier that way."

Thor rolled his eyes and flung one of his rags at his brother. He smirked some at the indignant noise of protest that got. "Thor!"

"I thought you might need another rag," Thor said sweetly.
Loki gave him the deadest stare ever. "My thanks..." he said sarcastically.

"If you two would stop chatting you might be done by now," Tyr said as he came in from the door behind where his brothers were sitting amid a clutter of half cleaned weapons. Both Loki and Thor half turned to look at their older brother. "Loki, are you even scrubbing those?" Tyr asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," Loki answered indignantly.

"It doesn't look it," Tyr said as he put a tray down between the two younger princes. On the tray was two plates of bread and roast with two tankards. "Mother said to bring this to you. Enjoy it because this is the only dinner you're getting tonight."

Loki looked down at the plate beside him and made a slight face. "Joy."

"Be glad you're getting anything," Tyr responded. "If I had my way, you two wouldn't be eating at all until you finished in here."

"Then I'm glad it's not up to you," Loki replied in a sugary tone.

"Brat," Tyr said although his voice sounded rather affectionate. "Just get to work. If you're out here all night long, Mother will be upset about how little rest you got. Even if it is your own fault."

Thor chuckled a little as Tyr left the barracks again so that the two youngest princes could get back to their work. "Are you actually going to be helpful with the rest of these?" Thor asked as he bent back down over the sword he was cleaning.

"I am helping," Loki protested as he used two fingers to fling the extra cloth he had been hit with into a pile of similarly discarded rags.

"Yes, I see that," Thor replied.

Loki chuckled a bit at the expression but nonetheless bent down to continue with his half of the work, albeit with a far lighter touch than Thor was using. He was still not terribly enamoured with the smell of the leather cleaner and wanted to avoid getting it all over him. The grease had been bad enough in his opinion. There was no need to add to the smell.

With Loki only barely helping and Thor in no particular rush, it took the brothers most of the night to actually finish cleaning the weapons that they had greased. By the time they finally trudged out of the barracks the moon was starting to descend again towards the horizon. "If you were more help we would have finished hours ago," Thor said as he rubbed his sore shoulder with his hand. Loki just rolled his eyes at that and folded his arms behind his back. They walked along the path that led back up to the castle at a leisurely pace.

As the two brothers walked, Thor turned his attention to the 'Loki Problem' as it kept coming up in his mind. Telling his brother of his heritage was a dilemma that Thor kept turning over in his head unsuccessfully. But Thor figured he could at least perhaps help his brother see Midgard differently. "Loki?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you ever wonder about other places?"

Loki looked over at his brother with obvious confusion. "... yes, but I did not think that you did."
"I wonder about other places once and a while," Thor said a little defensively. "Midgard interests me a lot."

"Midgard?" Loki echoed in bewilderment. "There's hardly anything on Midgard."

"Maybe not yet, but it's still young, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose," Loki acknowledged. "But there's still nothing there. Why do you think the Jotunns had such an easy time there? There are far more interesting realms to explore if that's your wish, brother. Vanaheim sounds particularly nice to me." Loki's eyes practically glittered with excitement and Thor could tell his brother was thinking about all the sorcery that he could possibly learn in such a realm.

Thor snorted a little. "Of course it does. You just want to ogle their libraries."

"I do not ogle libraries," Loki protested.

"You do," Thor insisted with a laugh.

Loki gave him a half-hearted glare before turning his attention back to where he was going. "How about we make a deal," Thor said after they had walked for another few minutes. "I will go to Vanaheim with you and you go to Midgard with me."

"I still don't understand what your interest in a realm with virtually nothing in it is but fine, Thor," Loki said. "If that's what you want. We'll probably be bored out of our minds there, though."

"Don't be so pessimistic," Thor said cheerfully. "I'm sure even you can find something worth while there if we just give it a chance. Perhaps they are very good at brewing beer or something."

Loki snorted. "That sounds more like something you'd be interested in. I prefer to not act like a complete fool just because I drink something," he said dryly.

"Ah, loosen up, Brother. It isn't so bad," Thor said.

Loki just gave Thor a rather bland look. "I recall the first time you were allowed to try beer... and the mess that had to be cleaned up after it," he said. "Just how sick did you get again?"

Thor felt his face heat up. "It wasn't that bad," he muttered.

"You say that but I remember differently," Loki said lightly. "Well, I remember it at all, which is already an improvement over yourself." Thor scowled a little more but decided it was best to not protest further. Loki did have a point. Thor had managed to convince his parents to allow him to try beer again after returning to this body and he'd perhaps overestimated his young stomach just a bit. He'd gotten terribly ill from the amount he'd drank without really thinking about his change in physical size. He doubted he would ever actually live it down.

Loki chuckled some but didn't bother hiding his smile at all. "Alright, well, as fun as this is... it's late and I smell like leather polish. So, goodnight, Brother," Loki said as they reached his door.

Thor murmured his own response and waited until Loki's door was closed before continuing on to his own room. He smelled even more like leather polish than his brother did since he hadn't bothered trying to avoid it in the first place. He imagined it would take a bit of his own scrubbing to get the smell off his skin fully.

Even after scrubbing his hands and arms for a good hour the smell wasn't fully gone, but at that
point, Thor gave up and went to bed. He didn't care that much and he was exhausted. His forearms were sore from all the scrubbing as well and he just knew they would be more so when he woke up in the morning. Probably almost as bad as when he first started using Mjolnir. Nothing could truly top Thor in his early days of wielding the mighty hammer but the soreness from scrubbing all night was definitely coming close.

The next morning, Thor had the very unpleasant wake up call of about twenty chickens being let loose under his covers. Beaks and claws tore at his exposed skin and feathers flew everywhere as Thor thrashed to try and get free. He was cursing by the time he managed to fall out of his bed and away from the now rampant and terrified birds. "Loki!" he roared as he scrambled back from a chicken that had landed beside him and was looking particularly murderous. He didn't spot his brother anywhere but Thor knew that didn't mean much.

Feathers were flying every which way and Thor's legs were bleeding here and there from particularly deep scratches. The annoyed God of Thunder kicked at one of the menaces and it squawked with indignation as it tried to fly away and only barely avoided the hit to its feathery backside.

Thor went to the door that led to his balcony and opened the door. Several of the chickens rushed the exit leaving a trail of feathers behind while a couple of the stupid birds just hid around Thor's bedroom. With more than a few grumbles of annoyance, Thor set to shooing the rest of the birds towards the balcony. The stupid chickens were acting more than a little difficult and running from Thor, but only of course when they weren't heading towards the door. More and more feathers escaped and Thor's floor was covered with what looked to be the contents of an entire pillow before he finally got all of the fowl outside.

He must have looked at least a little crazy as he left his room and hurried down the hall to his brother's. Thor didn't bother to knock as he burst into Loki's room and tackled his brother where he was reading sprawled out on his bed. Loki let out a yelp as they both went flying over the side of the mattress to land hard on the ground. "Thor!"

"Take your punishment, Loki!" Thor replied as he attacked his brother with relentless fingers against the few ticklish spots he knew the trickster to have. Loki shrieked and tried to squirm away but Thor easily managed to pin the other boy in a hold against the ground. "My room is covered in feathers, Loki!"

"Oh? Did you finally molt, brother?" Loki shot back. "Good for you!" He yelped and squirmed more as Thor managed to worm several fingers down Loki's back to get that particularly sensitive spot near his neck. "Thor!"

Thor ignored his brother's protests and continued to get his (admittedly, somewhat childish) revenge until Loki's face had turned bright pink and he was gasping for air. Thor finally released his brother and sat back. Loki gave a halfhearted glare as he sat up and kicked Thor lightly in the side. "Brute."

Thor chuckled some and used Loki's bed as a backrest. "Where did you get so many chickens from, anyway?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Loki said as he straightened his shirt in a very dignified manner. "I don't even like chickens."

"I'm talking about the twenty chickens that were dropped very suddenly in my bed and carved up my legs," Thor said holding up one leg and gesturing to the scratches on his calf.
"Poor baby," Loki said sarcastically.

"It was obviously magical," Thor added.

Loki blinked innocently. "Why, Brother... I wouldn't expect you to find barnyard animals in your bed to be 'magical,'" he said lightly.

"Oh, ha ha," Thor snapped before pushing his brother again. Loki laughed even as he fell over onto the ground. "You are such a pain sometimes."

"Am I now?"

"Yes."

Loki grinned widely and pushed himself back up. "I wouldn't be nearly as charming if I weren't," he said. There was a knock on the door, and Loki cleared his throat. "Yes?"

"Loki, darling, come to breakfast. You as well, Thor," Frigga called.

"Coming, Mother," Loki called back. Loki got to his feet and straightened his clothes before holding a hand down to help Thor up. "You need to get cleaned up and dressed," he observed as Thor popped up to his feet. "You look like you came from a barn."

Thor gave him a dull glare. "You're hilarious."

"I think so."

"Of course you do," Thor said as he made his way towards the door. "Tell Mother that I'll be there in a minute."

Loki nodded and headed out of the room. Thor groaned a little as he headed back to his room so that he could get ready for the day. He wasn't sure what they would be doing today since they were confined to the castle and its grounds but Thor imagined that Loki would be able to think of something. Hopefully it wouldn't involve anymore chickens.

At the first meal of the day, Thor and Loki received an official scolding from their father. Thor was barely listening and, considering the way his oatmeal kept forming strangely chicken shaped lumps while he was eating it, he didn't think Loki was paying much attention either. Keeping a straight face while stabbing little oatmeal chickens was surprisingly challenging, and Thor figured the easiest way was to not look at what he was eating all that much. Loki was keeping his nose almost buried in his own bowl but Thor wasn't fooled in the least. Occasionally, the Trickster's shoulders would jerk as he muffled his amusement.

Odin finally seemed to wind down from his lecture and sat back in his chair heavily. "I take you two have learned your lesson yesterday?" he asked.

"Yes, Father." Thor kicked Loki as subtly as he could under the table and got the younger Prince to quickly look up with his own agreement.

The King of Asgard didn't look entirely convinced. "Very good. But just to be certain... Lady Vor has agreed to supervise your activities today."

Thor couldn't help the face that announcement caused. His Father's voice had been rather ominous there. "What activities?"
Frigga cleared her throat and leaned forward just a little to better address her sons. "The art wing of the library needs cleaning. I'm afraid the maids have not been able to get to it lately. Your Father and I thought you might like to help them." Both Princes groaned aloud at that. While Loki wouldn't mind being in the library, cleaning the art wing most likely meant a copious amount of dusting, which he hated. Frigga didn't bother suppressing her smile any. "Now, now, I do believe I told you both to take your punishments gracefully."

"... yes, Mother."

"Very good."

"Perhaps this will remind you both that you are Princes of Asgard. Such petty tricks are beneath you," Odin said as he picked up his goblet.

Frigga sighed some and reached over to put a hand on Odin's forearm. "Yes, dear. They've already heard all of this. I doubt you need to repeat yourself," she said firmly. "Besides, Kings should not feel the need to repeat themselves."

"If my sons listened I would not have to," Odin muttered into his cup.

Frigga patted Odin's arm comfortably although it was clear from her expression she thought he was being patently silly. "If you two are done, go on and see the Lady Vor," she told her sons. Thor quickly shoved the last bits of his breakfast down his throat before jumping to his feet. Though he didn't want to go dust all day, staying around to possibly have to listen to Odin's lecture over again wasn't much more appealing.

Loki seemed to agree with that idea as he drank down the remains of his cup even while moving. The two of them hurried out of the dining room. Thor swallowed down the last bits of his meal and wiped his mouth of any residue. "I thought we'd be stuck in there another hour," he admitted.

"I think Mother tires of hearing it just as much as we do," Loki said. "But dusting... she could not have thought of a more tedious task..."

"If she tried, I imagine that she could," Thor muttered. "Mother is quite clever herself."

"True," Loki admitted as they made their way through the halls of the palace. "But I think dusting plenty unpleasant enough as it is. No need to go searching for what could be worse..."

Thor nodded a little. "Does that mean no more pranks?"

"Why, Thor, whatever is the matter with you?" Loki asked, looking mildly offended. "How slow the day would pass without any sort of entertainment."

"This is why we keep getting into trouble, you know," Thor said with no small amount of exasperation.

Loki shrugged. "I'm practicing my spell casting."

"I don't think I believe you."

Loki put a hand to his chest and looked incredibly wounded. "Brother... you cut me."

"I think you'll survive."

"Mm, your concern for my welfare is noted, Thor."
Thor chuckled some and followed Loki down the hall to the great library where they would no doubt be spending an obnoxious amount of time trying to remove dust from all of the ancient statues and pottery that was on display in the art wing. Though there was artwork on display throughout the palace, the rarest and most historical pieces were kept under lock and key for their own protection. Thor thought it a little silly to do, after all, who would go out of their way to destroy statues and tapestries? Though he supposed it did keep all of the rarest of the Royal collection in one spot. Having to trample all over the palace cleaning things that were spread out would probably be even less enjoyable than being stuck in the art wing all day.

Lady Vor was waiting for them and the two Princes barely got out a greeting to her before they were handed special cloths and cleaning supplies. "Now don't you two fool about in here," Vor said as she opened the door to the long hall filled with various pieces of art and history. "There are quite a few fragile pieces and none of them can be replaced."

"Yes, Lady Vor," Loki said obediently as he picked up his currently bright white cloth. Thor wondered idly how long the fabric would stay so clean. Probably not very long at all. Lady Vor nodded to them and went to sit at a small table at the top of the hall where she opened a thick leather bound book covered in runes. Loki and Thor exchanged a long look before glancing at the different artifacts. "You start down there and I start up here?" Loki suggested with a vague gesture towards the nearest statue.

Thor sighed but nodded in agreement. "We'll meet in the middle," he said before trudging down the hall to the very end where Thor recognized some of his mother's own weavings on display. Thor was a little surprised to see Frigga's tapestries on these walls, but then again, they were all depicting events that had happened ages ago so perhaps that was why they were there.

Tapestries were not particularly easy to dust, so Thor had to carefully knock the dust and dirt out of the weave without damaging them. The whole thing was an exercise in restraint with his massive strength. Thinking of his punishment as a strange form of training helped pass the time surprisingly well. By the time he realized he was getting hungry for the midday meal, he had made it through a good portion of his half of the room. Although the tapestries were starting to become scattered between statues and pottery, which slowed his progress down significantly.

Thor climbed up on top of a nearby step stool so that he could reach the top of a large stone slab. There weren't many carvings on display in the hall, mostly because of how heavy and cumbersome they were. The one that Thor was currently cleaning off was the largest in the room and thoroughly covered in reliefs and carvings.

"Thor!"

The Golden Prince of Asgard nearly toppled to the ground but managed to catch himself. He leaned back from the stone slab to peer down the hallway at his Brother. "What?"

"Why is it all our punishments involve cleaning things?" Loki asked from where he was cleaning off some tiny pot that had been painted with blue that had been flecked away over the years.

"Perhaps because they know how much you dislike it?" Thor suggested.

Loki made a face. "I don't mind cleaning up... when it's my own mess..."

Thor grinned widely and turned back to the slab of stone that he was cleaning off. The big piece that was held against the wall had been shattered at one point and then painstakingly put back together. Giant cracks were running through the entire scene and several pieces along the edges were missing. The scene was, rather unsurprisingly, a battle scene of some sort where the King of
Asgard was wielding some strange blocky thing.

Thor paused in his cleaning and looked closer. After just a moment, he straightened in surprise as he realized just what he was looking at. The Tesseract was right there carved in stone and he'd never even noticed it. Then again, Thor rarely spent time looking at these ancient works of art. Thor leaned back enough to peer down the hall at where Vor was still doing whatever it was she was doing at the front of the room. Satisfied she wouldn't notice anything, Thor turned his full attention to what was right in front of him and by all accounts had been for all his life.

Lines were coming from the Tesseract, and Thor traced them with his cleaning cloth as he tried to recall what the older version of the runes in front of him translated to. He wasn't nearly as good with these older runes as he was with newer versions. Luckily, the helm on the King of Asgard was easy enough for the fledgling Thunder God to identify. His Grandfather Bor was always shown with that same down-pointing horned helm. But Thor had never heard anything of his Grandfather using the Tesseract.

The army on the opposing side looked to be Elves, which made sense as Bor's most well known foes had been the Malekith and his Dark Elves. But what was strange was that the one in front of the Svartalfr was not an Elf at all. Really, the inclusion of someone other than Aesir or Alfr was just mind boggling. There shouldn't have been any Giants in the fray at all and yet Thor couldn't help but recognize the form as that of a giant. Whether it was a Frost or Fire Giant was rather harder to tell but the figure was definitely beyond the stature of an Aesir.

Unfortunately, almost all of the runes that told of what was actually happening in the scene had been broken off or otherwise obliterated from time. Thor could only make out a few unimportant details such as his Grandfather's name and a few praises for the Aesir army. Nothing that really helped explain who was getting destroyed with the Tesseract by his Grandfather. Normally, Thor would think perhaps Sutur but he was positive that Odin himself had dealt with Sutur and not Bor. And that it had not been done with the Tesseract.

Thor stood there pondering the strange scene for another few moments before his curiosity got the best of him. "Lady Vor!" he called, pulling back enough to look over at her. "Who is this?"

The unexpected question got not only Vor's attention but also Loki's. Both of them came over to where Thor had been cleaning the slab. Lady Vor seemed very surprised when she realized what Thor was asking about. "Ah, well, that is a depiction of the early days of the war with Svartalfheim. The Jotunn Loptr betrayed King Bor and sided with the Elves after swearing fealty to Asgard. King Bor then destroyed him during the battle."

"Jotunn Loptr?" Loki echoed. "I've never heard of him..."

"He is not spoken of very often," Lady Vor said in a sort of agreement. "He was raised here in Asgard by Queen Bestla and King Bor along side their three sons as one of their own but his nature was too treacherous."

Thor was taken aback by the striking similarity between Loki and Loptr. Why had he never heard of this Loptr? Thor tried hard to not look at his brother but couldn't quite manage it. Loki was studying the engravings carefully and Thor felt another sting of guilt that he hadn't told Loki the truth yet. Perhaps this was the opening that he needed? Thor turned to look at Vor. "Why did our Grandparents raise Loptr?"

Vor waved a hand slightly. "Loptr was orphaned during the journey of Queen Bestla to Asgard. She adopted him afterwards and raised him here as part of her family," Vor explained.
"How bizarre..." Loki murmured, still studying the image in front of them. "I suppose it didn't work out too well for them, though. Must be what happens when you take in Jotnar."

Thor nearly winced. "Not all of them are like that, surely," Thor said quickly. The last thing he wanted was the hear Loki say something like that against his own people.

Thor's quick reply caused Loki to look over at him in surprise. "Really, Thor?" he asked. "They attacked your oh-so-interesting Midgard, you know... surely you would dislike them for that alone."

"Well, I don't," Thor said firmly. He might have once. But that was another life and another, less informed, time. He simply couldn't make such sweeping statements anymore. "I don't know any of those Jotnar to dislike and even if I did, they were defeated. Honored Enemies are just as important as Allies... just in a different way."

That got him another surprised look from Loki and Vor. "Very wise indeed, my Prince," Vor murmured. "I must say, I am impressed to hear such a thing from one so young."

Thor turned back to study the carving of his Grandfather killing someone he'd raised as his own son and felt very uneasy. He sincerely hoped history would never repeat. Just the idea of Odin killing Loki made Thor's entire chest seize up painfully. Perhaps that was why their Father made no mention of Loptr? Thor glanced over his shoulder at Vor again. "Why does Father never mention this? Loptr was raised as his brother wasn't he? Our Uncle?"

"Father doesn't speak of his other brothers either," Loki pointed out.

Thor had to admit that was true. The only reason he knew about his Uncles Vili and Ve was because of the stories about the fight with Sutur. When he was even younger than he was now, Thor had loved being told the story of his Father and Uncles defeating the massive Fire Giant King. He hadn't realized back then that Odin had never stayed when Thor begged for that story. He'd always heard it from Frigga rather than Odin. Thor couldn't help but worry that his childish exuberance had hurt his father unintentionally. That Odin wouldn't want to relive his grand victory had never occurred to a young Thor, despite the fact that it had cost his Father two of his brothers. Now that Thor had a better idea the pain that such a loss caused, he couldn't help but want to kick himself for his thoughtlessness.

"Our King prefers to focus on the future rather than the past," Vor said. "We cannot change the past. Only the future."

Somehow, Thor managed to avoid looking at Loki while he stood there trying his utmost best to not look as incredibly guilty as he felt. He was unsure how successful he was.

Chapter End Notes

**The Tesseract**- All that has been said about the Tesseract and how it came to be on Earth for Hydra to find was that Odin brought it to Midgard and left it for some unknown reason. This implies that it wasn't on Midgard during Bor's rule and as such I found it unlikely that Bor would have never used it in battle. We see him using Gungnir during the Dark World Movie without a single qualm.

**Svartalfr**- One of the names for Dark Elves. I found this one made the most sense to
use since their realm is Svartalfheim.

**Alfr**- Alfr is used here as a more general term for Elves and as such could be used for Light or Dark. Much like how Jotunns initially could have referred to either Ice or Fire giants. Marvel uses Jotunn specifically for Ice however and that is what I will be sticking with.

**Sutur vs Bor's Sons**- In Mythology, Bor's sons (Odin, Vili and Ve) fight Sutur and seem to all live through the fight. In Marvel, Odin is the only one to survive and his brothers Vili and Ve give Odin their power so that he can win. I find this a very satisfying explanation for how Odin could be so incredibly powerful in the comics beyond that of normal Aesir's and so have used the Marvel telling.

**Loptr**- In Mythology, Loki is actually the brother of Odin, not Thor. He is often described as a half or foster brother of Odin. I decided to reconcile this with the Marvel cannon of Loki being Thor's brother by creating another character using one of Loki's other names and making him Odin's Foster brother. That means that Loptr in this story is essentially an OC and while his story will have many similarities to Loki's they are not the same character. But having Loptr included will play a large part of the story of the Asgardian Royal family later on.

**Bor and Bestla**- Bestla and Bor are Thor's Grandparents. Neither had too much history in Myth that I could find however Bestla was quite definitely portrayed as a Jotunn. The trip referenced by Vor in this chapter where Bestla adopted Loptr was a usual trip that the Queen would take back to her homeland. And unlike Loki, Loptr was a full sized non-disguised Jotunn. As was Bestla.

If it isn't entirely obvious by now, a lot of this story is going to be dealing with the history of the Asgardian Royal Family and the things that they just don't talk about such as dead Uncles and the various secrets they keep from each other. Hence, a lot of their Canon specifically is up for picking and choosing for me.

As of this chapter the revealed Family Tree of Odin is as follows:

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Bor = Bestla
\/
Frigga = Odin---Vili---Ve~~~Loptr
|\/
Tyr---Hodr+-Baldr---Thor~~~Loki
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= is married
\/ is child of
--- is siblings
+-+ is twins
and ~~~ is adopted
Meeting

Chapter Summary

New evidence in the attacks upon Asgardian Citizens leads to Odin arranging a meeting with another King.

Chapter Notes

So this is the first, albeit short, chapter not focused solely through Thor. There will be more of these as the story progresses because Thor simply won't be around for all of the important things that are going on. There will even be chapters following Loki in the future.

Odin Borson, King of Asgard, stood at the very edges of the room as the healers did their work. There had been another attack upon his people. Another secluded farm on the very outskirts of Asgard raided in the middle of the night with no warning. Nobody had stepped up to take responsibility for the strikes as of yet, but after four such incidents in as many weeks, they now had a few more clues.

Eir moved away from the body she and her assistants were examining to stand beside Odin Allfather. Odin didn't look at her. He was too busy staring at the small figure on the Soul Forge. The boy was far too young to be dead. He couldn't have been much older than Thor or Loki and still in his night clothes though he had been found many yards from the farm in the woods. His arm was blackened from his wrist to his bicep. "We've confirmed it's frostbite," Eir said. "He was probably grabbed as he tried to flee."

"Jotnar then," Odin murmured. He had been desperately hoping it wasn't Jotnar behind this.

Eir nodded. "There are no other marks upon him, and so, we cannot be certain what precisely killed him... but then you are also more knowledgeable about Jotnar magic than myself, my King."

The memory of his father turning to snow flashed in his mind's eye briefly even as he nodded in agreement. Odin blinked the image away impatiently to move on to the situation at hand. The touch of a Jotunn shouldn't have killed. The boy would have lost the arm most likely but shouldn't have died from the frostbite damage alone. Unless, Odin supposed, the child had a preexisting condition such as difficulty breathing or a weakened heart. Such a thing would be much harder to detect. "The others?" Odin asked. There had been six bodies that had been brought in that morning.

"Much easier to identify," Eir said. "Sword wounds on all of them. No more frostbite, however."

"They were most likely trying to conceal who they were and so avoided touching their victims during the fight," a new voice from the doorway offered.

Odin moved his eye to the side and frowned a little as Councilman Arngrim, one of the more
outright against Jotnar, stepped into the dimly lit room. Under the glow of the Soul Forge his already dark brown eyes seemed entirely black, and his wispy grey hair almost disappeared against his head. Arngrim needed a cane to walk ever since he nearly lost a leg during Bor's war with the Dark Elves, but that didn't seem to change his smooth gait very much. He was still quite the formidable opponent when he felt the mood for a fight, which was often. "I told you we could not trust Laufey to keep control of those animals, Allfather. How many more of our people will die because of those monsters?"

"Careful, Arngrim. Laufey is a King. Afford him the appropriate title," Odin said as he turned his attention back to the information still being recorded above the body of the young boy.

Arngrim scoffed lightly. "As you say, Allfather." The old man didn't sound terribly happy, but Odin let that go for the moment. Arngrim never seemed happy when told to keep his dislike of Jotnar contained. "But still, we should retaliate. Too much Aesir blood has been spilled with no repercussions."

"Repercussions?" Odin echoed as he turned to face the senior Aes. "Without so much as an attempt to speak with Laufey King?"

"He has not spoken to you! For all you know he's commanding these raids himself!" Arngrim near roared.

"And for all you know he's no more aware of this than I was aware of those 'hunting' incidents," Odin said, trying very hard to not growl as he did. He thought he was fairly well successful considering how angry he still was about that situation. The fact that some of his guards had apparently thought it was not only okay but good sport to cross the border between realms and hunt Jotnar down to kill had infuriated Odin beyond belief. The last thing his kingdom needed was even more strained relations with Jotunheim.

"I find that unlikely, Allfather," Arngrim replied although he sounded a little more subdued.

Odin frowned. "No matter how unlikely you find it, it is still possible," he pointed out before turning to look at one of his Einherjar. "Contact King Laufey. Tell him to meet me at our usual conference spot at midday." The guardsman looked somewhat startled but bowed and went to go send the message.

"Tell me that you will be taking some Einherjar with you, Allfather," Arngrim said.

"I will take Tyr, as usual. And you have no room to complain, Arngrim," Odin said firmly. "Now leave, this is not a place for arguments."

Arngrim looked like he would very much rather keep complaining and arguing but, after a moment, thought better of doing so. Instead, Arngrim bowed low and left the room. Odin waited several minutes to be absolutely certain Arngrim was gone before turning back to Eir. "Is there anything else, Lady?"

"No, Allfather," Eir said. "I shall have a complete and formal report ready for you by supper."

Odin nodded in understanding before leaving the healing chamber. He was very much not looking forward to meeting with Laufey later on, but then he was never really looking forward to meetings with the Jotunn King. Odin started for his office, which was just off of his bedchambers. Though the business of raiders on his borders was pressing, there was also countless other things that required his attention. The Vanir, for instance, were requesting a complete renegotiation of the current trade agreement. Considering Frigga was from Vanaheim, it seemed prudent to at the very
least hear the Vanir out. And then Hodr had sent a letter asking for his advice on unrest in his own realm and Odin wasn't going to just ignore his son asking for help.

Odin sighed as he walked. There was just so much to do. He was almost to his office when he caught sight of his two youngest darting down the hall. Thor was laughing, and Loki looked the very picture of exasperation as he chased behind. Odin watched them disappear down a side corridor before beginning to walk again. He was glad they were enjoying themselves, but he did wish they would try to contain such energy while inside.

Just as he was reaching for the knob of his study door, he heard a loud crash followed by Loki shouting his brother's name. Odin paused mid-motion and closed his eye to pray to the Norns for patience. He didn't recall being this bad with his own brothers. Hodr and Baldr had been a pair of little troublemakers, but they were twins and as such expected to be a handful. There were a few more clatters from around the corner and down the hall, and Odin caught the faint noise of one of his guards on duty stifling his amusement. Odin looked over at where said guard was standing at his position fighting against his smile. "Do you have children, Delgr?"

"No, Allfather. Me and my wife have not yet been blessed as such."

Odin grunted a little. "You might want to hold off another few decades," he said before entering his office. He heard Delgr stifle another snort of amusement but paid it little attention. Odin closed the door and tried to not worry about whatever mess his sons had just made. Whatever that crash had been, probably armor by the sound of it, it probably wasn't anything too terribly expensive.

By the time Odin had finished his reply to his son's letter, there was little time to spare in getting to his meeting with Laufey. There was a knock on his office door just as he was pulling on a thicker cloak. Tyr was waiting outside, having already been informed of the meeting. Tyr gave a slight nod, and the two Aesir started walking through the corridors towards the side exit that was nearest to the stables. "Do you think Laufey condoned these attacks, Father?" Tyr asked after several minutes of walking.

"I somehow doubt it. Starting a fight with us now is not something he'd be willing to do. Laufey is many things but not suicidal," Odin answered. Tyr nodded but stayed mostly silent. Odin glanced over at his eldest. Tyr wasn't the loudest of his sons, but it was always rather obvious when he was preoccupied with something. "What is it, Tyr? You seem to be thinking rather hard."

"Just that this seems an odd move," Tyr said. "Attacking our farms, even if it is not condoned by Laufey doesn't seem like something that the Jotnar would do recklessly. And the fact that there has been only one victim of Frost Touch is particularly odd. I've never known a Jotunn to care if they freeze anyone."

Odin hummed a little in thought as the two of them reached the stables and called for their horses. "You think they are being accused unjustly?" Odin asked.

Tyr sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I do not know," he admitted. "There has to be at least one Jotunn involved, I would think, to have given such a severe case of frostbite."

"A Jotunn is not the only one to be able to freeze another," Odin pointed out softly. "But combined with the tracks and our rather... uncomfortable relations with Jotunheim, I find it unlikely that someone is manufacturing all of the evidence against them."

"Circumspect at best," Tyr said. "We should just be careful with how we deal with this situation. Laufey is... not your biggest fan, Father."
"Nor am I his," Odin muttered as a hostler brought the two warhorses forward already saddled and bridled.

Although Arngrim would most likely prefer Odin to take an entire battalion of forces with him, Odin left with only Tyr by his side to go to the meeting. Long ago, when the terms of the surrender had been finalized, Odin and Laufey had chosen a neutral spot to sign the formalities. A plateau of a mountain in Asgard that was so very tall and the atmosphere thin that the temperatures dropped well below freezing. The climate was still rather warm for a Jotunn but survivable even without spells to keep them comfortable.

The Allfather and his General son arrived at the top of the mountain where several stone pillars and a large slab-like table were still standing from the signing of the surrender all those years ago. The wind was only blocked from one direction, so snow drifts had piled high against the pillars and icicles were hanging from the lip of the table almost all the way to the ground. Waiting for them were two Jotnar by one pillar that had several rows of runes carved along the surface. The slightly shorter of the two turned and took a few steps towards the center of the flattened area. "King Laufey," Odin greeted.

"Allfather. Might I ask the cause of this rather... sudden summons?" Laufey asked arms folded unhappily.

"Several of my people's settlements near the border have been attacked," Odin said.

"A pity."

Tyr shifted slightly, but Odin paid him little attention. "The latest victim was frostbitten," Odin said, locking eyes with the taller ruler. "It's not been particularly cold in Asgard this season... and it was in a rather odd location."

Laufey's eyes flared in anger, and his shoulders stiffened ever so slightly. "You accuse me of arranging these attacks?"

"I accuse you of nothing," Odin replied calmly. "But I would be grateful if you could shed any light on these unsettling circumstances."

"There is a ban on anyone crossing our borders from either side," Laufey said. "The entire stretch of land up til three miles in our territory is military only. No citizens may even approach the border."

"How well is the border patrolled?" Tyr asked.

Laufey's eyes flashed again as they moved from Odin to Tyr. "They are patrolled, General, as well as we can afford. With our people struggling to survive our forces are spread rather thin at the moment," he hissed.

Odin shifted so that Laufey's blood red eyes flicked back. "I understand you cannot patrol every inch at every moment... but my people are being attacked."

"And mine aren't?" Laufey demanded. "I still get reports of Asgardians crossing the border and attacking my people for sport."

Odin's eyes darkened. "I told my men to stop that." He was very displeased to hear that the situation was still happening but there was little else he could do. There wasn't any way to keep the portals closed.
"What of your watchdog?" the other Jotunn asked. "Should he not see all of this and tell you who is murdering our people? How can you claim ignorance when you have one such as Heimdall to spy on others with? You have used him against our people enough times!"

"Byleistr!" Laufey snapped. "Do I appear to need your help?"

Byleistr shifted where he stood. "No, My King," he grumbled.

"Then keep silent," Laufey said. Byleistr bowed low though he had a thunderous scowl on his face. Laufey turned his eyes back entirely to Odin. "Though they do have an excellent point, Allfather. How is it that your people keep disobeying you if you have Heimdall to watch your borders?"

Odin sighed. "I shall investigate that when I return. Perhaps Seidr is somehow involved," Odin said. Truly, such determinations were hard to make so early. Heimdall saw nearly everything, but there were ways to hide from his sight, and if there were something more pressing happening, well, Heimdall would only naturally turn his attention towards that. He only had the two eyes.

"And I shall make it clear to my people that raiding is not to be tolerated," Laufey said almost pleasantly. Odin thought it rather clear that Laufey didn't expect much to come from that declaration. If he were honest with himself, Odin didn't expect much either, but a public statement against certain actions never hurt.

"I suppose that is all I can ask," Odin said. He didn't feel like much had been resolved, but then without more concrete evidence, he couldn't do much else.

Laufey nodded but then, after a brief pause, jerked his head ever so slightly to the side. Odin gestured for Tyr to remain where he was before walking to the edge of the cliff with Laufey where the two Kings would not be overheard by either of their offspring. Laufey didn't look down at Odin and instead fixed his eyes on some distant point along the horizon. "How fares the child?"

"He's well. Healthy and happy." Laufey nodded almost absently and continue to stare out across the distance for several minutes before turning. Odin almost dared to grab the other ruler's arm but didn't. "You could ask more than that you know," he said. He was almost begging for Laufey to ask more, but Laufey had rejected any and all information about 'the child' as he continued to call him.

Laufey stopped, and half turned back to look at Odin. "It's not my place to know more than that. I shouldn't even ask that much."

"He's your son."

"No, he is not, and you know well why," Laufey said.

"It is a foolish law that you, yourself, overturned," Odin hissed with more than a little venom.

Laufey straightened to his fullest height though it was hardly needed. "I overturned that law due to the grief of my child dying. It made quite the compelling argument that my own offspring died senselessly right as so many of our people were killed by your forces. If that child were to suddenly be alive, my people would be far from pleased at the deception inadvertent though it was."

Odin knew that, in a way, Laufey had a point. But he also knew that he was just wrong as well. Jotnar didn't tolerate leaders who were untruthful, or at least not ones that got so obviously caught in a lie. And so, if it suddenly became known that Laufey had changed a law based on something that hadn't actually happened he would be endangering his own life and that of his two other offspring. Still, Odin found himself more than a little incensed on his son's behalf. Because it was a
stupid and cruel law that disallowed the survival of any Jotunn that was not properly formed or sized. Many had broken the law over the centuries, and Laufey had finally gotten rid of it but far too many had died before that had happened.

Seeing how Laufey wouldn't be changing his mind; however, Odin was forced to just accept things were the best they could be. For now. "Just because he cannot return to Jotunheim does not mean you cannot ask about him."

"And what good would that serve, Odin?" Laufey asked, sounding as if it was very difficult to keep his voice calm and low enough to not be overheard. "How would knowing who is raising my child or the name given to it help either of us in any way?"

"Perhaps it would help ease your conscience," Odin said a little haughtily.

"My conscience does not need easing," Laufey denied.

There was a long moment of silence between them as they both weighed whether or not they would accept that lie as truth. "Are you absolutely certain you want to know nothing about him, Laufey?"

"I would just be tempted to steal the child back," Laufey muttered. "And that is a complication none of us need." Laufey gave Odin a short nod before beginning to walk back to where Byleistr was waiting.

"What if he finds out and asks about you some day?" Odin asked.

"Tell the truth, Odin," Laufey replied without turning. "That I left the child to die."

Chapter End Notes

Arngrim- A very unpleasant fellow really. Arngrim was a berserker who went a pillaging (as you do, I imagine) and killed the King Svafrlami (who wasn't terribly pleasant himself) and took his daughter Eyfura as a prize and forced her to marry him. He also took Svafrlami's cursed sword Tyrfing. Alternatively, he was given both Tyrfing and Eyfura as recompense for being such a good little war-chief for an old king. Alternatively, alternatively, he went asking for the hand of another Eyfura who was daughter to a Danish king. The King said no and that started a big thing to go prove himself which ended in a couple deaths and a not so great peace treaty terms for his enemies. No matter how Arngrim married Eyfura he did and they had twelve sons whose names vary depending on the version being told. Originally I wanted to use one of Arngrim's sons here but decided an older Aesir would serve a bit better so went with Arngrim himself.

Aes- This is my own little thing that I came up with because both As and Ass which are the mythological appropriate way of referring to male Norse gods just... doesn't work for me. I suppose I could have used Os which was sort of interchangeable with As but I didn't know how to pluralize that or if it needed pluralization at all. So I settled for chopping off the beginning of Aesir.

Einherjar- The Einherjar are all supposed to be dead people. Though in Marvel and the fandom it has become a name for basically the royal guard of Asgard. So just remember, every time you see one of those fancy golden armors... they're supposed to be
Delgr- Nobody important. Just an Aesir Guard. (Hey, not everyone can be a famous warrior.)

Laufey- Alright, down and dirty here. Laufey is a problem for this fic. I don't want him to be the villain, as it were. I don't like one dimensional characters I.e. evil because I say so. So here, I'm going with the idea of Laufey being a much better King than Father. He hasn't asked Odin anything about Loki and as such doesn't know that the youngest Prince of Asgard is really his own son. Also, it is worth mentioning here that the idea of tossing out imperfect children was an amalgam of the canon of Laufey being ashamed of his son being born small and the idea of *Apothetae* which is the (if you've seen 300) act of tossing 'puny and deformed' babies into a chasm (although there's no real evidence that this happened as the chasm named was excavated and only adult skeletons were in it). There will be further discussion and plots relating to Jotunn's and their physical ideals and basically their genetics later on. (Bet you weren't expecting discussion of Giant Genetics in this fic but, oh yeah, I'm going to get into it at some point because I've got ideas...)

Byleistr- Brother of Loki, Son of Laufey and Farbauti. He's not really given much to work with in either Marvel or Myth so here he's going to be the second son because I don't see Laufey bringing his heir apparent to this meeting.

Gender in the Jotunn- In this fic, I'm going with all frost giants being Agendered. I.e. Intersexed. This is partly because of Loki's pension for going back and forth with genders and also because in myth Farbauti was Loki's father and Laufey was his mother or backwards from how they are in Marvel. This seems an odd change to make by the by, Marvel. This is part of the reason why Laufey does not refer to Loki as 'son' at any point. They don't really see 'son' and 'daughter' unless the individual specifies. Plus, he doesn't know Loki so there's that.

Heimdall pt.2- Heimdall, while he sees a whole heck of a lot, is not omniscient and if he were more like his godly self and a bit more all seeing well, it makes conflict really bloody hard. I mean, how do you have arguments or intrigue if you can just go down to the bridge and ask good ol' Heimdall who did what and when? So yes, Heimdall has to be actually *looking* for something to see it in this fic. For narrative purposes.
Building Tensions

Chapter Summary

Thor begins to realize his endeavor is not going to be so easy.

Chapter Notes

Lots of notes for this one and I didn't even say everything I wanted... I need more room!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was utterly crazed. Thor could tell by the look in his eyes. Part of him wanted to reach out and grab his brother by the arm and yank him back from this madness. Surely, there must be some way. But that part of the Thunder God was pushed to the very back of his mind under the unbridled anger. The Son of Coul had not deserved to die. Loki did not have to kill him. He could have just as easily incapacitated the Midgardian but had decided to go for a mortal blow.

Mjolnir hummed in Thor’s grip as he faced his not-brother on Stark’s tower. Loki didn’t seem to realize he was in any danger. His face was twisted into a cruel smirk that had, at some point, replaced his easy laughter. Thor hated that smirk. How dare Loki look so smug after what he’d done?!

"How angry you look, Thor..." Loki drawled. "And for what?"

"You killed Agent Coulson," Thor said, gripping the handle of Mjolnir tighter.

Loki looked darkly amused as he shrugged. "What difference does it make to have one less insect in the world?" he asked as he took a step closer. "They are such fragile things, Odinson. Their lives are over in a mere blink... you cannot protect them, Thor. They are driven to destroy themselves. I simply sped up the process for one of them. It barely took any effort at all... like piercing a potato with a fork."

"They are not so lowly, Loki!"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Tell me, Thor... just how gentle need you be around these mortals? You can crush them with barely a thought, and you still persist in pretending them worth your time? One little hug from you would pulverize their bones. It very nearly broke my bones enough times... I can't imagine these tiny creatures withstanding it any better."

"You seek to frighten me with the truth of mortality? You do not!"

"Prepare yourself, Odinson... all of them will die. The Norns are not kind to such tiny lives. If they were... your Agent would have put up at least an attempt at a challenge. But he didn't. A child could have defeated him..."
Thought left entirely as Thor flew at his brother. The whole world went red as Thor swung his mighty hammer with all his strength over and over and over again. And then again. And yet again. He didn’t bother to count as he heard nothing but his own roars of anger and the ear-rending boom of nearby thunder.

Something warm spattered against Thor’s face, but he paid it little mind. He swung his hammer again, cracking the strange smooth stone of Stark’s tower. Lightning lit up the sky and rain began to pour. As the freezing droplets stung his eyes, Thor finally managed to rein in his anger.

The tower was a devastation. Scorch marks littered the area around Thor, and huge holes had been smashed into the ground. Loki lay at Thor’s feet a bloody smear. His entire face had been caved in, and several of his limbs were bent where there was no joint. Red spread out from beneath the traitorous son of Laufey and began to slide down the side of the tower. Thor just stood there and felt dark satisfaction. Finally, he had shut Loki up.

Thor woke up with a gasp of horror and soaked in a cold sweat. He looked around in confusion at the library and tried his best to regain his bearings. Never before had his nightmares been so horrible. Thor spotted some water nearby and grabbed it to take a long drink. His stomach churned unpleasantly at the memory of his dream, but he was hoping that the water would help.

The fledgling God pushed himself more upright in his chair that he’d fallen asleep in and shakily put the book he had been reading off to the side. The violence of the dream had not been what had frightened him so, although the thought that he could do such a thing to his brother was disturbing indeed. The feeling of satisfaction had been much more unsettling. Thor didn’t want to feel satisfaction at the sight of his brother beaten to a bloody pulp, much less being the one to do so in the first place. He knew that what Loki had done was horrible, but that strange joy had felt too much like revenge for Thor’s liking. Thor had done his best to move on from the anger and bitterness the whole situation had caused. He’d come back here for a fresh start with his brother. All of those things had never happened now. So then, why was his subconscious doing such unpleasant things?

Just then, Loki rounded the bookshelf with his own book open in his hands. He looked up and seemed surprised. “Finally awake again, are you? It’s been almost two hours. You’re never going to get better if you fall asleep while studying… what’s the matter with you?”

Thor startled a little at the sudden question. “What? Nothing!”

“You don’t look like nothing. It looks more like you saw a draugr,” Loki said as he put his book to the side. “What happened?”

Thor shook his head. “It was nothing.”

Loki frowned and folded his arms over his chest. “You know, you are a terrible liar,” he said as he leaned back against the table.

Thor didn’t want to even attempt to recount his nightmare to Loki. Without knowing what had happened, the entire thing would make no sense whatsoever, and Thor wasn’t about to try and explain the situation to Loki. Not that Loki wouldn’t be able to understand the magic involved but Thor didn’t think he could actually make himself tell his brother that he’d gone insane in the future. Or that Thor still wasn’t sure what exactly had led to his brother’s madness. He could guess, with some degree of certainty, but he could not know for certain. “It was just a nightmare, Loki. Nothing to worry about, I promise,” Thor said.

Loki looked far from convinced. “You’ve been having a lot of nightmares lately. Isn’t this the third
this week?"

"Oh, don’t start. I’m fine.” The last thing Thor needed was Loki to be worrying over him due to a few insignificant nightmares. His mother was already doing that despite Thor trying his best to assure them all it was nothing. He had only woken up from one a few times this week. And none at all the week before. They really weren't that prolific.

"Am I not supposed to worry when my brother wakes up in the middle of the night calling me like the night before last?" Loki asked.

Thor didn't have any real answer for that so decided that not answering at all was the best course of action. He was just glad he hadn't yelled Loki's name again this time. Loki had not wanted to let that previous version of the dream drop at all. Thor had needed to spend a solid two hours that night nearly pleading before Loki would go back to his own room.

Loki frowned and moved to perch on the edge of Thor’s chair like one of their father's Ravens. “Thor… brother, come on, please talk to me? This is not normal for you. Something must be bothering you,” the younger Odinson said. Thor tried to not be touched by the genuine concern on his brother’s face but found he wasn’t quite able to manage the distance he wanted. The last time Loki had been so obviously worried about Thor was many decades ago. At least for Thor.

Still, telling Loki that Thor might still have some issues he hadn’t worked out dealing with his brother, from something that hadn’t even happened yet, was not something that Thor was willing to do. There must be some way to get Loki to drop the subject without actually giving away anything sensitive. After a few moments thought, Thor came up with what he hoped would be a good solution. “I will speak with Mother if that will make you feel better,” Thor said.

For a moment, Thor thought that Loki might protest. His younger brother looked particularly mutinous, but he finally nodded. “Alright, but you be sure to actually do it, Thor. If you don’t, I’ll go to Mother myself,” Loki warned. "And I won't hold back."

Thor gave a huge grin of relief and happiness. “Of course, brother. Now, what were we studying?"

Loki sighed heavily, “Hopeless. Utterly hopeless. It was Great Uncle Mimir? Grandfather’s brother?”

“Ah. Right,” Thor picked up his book again and flipped it open. After several pages flipped by, Thor came to a rather gruesome illustration of Mimir’s beheaded body. “Why are we studying this? We know what happened…”

“Really?” Loki drawled before sliding the book out from under Thor's hands and slamming it closed. “When did Mimir get killed?” he asked while keeping the book soundly shut with his one hand. “If you know what happened this shouldn’t be a hard question.”

Thor’s eyes widened, and he scrambled to think up the appropriate answer. He had just read this a little while ago. “S-seventy… nine oh three?” he answered hesitantly.

“No. That was the year the Aesir-Vanir War ended. Great Uncle Mimir died three years previous in seventy-nine hundred,” Loki corrected.

“Ah, right…” Thor muttered. “Seventy-nine hundred…” At least he was close. That should count for something.

Loki sighed and sat down in the seat he had vacated several hours ago when Thor had drifted off to sleep. “Alright, how about something easier… what did end the war?”
“Mother and Father getting married,” Thor answered with much more confidence.

Loki looked rather amused by the answer. “Half right. There was a treaty, and their marriage was part of it,” he said.

"Well, it's essentially the same thing," Thor said a little grumpily.

"Do you know what started it?" Loki asked.

"The treaty? Or the war?"

Loki's eyebrow went up. "Either if you know them," he said, sounding a little surprised.

"The war was due to the dispute over Idunn's apples. The Vanir said that because Idunn was a member of the Vanir her apples would, therefore, be their property and not the Aesir's... and the treaty was because some important bystander got killed when trying to protest the war..." Thor said although his voice grew a little more hesitant at the second part.

"Nerthus," Loki supplied. "I'm impressed, Thor... you've actually been studying, haven't you? Most people completely forget why the treaty was made in the first place and just assume that the Vanir gave up because Bor was so difficult to fight."

Thor couldn't quite help but feel rather proud of himself. He may not have recalled Nerthus' name, but he'd remembered part of the situation. Much better than he'd ever done before. He gave his brother a grin. "I have a good tutor, I guess, Brother." Though Loki often seemed entirely too exasperated with the idea of tutoring Thor, the fledgling Thunderer couldn't deny the results.

"A tutor is only as good as the amount of effort the student puts out, Thor," Loki said. "Even Lady Vor says you've been improving and you know how hard she is to impress."

Thor's smile grew wider at that compliment. "Maybe she won't look like she bit into a lemon next time we have a test then," he said cheerfully. Lady Vor didn't smile really at all, but the expression that she got when looking over Thor's papers had always made him uneasy. The unpleasant expression hadn't changed Thor's studying habits the first time, but he was determined to be better this time.

"It might take a little more studying to get that much improvement," Loki said with a crooked little smile.

Thor frowned and shoved the chair Loki was on with his foot. The whole piece of furniture nearly toppled, but Loki was quick to grab the table and prevent the tumble. "Thor! So rude! Such a reaction to a little friendly advice..."

"Hardly friendly advice, Loki," Thor replied as he got to his feet and stretched. He groaned as his back cracked in several places. Falling asleep in the chair had not been the best thing to do. "You're a know it all."

"I can't help if I do know it all," Loki shot back. "Or... more than you, at least. I don't fall asleep when I'm studying."

"I can't help it if it's all boring," Thor said in nearly the same tone as his brother.

Loki rolled his eyes. "Alright, alright. Since you've been doing so well, how about we take a break?"
Thor was definitely willing to do that. "I thought you would never suggest such a thing," he said as he stretched his arms up over his head again. "What shall we do for our break?"

The darker son of Odin hummed a little as he thought about that question. "Considering we are still forbidden from leaving the grounds... oh! I know. Come with me, Thor. I've been meaning to show you something!"

Thor blinked a little in surprise, but since Loki was already darting off, he hurried to follow. He figured this was another prank that would undoubtedly end poorly, but his curiosity wasn't about to let the inevitable trouble they'd get into, stop him. The two boys tore through the hallways and almost collided with a few servants and guards. "Don't run!" someone scolded, which they ignored entirely. The voice hadn't sounded like their father or brother, so it was very easy to act as if they hadn't heard it.

Thor was surprised when Loki went to his room and quickly ushered them inside. Loki quickly closed the door behind them. "I've been experimenting with my powers, and I figured something out," he said as he went over to lock the windows as well.

"Oh?" Thor couldn't help but be very intrigued. He didn't recall his brother coming to him all excited the first time they were this age. "What did you discover?"

Loki stepped back into the middle of the room and held his hands out. "Alright, just watch this. I haven't quite gotten the hang of it yet, but it's amazing..."

Thor's eyebrow went up in interest. Loki seemed to concentrate hard, and the green of his Seidr began swirling around his hands. The mist-like green energy wrapped up around his arms like twin snakes. Thor wanted to ask but, at how Loki was obviously focusing, decided to just watch. The verdant magic continued to swirl and spread until it had enveloped all of Loki's body. There was a brief flash and Thor was momentarily blinded.

When he finally blinked enough to see again, he thought his brother had gone invisible for a moment. But then he spotted a salmon on the ground. The fish flopped around and gasped for air. "L-Loki?" Why had he turned himself into a fish!?

There was another flash and Loki was sitting on the ground looking a little embarrassed. The pink of his cheeks seemed to match the bright underbelly of the fish he'd just been. "I... meant to turn into something different. I've not quite mastered it yet..."

"Oh. Right... it does look difficult," Thor said as he went to offer his brother his hand. "How did you even figure out you could do that?" Loki certainly hadn't come to Thor before he'd mastered shape shifting the first time.

Loki shrugged a little. "About a month ago I was trying to get aw... somewhere," he said awkwardly. Thor narrowed his eyes at that last word. He was almost certain Loki had changed what he'd been about to say, and he didn't like that. "And I suddenly turned into a tiny little fly," Loki said in a rush. "I couldn't figure out what happened at first, but then I started trying to turn into other things, and I've been getting better at it. It's happening a lot faster than the first time I tried to do it on purpose."

Thor hesitated for a moment and tried to figure out the best way to frame his thoughts. He knew from Loki in the future that transformations could sometimes be tricky to control. Becoming stuck in a form was not unheard of: like what happened to Fafnir the dragon. But the fledgling Thunder God also knew how much a part of Loki shapeshifting was. He wasn't entirely sure why Loki had such an affinity for it but also supposed that didn't matter at this point. "It's amazing, Loki," Thor
said with a smile. "Even if a fly and a fish aren't terribly useful creatures."

"I can turn into other things," Loki said defensively. "I was trying for a wolf," he added with a pout. "I did it once, but I can't seem to figure out how to get back to it."

"I'm sure it's just a matter of practice," Thor said as he put a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Like mother and her weaving. Or Tafl."

Loki gave Thor a sideways glance. "You don't seem all that surprised by this..."

"Loki, brother, you have magic," Thor said. "I try my best to not be surprised by anything that you do. I don't always succeed, but I try."

Loki looked contemplative for a moment before looking back down at his hands. "I'm not sure that it is Seidr..." he murmured. "It doesn't feel quite the same."

"That was definitely Seidr around you," Thor pointed out in confusion. "I've seen you do enough magic to recognize your sorcery."

There was a moment of silence before Loki nodded. "Yes, I do use Seidr but... it still feels different. I'm not casting a regular spell like when I put an illusion on something. It seems more like I'm absorbing my own Seidr and then using it differently. I don't really know how to explain it."

Thor had never heard of this before and regarded Loki carefully. Though he did sound very calm yet interested in the difference, Thor could see that Loki was a bit disturbed by his own observations. Using Seidr in some way other than to cast a spell wasn't something Thor had ever heard therefore he had no way of knowing if it was even possible. Thor supposed from a rather elementary standpoint, Seidr was just a form of energy, and so it should be able to be transformed. Thor did a similar thing with the electricity that runs through his body every time he summoned lightning. There was just no way for Thor to avoid being hit by some of the energy and he'd become very skilled at absorbing it and then dispersing it harmlessly as heat and light. Thor hoped this was something similarly benign. "Perhaps you should mention this to Mother," Thor offered. "She has been training you with Seidr after all."

Loki frowned a little. "I was sort of hoping to keep this transformation power between us," he said. Thor was very surprised by that. "Really? Why?" he asked. Loki shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "Loki... what is it?" Loki still didn't respond, and Thor found himself worrying a bit more. Loki was secretive and always had been, but he rarely didn't take a chance to talk about his own skills. "Loki. Tell me..."

"Aesir don't usually get such abilities," Loki murmured. "It's not like Hermod's speed or Tyr's strength... This is just... strange."

Thor bit his lower lip uneasily. Loki had a point. Transformation was not something that Aesir had much affinity for. But it was an ability that Jotnar tended towards. Perhaps this was the time to come clean. The truth would ease Loki's mind about his powers at least. "It's not common in Aesir," Thor agreed carefully. "But it does show up in Jotnar..."

Loki gave a start. "What do Jotnar have to do with any of this?"

The way Loki said Jotnar gave Thor pause. Thor's brother sounded vaguely disgusted and a bit afraid. Thor cursed the monster stories of Jotnar that no doubt led to such a reaction. He'd tried to avoid them since coming back, but that didn't mean they hadn't heard quite a bit of it before he'd woken up in his bed. "Well, it's just... Father's half Jotnar," he said although he hadn't meant to say
that. He mentally cursed his own tongue for failing to just tell the full truth.

Loki eyed Thor for a moment. Thor was about to quickly add to his truth but also strange omission before Loki sighed. "You have a point... maybe that's part of this... Thank you, Thor. You're probably right, and I should talk to Mother about it. I was just worried about what she would say."

"Loki, you know Mother would always be proud of all of your abilities," Thor said. A part of Thor was jealous at how much closer Loki was with their mother, but he tried his utmost to not be. They simply had much more in common than Thor and Frigga did.

"I know..." Loki muttered as he went to sit down on his bed. "I just... worry."

Thor tilted his head slightly to the side as he watched Loki. His brother was picking at the blankets beneath him. Thor could honestly not recall an incident where he had seen his brother looking... unsure before. Loki always knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. Even if he was misguided at times, he was always confident in his choices. "Loki, what is it?"

Loki just shook his head a little and continued to look down at his knees. After a moment's hesitation, Thor moved to sit down beside his little brother. "Loki. Tell me. Please, don't keep secrets from me."

Loki looked up sharply, "You mean like you aren't?"

Thor recoiled slightly and guilt rose. "What are you talking about?" he asked as calmly as he could.

"I know you aren't telling me everything, Thor!" Loki said. "I know something's been bothering you and you don't tell me what it is. So, why should I tell you what's bothering me? Don't be a hypocrite... I hate that..." Loki looked off to the side as he grumbled the last bit of his complaint.

Thor wanted to argue. The two situations were completely different but how exactly would he get Loki to believe that? Thor already knew the answer to what was bothering Loki but couldn't explain that knowledge and sharing his own fears would only bother Loki more. He supposed, since Loki didn't know the whole of it, the situation might seem a tiny bit hypocritical. But it really wasn't! Thor was certain of that! "My nightmares won't ever happen but what's bothering you is real. I just want to help, Loki..."

"And I don't want to tell you," Loki said.

Thor tried to remain calm despite the anger he heard beginning to build up in Loki's voice. "Is it really that bad? It can't be that bad... does it have to do with transforming yourself? Your shapeshifting is unique but not bad..."

Loki jumped to his feet and turned to face Thor. "Of course, you think so! It's not happening to you! You don't wake up in different forms and spend an hour each morning trying to get back to how you are!"

Thor blinked. This was not something he'd ever heard. Not having perfect control of a new skill wasn't really that unheard of but waking up different was a bit beyond a lack of control and focus. "What are you waking up as?"

Loki turned bright pink. "It's none of your business!" he hissed. "Forget I even said it! It's not important!"

"It sounds important..."
"Well, it's not! I don't have to tell you anything, Thor! Not a single bit! I shouldn't have even shown you that first part. I knew it was a bad idea! I never should have brought you here!"

"Loki!"

"Just go back outside and run around with your friends! I don't know why I thought you’d understand! I should have known better!"

"I can't understand if you don't tell me what's going on!"

Thor suddenly realized he had stood up at some point and the two brothers were a bit closer to each other. Loki looked on the verge of either strangling Thor or breaking down into tears. Thor wasn't sure which was more likely given how upset his brother was. "It's none of your business!" Loki said. Thor blinked, a bit surprised at how different Loki's voice sounded. His normal voice was strangled and oddly... high pitched?

Before the strangeness could fully process, Loki was yelling at him again. Thor didn't really listen to what the words were, though. Some strange instinct told him to look down. Without permission and without any real thought, Thor's eyes slid down from Loki's face. "L-Loki?"

Loki froze and looked down. Thor didn't see the flush that swept over his brother's face as he was too focused on trying to process what he was looking at. Due to how neatly Loki dressed and how well fitted his clothes were the strange lumps suddenly straining the front of his shirt were incredibly obvious despite their rather small size. "H-how..." Thor had heard of Loki transforming into female animals on occasion, but he'd never considered... this.

Loki quickly closed his arms over his chest. "G-get out, Thor."

"But... Loki, wha-"

"I said get out!"

Thor finally managed to pull his eyes back up and noticed the slightly softer curve of Loki's face. His brother (?) was so obviously mortified, but Thor had been rendered entirely off guard. He'd had no response for this. It wasn't something he'd even imagined before this moment. Loki's cheeks were blood red and tears were clinging to his (her?) suddenly very feminine looking eyelashes.

"Out!"

Green magic swirled and suddenly slammed into Thor's chest. A grunt of pain escaped as Thor was flung magically from the room. No sooner had his back wallop the ground before Loki's door slammed closed. Thor heard locks click into place and pushed himself up onto one elbow. He could only stay there on the ground and stare at Loki's closed door with a slightly agape mouth.

Thor stayed on the floor for quite a while just struggling to process what he'd seen. Somewhat numbly, Thor pushed himself fully to his feet, and he absently brushed himself off. His chest was stinging from the impact of magic charged with such unstable and volatile emotions, but he ignored that for the most part. He was struggling to not be repulsed by the idea of changing one's self in such a way. Asgardians were very clear in what men and women did and that those boundaries shouldn't actually be crossed. But... Loki looked as if it was entirely out of his control. Which was far worse, in Thor's opinion.

Thor began to walk though he had no real destination in mind. Living in Midgard off and on had softened his view on unmanly behavior some, but he still didn't understand the idea of changing how the Norns made you. Appreciating the beauty of the same gender and even finding yourself
attracted to some of them Thor could understand. Most Asgardian youths did experiment a bit, but essentially all outgrew it. Thor thought that entirely normal and even acknowledged that some didn't grow out of it and accepted that as part of those people. Especially since most that he suspected of such things also stayed attracted to the opposite sex like biology dictated and kept their more unusual tastes to themselves. But Asgardians didn't... change.

Thor had been distantly aware of that sometimes Midgardians changed their gender in such a way, but he'd never met one. He'd just written it off as one of those strange bits of Midgardian-ness that made no sense and that they would grow out of as a species. But if his own brother (sister? what was the best word here?) could change himself so easily, what was he supposed to think?

When Thor tried to put himself in that position of having his manhood taken away and being in a woman's body, his mind violently protested the very idea. The very thought was horrifying and made him more than a little uncomfortable. He clenched his fists to prevent himself from checking that he hadn't changed. He knew he hadn't and that the very thought to 'check' was silly but he couldn't quite help the urge.

He had more than half a mind to go back to Loki and demand he never do such a thing again but considering the horror on Loki's face, Thor didn't think such a demand would get him anywhere. Loki obviously hadn't meant to do that and so demanding him not accidentally change again would amount to nothing. Besides, Thor was certain Loki still enjoyed women. The way he looked at the lovely Sigyn was proof enough of that.

"Thor, darling?"

Thor gave a start and turned to see his Mother standing there with a cluster of flowers from her garden in her hands. Her smile quickly fell when she saw his face. "Thor? What is it? You look upset."

No answer really came to him at first. He just stood there gaping at Frigga and struggling to find words to explain he'd just seen his brother turn into a girl of all things. "M-mother... I just..." How could Thor say that out loud? Every instinct as an Asgardian man was screaming to hush this up and never speak of it again. But secrets were not going to help here. He knew that. Still, saying it didn't seem acceptable either.

Frigga must have seen Thor's difficulty and quickly bent down just slightly beside him. "Thor, dear, you can tell me... what's happened?" Thor opened his mouth again, and again, nothing actually came out. He knew he had to say something. Thor glanced around for anyone that might be nearby. There were guards just down the hall standing at attention.

Frigga followed his eyes down the hall and frowned. She quickly covered the scowl with a small smile. "Come, Thor... we'll speak in my sitting room," she said.

Thor just nodded and took the hand she offered. Frigga's sitting room wasn't very far, and when they got there, she quickly dismissed all of her attendants. Thor sat down on a couch and stared down at his hands as Frigga arranged the flowers she had picked in a beautifully cut Vanir Crystal vase. The silence wasn't oppressive, and Thor was definitely not in any sort of hurry to break it.

His mind was still spinning with contradicting thoughts. Thor loved his brother. He really did. But how was he supposed to deal with this? How was he going to keep his brother from pain when his brother was turning into his sister for no reason? That was... that was insane, and he had no basis for how to deal with a sister. He'd never had one before and certainly hadn't considered Loki a sister figure. He might have been... feminine, and Thor knew that others teased him about his magic and female hobbies, but Thor had never really thought of him that way. Not before that
moment when he actually saw his brother as a girl. He wanted to protect Loki but at the same time pull as far back as possible. Thor didn't understand any of it, didn't like it, and wanted to avoid the whole thing.

Frigga didn't press with any questions. She just continued to arrange her flowers and hum a quiet tune that Thor vaguely recognized from when he was younger. Thor started wringing his hands a little, waiting for a question or a statement or anything from his mother.

Thor was quiet for several more minutes before looking up at where his Mother was adjusting where on the table the vase was sitting. Had these sorts of things happened to Loki before? Was that part of why Loki pulled so far way? Did he have some strange affliction that changed his body like that? Thor hoped such a disease didn't exist. Or... would that be better? Diseases meant that there was a cure somewhere. Could Loki be cured of this strangeness?

Desperate for any sort of simple solution, Thor's mind latched onto that idea. "I think Loki is sick," he blurted into the quiet of the room.

Frigga quickly turned. "Sick? What's wrong?" she asked, eyes wide with worry and held still.

"We were arguing, and he turned into a girl!" Thor explained quickly. "I know he didn't mean to! So... so there must be something wrong with him, right?"

Frigga, if possible, went even more still than she had been before. Thor's wide eyes moved over his mother's carefully neutral face for some sign that he was right. That this was a simple thing that could be fixed. "He turned into a girl?" Frigga repeated carefully.

Thor nodded quickly. "I could... see... breasts beneath his shirt..." Thor answered awkwardly and quietly. That entire sentence felt so very wrong. He was impressed with himself that he'd managed to say it all.

Frigga was silent for another moment before crossing the room to sit down beside Thor. "Thor... this is very important. Did Loki change any other way?"

At first, Thor was confused by the question. After a moment, Thor's stunned mind realized that she was subtly fishing for any signs that the glamour on Loki had failed. Thor almost answered truthfully that, no he hadn't appeared as anything but an Aesir girl, but then realized that this was the perfect chance to have 'found out.' He was a little surprised he'd managed to think of it but took the opportunity presented. "W-well... he looked a bit... blue."

Frigga went still again. "Blue in what way?"

"Sort of... all over," Thor said.

The silence that stretched on after that statement made Thor think perhaps he'd been too hasty. Perhaps saying he'd seen his brother turn into a blue girl was really a terrible idea. "Thor... you mustn't tell anyone what you saw."

"I wasn't going to... but what's going on, Mother?"

Frigga hesitated a little. "It's nothing, Thor. Rest assured it's nothing serious."

Thor was surprised. Did she really think that such a non-excuse would put him off asking? Perhaps not and Frigga was just going through the motions. She had been keeping the secret for quite a while already. Thor looked back down at his hands as he thought of how to pry the truth out without letting onto his own secrets. "Thor... dearest. Truly, your brother will be fine. I'm sure it
was just his magic reacting and trying to scare you... you know magic is a bit unpredictable."

Thor wasn't really listening to his mother trying to comfort him. Nothing he was coming up with would manage to make his mother tell him the truth without bringing up other questions, he didn't think. He simply wasn't that good with words. "Mother, I know," Thor said abruptly.

Frigga went silent for several heartbeats. "Know what, dear?"

Thor took a deep breath and looked up at her. "I know Loki's a Jotunn..."

The Queen of Asgard's face went nearly ashen. "Thor-"

"It's alright, Mother," Thor said quickly. "I still love him... he's my brother, but... what's going on? Why did he turn into a girl? Why haven't you told us about this? Is he sick?"

Frigga was quiet for a moment. "Have you told Loki about this, Thor?"

"... No. I figured you would... or father would."

"Your father does not think it's something that Loki needs to know," Frigga said as she stared at the flowers she had just arranged. "But now that this has happened... perhaps I should speak with Loki about it."

"Why? Please, Mother, I'm worried."

Frigga sighed and turned back to look and Thor. "There is nothing wrong with Loki, Thor," she said softly. "He's a normal young Jotunn is all. They develop differently from us."

"But he turned into a girl," Thor insisted. What sort of people turned into girls randomly during arguments?

"Thor... you cannot judge a different species based on what Aesir find normal," she said. "For Jotnar, such unexpected changes happen quite a bit at his age."

"Why?"

Frigga sighed again. "Darling... Jotnar do not have male and female. They are all the same," she said gently.

"The same?" Thor asked, unable to fully help the dislike from being obvious. He liked knowing what to expect from the people he was dealing with. But if they were all the same, how did they... make babies in the first place? And how did they decide which one took care of the children? Did they not take care of them? Is that why their father found Loki abandoned?

"Yes, dear," Frigga confirmed. "Where we find it strange that they are only one sex. They find it very odd that most other species have two. In a way, it makes their life much easier. Everybody can be whatever they wish because there are no set rules based on gender since that is all the same."

Thor frowned a little in confusion. "But... that doesn't make sense... how do they..."

Frigga put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Thor. It's just the way they are. And nothing is wrong with Loki. I promise you. I will go speak with him."

"Are you going to tell him what he is?" Thor asked. Frigga hesitated. Thor could almost see her desire to do so warring with Odin's decree to not do that very thing. "I think you should," Thor volunteered. "He seemed really scared..."
Frigga glanced off to the side for a moment before nodding a little bit. "I think you might be right, Thor... Though it will be a very difficult conversation..."

"Do you want me to help, Mother?"

"No, Thor. This is something I think your brother would prefer to be kept to himself. For now."

Chapter End Notes

**Thor's Dreams**- Thor may very much love his brother and be trying to save him but that doesn't mean he's unaffected. He hasn't actually forgiven that Loki for what happened or even really dealt with all the bad feelings that sort of thing generates. Hence his conflict. He's of the opinion he should just ignore it and move on but until he actually deals with it he's going to keep having these sorts of incidents.

**Draugr**- Ancient Norse mythology describes the Draugr very much like how they appear in the game Skyrim. Minus the dragon shouts. They protect their treasure, wreak havoc, and torment those that wronged them in life. Some have been known to change their size, weight, and be able to 'swim' through rock. They can also drive people and animals mad and can do things like shapeshifting and enter people's dreams and curse others to be like them. The preferred method of getting rid of them is cutting off their head, burning the body, and dumping the ashes in the sea.

**Odin's Ravens**- Huginn and Muninn are their names and are often shown at Odin's sides. Huginn and Muninn fly around the world through the day and then inform Odin what they saw and heard.

**Mimir**- In myth, Mimir is beheaded during the Aesir-Vanir War and the body is found by Odin who sacrifices his eye to the (still speaking but embalmed) head. This grants him knowledge of Ragnarok. He is also been speculated as being Bestla's brother and therefore Odin's Maternal Uncle. In Marvel, he is called brother to Bor so he'd be Odin's Paternal Uncle. He is still beheaded during the Aesir-Vanir war however. His head later came to be found in the Well of Wisdom which was that cave of water in The Age of Ultron Scene. Strangely, it seems that MCU Odin lost is eye to the Jotunn and didn't sacrifice it to his Uncle (at least if his bloodied face in the scene where he finds Loki is anything to go by).

**Aesir-Vanir War**- There is a lot to unpack and I don't have room here. Very shortly in myth, the two groups fought over the right for human's worship. Odin invaded and there was so much collateral the war ended, the two peoples joined, and got wisdom in some way. So, I've used the little tidbit about Idunn possibly being Vanir to make the war over the apples and ending in truce after an unintended death. Also, since Bor is said to have died in myth from the Jotunn and that war is rather recent all things considered, I had it so that Bor was the King during the Aesir-Vanir War.

**Dates in Asgard**- The dating system is a bit tricky. Why would the Aesir use a human dating system when they've been around for thousands of years before humans? So, I've come up with a timeline in both Midgardian Time and it's corresponding Asgardian Time. Basically, at 0 year where B.C. turns to A.D. that is about year 10,000 to the Aesir. So here 7900 is 2100B.C.
**Nerthus** - Nerthus is a Proto-Germanic Earth Goddess that can arguably be linked to the Vanir and some have drawn connection with her and the god Njord. Because in a way she predates the Vanir I've had her dying in the war.

**Fafnir** - Was a dwarf whos greed turned him into a literal dragon. The dragon Smaug from the Hobbit was based off him somewhat. In Marvel he was the King of Nastrond until Odin sent Volstagg and others to go kill him. Marvel also has a second Fafnir who is a Jotunn.

**Loki's Shapes** - Loki's story about becoming a fly and his appearance here as a salmon are references to stories where he does take those forms. Also, Loki's confusion about his power to shapeshift will be further explained later when I get into those biology/genetic lessons I mentioned last time. Loki's mention of Hermod's speed and Tyr's strength is because these traits are beyond normal Aesir abilities but considered good because it's more physical.

**Girl Loki** - Coming from an Asexual people comes with some interesting problems I imagine. In my little head canon, going through puberty would be much harder if you had to deal with both sexual organs. Twice as many hormones to deal with. Loki's accidental gender change here is just a physical representation of that, rather like a young boy's voice cracking. It's just something that happens until their bodies settle a bit more. Loki's current guise makes what would normally be rather minor mostly internal shifts into something more dramatic.

**Thor's Transphobia** - This is purely because Thor's never so much as met a trans person before and cannot fathom it. He's a very confident person with good self esteem and self image so it doesn't compute. His reaction to Loki is based entirely from ignorance and not malice. Homosexuality is a little harder to explain and done later. And all of this is with the knowledge that all written Norse myth is after Roman Christians came into the picture. So, take with salt.
Awkward Truths

Chapter Summary

Frigga has an important, if awkward, conversation with her son.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frigga sent Thor off to play by himself after many assurances and, though the young Thunderer seemed reluctant, he eventually did do as his Mother asked. He still looked troubled, and Frigga knew that she'd have to have another few talks with him as well to help with the revelation he had just had. She wasn't sure how Thor had found out his brother's true species unless this was not the first time Loki's glamour had failed. The idea that Odin's guise had not been sufficient in hiding Loki's species was a little alarming to Frigga. Not because she didn't want her children to know about Loki's heritage but because Odin's magics rarely failed. Her husband might not consider himself a Seidmadr or even be actively continuing his studies into seidr, but he was quite skilled with the magic he did perform. Frigga knew that was just another thing she would have to bring up with him after she dealt with her youngest.

Frigga had honestly been expecting something like this to happen for the past decade or so. Ever since Loki had hit his most recent growth spurt around his seven-hundredth birthday. From her research, seven hundred was the typical age where Jotnar started experiencing such gender fluctuations. But when he never came to her about it or made even the slightest indication of anything bothering him, Frigga thought that perhaps Odin's guise had hidden the fluctuations from being apparent. Now, though, she was fairly certain she knew that Loki had been hiding them - most likely out of some misguided shame he shouldn't feel, to begin with - which wasn't really healthy for him mentally or physically.

Frigga paused in her private library off her sitting room to collect a book that she'd put aside for this very sort of thing. The thick book had no title but was bound in leather such a deep blue as to be nearly black. The edges of the pages were yellowed slightly, and little bits of paper were sticking out of the top and sides to serve as bookmarks. She paused long enough to open the front cover and examine the interior illustration. Over the two-page spread was a very detailed icy shorescape. The drawn waves were shattering across the ice-covered land to the right and foaming around the pounded smooth black rocks that separated the two domains. Again there was no title even though there was room for one within the open sky of the illustration.

The book, Frigga knew, was full of everything needed to raise a young Jotunn and had been written by Queen Bestla. Apparently, every Jotnar family had some variation of this very same book, copied by the expectant 'mother' (for want of a better term) from a master version, which was passed down to the eldest child. Bestla, not having been the oldest, had copied this book from her family's master shortly after first coming to Asgard. Frigga had found the book absolutely invaluable in raising Loki. Not only had the manual warned Frigga about the near inevitability of these gender swings, but the pages had also given her the recipe for the salve that helped Loki's sunburns and an appropriate substitute for mother's milk. From what Bestla had written, problems producing milk for their children was a rather typical issue among Jotnar, and since Frigga had not carried Loki, she hadn't the means to feed him at all.
Frigga closed the cover of the journal again and then picked it up off the table beside her favorite chair where it essentially lived for the last seven hundred years. Knowing that Odin would disapprove of her making the decision she had without even consulting him, Frigga wasted no time in heading to Loki's room so that she wouldn't somehow accidentally talk herself out of her task. This was going to be a tough conversation, but she couldn't allow that or the fact that her husband would argue stop her. Frigga knew her husband truly did mean well, that he believed wholly that Loki didn't need to know about these truths, but now that their youngest was changing genders unwillingly, Frigga was certain continuing with the ruse would only be damaging to him. She would talk with Odin about it later, no doubt he'd have a few things to say, but she didn't care.

Shifting the book fully into one arm, Frigga raised her other hand to knock on Loki's door. "Loki? Loki, darling, may I come in?" There was no answer, and Frigga found herself worrying even more than she had when Thor had first blurted out that Loki was 'sick' in her sitting room. When she knocked again and again received no answer, Frigga decided to do what she never had before and removed the wards Loki had erected around the door. They were somewhat sloppy barriers and were relatively easy to dismantle. Even the simplest spells were not as strong as she knew Loki could make them, which worried her immensely. The door was locked, but that was equally easy to deal with.

Frigga stepped into Loki's room and shut the door behind her as quietly as possible. She frowned deeply at Loki's bed. The sheets and coverlet had been ripped off and thrown into a corner, and several shelves around the room had broken, allowing the contents to spill off and onto the floor. The Queen of Asgard knew her youngest was very neat and tidy, rather shockingly so considering his age and being raised as an Asgardian boy. Thor certainly had never been so clean. Not even when he 'cleaned' his room on the rare occasion she had managed to get him to do it. So to see Loki's room in such disarray was very disturbing. "Loki?" A quick glance told her the bathroom was empty and she was beginning to worry that Loki had fled when she heard a small sniffle.

With the noise to help, Frigga quickly realized that the mass of bedding in the corner hadn't just been thrown there but was hiding her youngest. "Loki..." Frigga immediately went over to the mass of fabric.

Loki let out a noise somewhere between a whimper and a cry and crouched down even further into his blankets. Frigga put the book she was carrying off to the side as she knelt down in front of him. At first, even knowing that Loki was within the mass, she couldn't see him. But then he looked up enough for her to see his big beautiful green eyes filled to the brim with tears. Without even considering he might not want to be touched just then, Frigga wrapped her arms around him, blanket and all. "Shh, it's alright, my love."

"... Mother."

Frigga shushed him gently again and just held him. The blankets were thick enough that she couldn't tell if he'd managed to turn himself back fully male, but that didn't matter much either. In his mother's arms, Loki quickly reached a small breakdown, which he had been fighting against since Thor had left. He clung to her tightly and buried his face in her chest as he cried. Loki was trying to say something through his tears, but Frigga couldn't understand what. She tightened her arms around him and pushed back the blankets enough to expose his head. Loki didn't look up as Frigga ran a hand through his silky smooth hair in an attempt to comfort him. Her heart hurt to hear him crying as he was, but until he calmed a little more so that she could explain, all she could do was comfort him.

She rubbed his back through the blankets still wrapped around him as he cried so hard that his shoulders shook with them. She pulled him entirely into her lap even though he was too big for
such a thing now. Loki buried his face into the side of Frigga's neck, and she could feel his hot tears against her skin and struggled to not cry for him herself. She hated that he was so distressed about something that was entirely natural. He hadn't cried like this since he was a tiny thing with untied shoes and half outgrown baby teeth. Even more than before, she was certain that she was right to ignore Odin's decree. As a baby, it hadn't hurt to keep Loki's heritage to themselves, but now her baby was older and needed to know these things.

"I'm sorry," Loki whimpered.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Loki," Frigga said instantly and perhaps a little more fiercely than intended.

Loki almost flinched from her tone of voice. "I didn't mean to," he whined as his grip on her dress tightened. "I swear I didn't."

"I know," Frigga assured him as she rubbed his back again. "It's alright, Loki. I'm not upset with you."

Loki still didn't look up at her. "B-but Thor..." his voice broke at the mention of his brother. "His face..."

"Shh, Thor was just shocked," Frigga reasoned gently. "He's not upset with you either."

"Am I... turning Argr?" Loki asked in the saddest and lost tone she'd ever heard. “… because I use seidr so much?"

She was surprised by the question though she supposed she shouldn't have been. "No dearest." She wished dearly that her son had never heard such a horrible word and she wished even more that it didn’t cause him to second guess himself and what he enjoyed. He was truly gifted with seidr, and it was a shame that nobody seemed to properly appreciate it.

“They say that u-using seidr makes you… that boys shouldn’t and I have been…”

“That’s not true,” Frigga insisted. She wanted to ask who ‘they’ were that thought they knew what using seidr was all about but decided to hold off. “You believe me, don’t you? I would never lie about something like this. Using seidr doesn’t change who you are.”

"Then I don't know what's wrong with me," Loki cried. "It just keeps happening. I swear I've never tried to do it. Not once." He finally looked, up again and Frigga felt the pain in her chest increase at how red and tear-swollen his eyes were. Seeing how upset he was, Frigga was positive that he'd been trying to hide that these changes were happening for some time.

She reached up and wiped the tracks of tears off of his face gently. "I know. How long has this been happening, Loki?" He looked very uneasy at the question and tried to retreat, but Frigga kept him from doing so. "Loki. I promise I will not be upset, but I need to know if I'm going to help."

The youngest Prince of Asgard looked like he wanted to pull away and curl up again. "A-a few months," he finally murmured though he was looking off to the side and not at her.

"Loki," she said firmly but gently. She was his mother and knew when he wasn't telling the whole truth of something.

He winced and clung to the blankets around him. "M-maybe since this year," he admitted uncomfortably.
Frigga frowned. They were at the beginning of fall already, which meant that for over half a year he’d been struggling with his body changing without knowing what was going on. "How often does this happen, Loki?" He whined at the question, and she knew he was going to try and escape answering. "Loki, I know this is uncomfortable for you but please."

Tears built in his eyes again and pulled his blanket around his shoulders tighter. Frigga glanced down at the quilt and could guess at why her son was so desperately hiding himself behind it. "Loki," she said in the tone that never seemed to fail to make him look at her. After a tense minute, he did look over. "You won't be able to change back if you stay this upset," she reasoned as she brushed his hair back. "I promise you, you're not in trouble, and I'm not upset. I love you and just want you to not be so scared anymore."

Loki bit his lower lip uneasily. "Mother... what's happening to me?" he asked.

"I promise it's nothing bad," she said.

"Nothing bad?" he echoed, his voice cracking from how upset he was.

"No," Frigga said before Loki could continue. "Nothing bad. I swear to you."

Loki's eyes were a bit wild, and Frigga was surprised when he pulled his blankets wide open. Though his shirt was disheveled and pulled half out, Frigga could see what had alarmed Thor. Just like she had supposed, Loki hadn't managed to turn back. Frigga had to admit that Loki's slender frame was odd to see with developing breasts where they hadn't been before. "How is this not bad, Mother?" he asked as his eyes overflowed again.

Frigga reached out and brushed his tears away with her thumb. "Because you are still my beautiful son. Even when you are a girl," she said.

His lower lip trembled, and he quickly closed the front of the cocoon of blankets. Loki didn't want to look at Frigga at all. She pulled him close for another hug. He cried again into her shoulder. Frigga rubbed his back comfortably and just let him have another mini-breakdown. After another fifteen or twenty minutes, Loki finally seemed to get a handle on himself.

Frigga didn't say anything right away and just held him as he sniffled and wiped at his face. She ran her fingers over his head as his trembling slowly calmed and he relaxed. "I have something I want to show you, Loki," Frigga murmured. "It will help you understand what is happening to you."

Loki looked up a little uncertainly. Frigga gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile before reaching to the side where she had put Queen Bestla's book. Loki didn't say anything as Frigga found the bookmark that was most relevant and flipped about the first quarter of the book open. Loki's eyes widened at the very detailed drawing of a young Jotunn with large runes beside it identifying the section as one on 'The Change.' "M-mother?"

Frigga tightened her hold on Loki's shoulders. "It's alright, Loki. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere," she murmured as she flipped the first few pages of the section. "Now, tell me how much of this you've felt," she said drawing his attention back down to the book. Loki stared down with wide eyes at the long list across the page. Despite looking at the list, none of the words actually registered in his head.

Loki gripped the book in front of him so hard his knuckles turned white. "M-mother... this is a book about Jotnar," he said in a small voice.
"Yes, darling," Frigga confirmed. When Loki didn't respond again and just kept staring, Frigga sighed and put the book back to the side. "Come with me, Loki."

Frigga got to her feet, and after a little pulling and coaxing, she managed to get Loki up as well. Getting him to his feet was one thing, but he kept his death grip on the blankets around him. Frigga decided to let him keep them and just guided him into the bathroom. Loki looked ready to run back out as Frigga stopped them in front of the mirror. Loki was trembling under her hands again, but Frigga knew that this had to happen. Part of her wanted to just let this go, Loki looked so terrified and upset, but she knew that if he was going to truly understand he had to know about this as well. She wondered if he had already partially guessed considering how he was staring at his own reflection.

Frigga kept her hands on Loki's shoulders and allowed her Seidr to supplant Odin's spell. She watched carefully as royal sapphire spread up Loki's neck and face in a flush of color. His eyes widened and his mouth opened in a silent cry as the blue continued to spread over his skin. Faint whorls appeared on his skin, not nearly as thick as an adult's but still visible. She felt him tensing, and his nails turn dark as the flush reached them. Red blossomed around his pupils like a flower and completely erased the emerald green. Tears built in his now Jotunn red eyes and he backed away as much as he could from his own reflection. "It's alright, Loki," Frigga said, wrapping her arms around his chest in an effort to both keep him from bolting and to comfort him.

"M-mother..."

"I'm here. This is who you are, Loki, and there's nothing wrong with that," she assured him. Feeling his tension building more and seeing the anguished look on his face, Frigga felt it was enough and allowed Odin's guise to return.

Loki stared in just as much horror as before as his coloring turned snow fair and the red of his eyes seemed to slide away into green. He was shaking and couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from his own reflection. Frigga gently pulled him away and guided him back to the bedroom. He didn't protest as Frigga helped him back onto the bed. Though the bedding was in shambles, she imagined it was still more comfortable than the floor. Finally, as Frigga sat down with Loki curled against her side, he managed to make more than just vague noises of horror. "I-I... I'm..."


Another distressed noise escaped, and Loki clung to Frigga's dress again. "B-but how?" he asked, turning his wide eyes back up. "How can I be a... a..."

"Jotunn," Frigga said. Loki didn't seem able to say the word himself, but Frigga wouldn't allow him to avoid the truth. She noticed that Loki physically shied away from the word. "It's the way you were born, Loki. There's nothing wrong with being a Jotunn."

"But you and Father... how?"

Frigga sighed and brushed his hair back again. This was the secret that she had been most dreading, if she were honest. She loved her son as if she had borne him herself and she didn't want him to ever doubt that. "Loki, you were born on Jotunheim. I don't know to whom, but you were orphaned at the end of the war. Your Father brought you home with him."

"You... you aren't-"

"I am your Mother, darling," she interrupted before he could finish the question. She knew what he would ask. And why he would ask it. But she didn't want the question even voiced because it was
ridiculous. "I might not have carried you or borne you, but you are my son. And I love you."

"B-but I-

Frigga put a gentle finger to his lips. "Hush now. There is nothing wrong with being a Jotunn. Nothing. You are beautiful and intelligent and incredibly skilled, and both your father and I love you with all our hearts. It doesn't matter how we came to be your parents. We are your parents. And don't you ever doubt that."

"But Jotnar are monsters," he said, voice somewhat strangled. "I'm a monster..."

"No!" she said firmly. "They are not monsters, and neither are you."

Loki looked up at her again. "But I am," he said. "I keep turning into a girl."

Frigga frowned. "That's normal for Jotnar, Loki," she said. "That doesn't make you a monster. Please, darling, I know this is scary for you but let me explain it. You will feel better when you know what is going on." She was certain of that. Loki was highly intelligent. Once he calmed down and actually began to learn about what was happening to him, she knew the fear would start to abate.

Loki didn't look as if he believed that nor did he look enthused but he gave a shaky nod. Frigga gave him a smile and kissed his forehead. "Thank you, darling."

Frigga waited for Loki to say something or try to escape but he didn't. He stayed clinging to her side like he hadn't done in centuries but Frigga couldn't blame him. She gave him another tight squeeze of a hug before retrieving the book and opening it between them to the list she'd shown him a few minutes ago. "Now Loki... I know you might not want to discuss this with me, but I truly do need to know how much of this list is going on."

Loki stiffened a little but gave a shaky nod. Despite agreeing Loki didn't seem to be in any real hurry to share. Frigga didn't press him, knowing how awkward it must be for her son to admit to some of the things on the list. She kept stroking his head and just let him take as much time in silence as he needed.

Finally, after what Frigga felt might have been nearly an hour, Loki pointed to one of the more benign symptoms on the list. Aches and Pains. Hardly surprising. Even Asgardian boys felt those while growing. When Frigga remained silent and just continued to let Loki cuddle up against her, he reluctantly pointed to a few more bullet points. The Queen allowed her son to admit things when he was ready, especially when they came to bullet points that Asgardian boys would never have to worry about such as growing breasts. They slowly worked through the whole list until Frigga noticed Loki stiffen and hesitate even more.

"And this one?" Frigga asked pointing near the bottom of the list. Loki curled up a bit more and tucked his head down. She had a feeling she knew the answer to the question. "Loki... why didn't you go to a healer if you've been bleeding?" Eir would have come straight to Frigga if Loki had come to her.

Loki whimpered and clung tighter to his blankets while shifting away from her. "I... I didn't..."

Frigga brought Loki closer to her side. "It's normal, Loki. But if you were bleeding and you didn't know why you should have come to Eir or me. It might have meant something was wrong."

"I would... wake up and... I..." Loki broke off entirely and buried his face in Frigga's shoulder. Just the memory of waking up to blood all over his legs and bed was horrifying to him. He had utterly
panicked and had hidden all the evidence away as quickly as he could.

"It's normal, Loki," she repeated for him. "All Jotnar experience the very same bleeding. So do Asgardian and Vanir girls."

"But I'm not a girl," Loki whimpered.

Frigga sighed some and rubbed his back. She was beginning to somewhat regret choosing to raise Loki as a boy, but really they hadn't had much choice. Jotnar, externally, looked very male. Especially to the unaware. "You are Jotunn. That means that you are neither boy nor girl. And yet you're both."

"I am a monster..."

"No, you're not," Frigga corrected. "You are just perfect the way you are. You don't have to ever live life as a girl if you don't wish to. But it is part of your body, and you'll have to learn how to deal with it."

"I don't want to deal with it."

Frigga sighed. "I'm afraid you don't have a choice, my dearest." Loki was quiet, and Frigga knew it would take more than one talk to get Loki to accept the female part of himself. "What did you do when you woke up bleeding, Loki?"

"I... spelled the bed clean," he murmured so low that Frigga almost didn't hear. "Then I... turned back to a boy. As soon as I could."

Frigga frowned. "That's not healthy, dear. Your body still functions even if you change the outside. Didn't it hurt to be a boy then?" From what Frigga had read in the manual, Jotnar cycles were much like any other female cycle with some differences in length. But if Loki had blocked it by forcing his body into a male configuration there would have been considerable problems, which would have been painful. Judging by the way Loki looked off to the side it had indeed hurt. He had just stubbornly endured it for as long as he could. "Loki, you must not do that again. You could hurt yourself permanently."

Loki didn't look happy. "I don't want anyone to know about this," he muttered.

Frigga wanted to argue with him for the sake of his health, but she could understand why he wouldn't want to accept being female for even a short amount of time. She decided the best she could hope for was a compromise. "I can teach you how to change only what you need to. Please, Loki, it isn't healthy how you dealt with it before... and I don't want you hurt. And you must have bled so much while you slept. It could have been dangerous." If the only time his body had been allowed to function normally was when Loki was not consciously focusing on being male that would mean it all happened while he slept, Frigga could only imagine what that would have been like to wake up to.

Loki's cheeks were bright red as he looked off to the side. "I don't want it to happen at all."

"We can't stop it from happening, Loki," Frigga said soothingly. "But I will teach you how to better deal with it and how to hide it. This is nothing so horrible that we cannot accommodate."

"Don't tell Thor about this."

"I would never tell your brother about something you find embarrassing, Loki," Frigga told him truthfully. "But even if he were to know, he would not shun you. He loves you, Loki. We all love
you.

Loki didn't respond. He just stared down at his lap and fiddled with his blanket. "Can you help me... turn back?" he asked.

"Of course, dear," Frigga said as she took his hand in hers. "You will regain full control of your gender soon enough, I'm sure. For now, though, close your eyes and relax. Just stay calm and remember what you want to look like. The calmer you are, the easier it is to resist the shifts, and your guise will respond to show you how you want." Technically, the image masking Loki's appearance to that of an Aesir was what was having trouble. Since Aesir only had two genders, Odin's guise had to conform to whichever was closest at the time. When Loki's emotions triggered different hormones, the guise responded the only way it knew how. Perhaps Frigga would bring up the problem with Odin and together they could make a way for Loki's guise to no longer fluctuate. She knew it would make Loki feel better.

Frigga watched as Loki closed his eyes and took several deep breaths to try and relax. Perhaps five minutes later, Loki's face subtly shifted, and Loki sighed again. Frigga couldn't see his chest due to the blanket but from how he opened his eyes and murmured a 'thank you' she knew that he had managed it. "I never wanted you so very upset, Loki," Frigga whispered as she brushed his hair back from his slightly sharper featured face.

Loki remained quiet even as he absently tucked his shirt back into his waistband. He began to pick at the blanket still wrapped around him after a moment or two. "Does this mean... No matter who I like... I'm wrong?" he asked quietly.

Frigga tried hard to not show her surprise. Though she knew both Thor and Loki were getting closer to the age where they would start noticing other youngsters, she hadn't thought either of them had anyone already catching their eyes. "I think that no matter who you like, you can't be wrong," Frigga said with a smile. "Jotnar have always been much freer in their love than Asgardians. Much to their benefit, I think."

"I like girls," Loki said instantly and perhaps a little more defensively than he'd meant to.

Frigga couldn't help her smile from growing. "That's fine, Loki," she said. "And it's fine if you don't. You're far too young to worry about such things like that."

"I'm not that young," he said with a pout.

Frigga wrapped her arms around him and pulled her baby into a tight hug. "Of course, Loki. Are you feeling better now?" She could, of course, go further into depth with all of the changes a Jotunn of his age went through and the possibilities of the future but didn't think this the best time. He was struggling as it was and bringing up such things, which may not even matter, wouldn't help him feel more at ease.

Loki hesitated in his answer. "A bit better, Mother," he murmured. "But... why didn't you ever tell me about... this before?"

That was another question that Frigga had been dreading. She wasn't sure how to defend the decision when she hadn't been entirely in agreement with it herself. "Your Father thought you would be happier if you didn't know," she finally admitted. She couldn't think of any way to say it differently. There wasn't any other excuse that she could think of that would make it 'better,' and besides, Odin really had thought that Loki would be happier that way. They had argued over it for several months after Odin had first brought Loki home.
“Does Thor know?”

“Yes. But not because I told him,” Frigga said. “He said he already knew you were a Jotunn, but he didn’t care because you were his brother. He was just worried because he thought you may be sick. He did not realize either that Jotnar were singularly gendered.”

Loki’s eyes widened, and he wrapped his arms around himself. “H-how could he have already known?”

“I’m not certain,” Frigga admitted. Though Thor had said he’d seen Loki turn blue, Frigga wasn’t convinced that would have been enough for Thor to immediately realize his brother was a Jotunn. Someone might have told him, she supposed, but there were only a handful of people that Frigga and Odin had entrusted with the truth about Loki’s heritage: Eir and Ilmr for both needed special instructions for Loki’s care and their eldest son Tyr. “But does it matter, dearest? He loves you still, and once he gets over this shock, I’m sure you’ll find he doesn’t care about your gender either.”

“I care…” Loki muttered.

Frigga brushed a hand through his hair yet again and kissed his forehead. “I know you do.” That was the problem with raising such a powerful and label-defying child in a society that put so much value on those same labels. “But you needn’t care about that. Your father, your brothers, and I will love you no matter what.”

Loki nodded but didn’t look entirely convinced. He had a distant look on his face as if he were deep in thought. Judging by the way he continued to pick at his blanket with his fingers, Frigga assumed it wasn’t altogether happy thoughts. Frigga let her son work through his thoughts at his own pace and magically repaired the broken shelves along the walls. Once the shelves were fixed, the Queen got out of bed and went to go put the scattered items where they belonged.

Frigga had managed to get most of the various books and containers and other knickknacks back in their spots when she heard Loki shift. She glanced over to see him wrapping his arms around his knees and staring at a picture of a Jotunn in the book Bestla had written. She wasn’t sure that she liked how Loki was staring at it, though. There was a bit of hostility and fear and only the slightest amount of curiosity. She had been hoping that by this point Loki’s natural and inexorable curiosity would have won him over, but that did not appear to be the case.

“Why?”

Frigga almost missed his question he said it so softly. “Why what, darling?”

“Why did you and father take me?” Loki asked, still staring at the illustration. “I’m… I’m Jotunn… why would Father want me after fighting them so long?”

“I told you, dearest, you were orphaned from the war,” Frigga said as she went back to sit on the side of the bed. “You were much smaller than most Jotnar, and your Father felt you’d have trouble finding a family. He didn’t want that, so he brought you home.” She reached up to run a hand through his hair again.

Loki didn’t respond, but Frigga had a sinking feeling that he didn’t really believe her. She was about to try and convince him when he suddenly looked up at her. “Can I… can I be alone?”

“Are you sure you want that, dear?” He nodded. Frigga was tempted to press further but in the end decided against it. “Alright,” she agreed before bending over and kissing his forehead. “But call me
Loki swallowed hard but nodded again. “… thank you.”

“Of course, darling,” Frigga said as she got up. “I know this has all been a shock to you, Loki. But don’t doubt that we love you no matter what.” Loki looked off to the side and gave a vague attempt at a nod. Frigga decided to accept it as good enough considering the situation.

When she left, Loki was still huddled on his bed with the book and looked entirely too miserable. Frigga truly wished that she could comfort him more, but these were shocks that she knew Loki would have to come to terms with in his own time. Frigga stood beside Loki’s door for several more minutes before straightening and heading down the hall.

Odin was still in his study when Frigga found him. From how he was bent over his desk and several reports, Frigga assumed it was a safe bet that he hadn’t heard any of the drama with Loki yet, which was very good as Frigga had wanted to be the one to bring it up. Odin glanced up when his wife came in with some surprise. She didn’t often interrupt him while he was working. “Frigga, my dear, how unusual. Is something wrong?”

“You could say that,” Frigga said. “I have just come from Loki’s room. I know you may not approve, Odin, but I told him.”

For a few heartbeats Odin looked confused, but then he clearly realized what Frigga meant and scowled. “Frigga, we agreed that was not a good idea.”

“No, you agreed with yourself,” Frigga pointed out. “But I had to, Odin. He’s been turning female and needed answers.”

Odin’s frown increased. “He shouldn’t have been turning female…”

“That’s nothing compared to waking up bleeding, Odin,” Frigga said with her hands on her hips in disapproval. “He was terrified and thought he was turning ‘argr’ because of his seidr.”

“I thought the guise would handle that…” Odin muttered, still frowning as he tried to think of the reasons his magic wouldn’t have been able to keep such things from happening. “Just how much did you tell him?”

Frigga raised an eyebrow. “Everything. Just how was I going to explain it to him otherwise?” she asked back. Odin got up and even began to reply when Frigga held up her hand. “You said, Odin Borson, that if it became inevitable for him to know, then you would agree. Well, it’s inevitable. He had to know. I’ll not argue with you over it because I’ve already done it and we can’t change that. But he has questions, and you’re the only one that can answer them.”

“Questions? What kind of questions?” Odin asked unhappily. He definitely would have preferred having this conversation before Frigga had done anything. “What do I know about Jotnar that you don’t also know?” Honestly, Frigga probably knew more than Odin at this point with how she studied his mother’s book.

“Not about Jotnar,” Frigga said. “About you bringing him home. I have never asked you the specifics because I don’t really care. But he does, and he needs to know.”

“I don’t see why,” Odin protested. “What does it matter how he came to be our son? He is.”

Frigga sighed in frustration. “It matters to him. He’s already asked me why you would want him. I told him what I could, but it would mean more coming from you, Odin. He needs reassurance from
his father. So give it to him.”

“Frigga-”

“Don’t you ‘Frigga’ me, husband,” she snapped. “I’ll not have your excuses about this. He’s a sensitive boy and is questioning everything he thought he knew about himself because you decided it was best to keep this from him. If you don’t talk with him, we’re going to have problems. And not just between you and Loki.” With her piece said, Frigga turned and left the office. Odin called after her, but she ignored it. She knew her position on the matter was clear and if Odin wanted to have a happy marriage he’d do as she said.

Chapter End Notes

**Bestla’s Book**- I decided that raising a Jotunn with no guidance when the two races have some significant differences would be beyond difficult. It struck me that if Bestla lived in Asgard and had three sons of mixed heritage and one pure Jotunn she would have some sort of information hanging around. I know in my basement there’s all kinds of records and things you could stumble across. Frigga, being the awesome mother she is, would no doubt go looking for any way to help her with her new son.

**Argr**- Argr is a derogatory term much like ergi in denoting someone being “unmanly”. Argr specifically seems to relate also to being the so-called bottom during male homosexual intercourse, which was the stigmatized position. The top position did not seem to have the same dishonor associated with it. So, Loki is basically asking if he’s somehow turning himself gay by using his magic.

**Loki’s Age**- In the story currently, the year is 10,711 Asgardian Time and Loki is currently 708 or the equivalent of a 14 year old, which is about right for puberty to be a thing he has to deal with. In case you’re wondering, Thor is only 11 years older at 719.

**Puberty**- Ever an awkward topic, especially, I imagine if you’re a boy talking to your mother about having periods. What Loki did was suppress it while in public despite the fact that internally he was still going through it. This whole bit was awkward on lots of levels to write (and I hope to read as it was supposed to be) but very necessary. Because Jotunn are still primates so they’d have a cycle too and Loki’s going to have to deal with it. The rest of Jotunn puberty, in hindsight, is all fairly typical sorts of growth spurts and such so not nearly as traumatic for him. If you’re curious, in the verse that Thor came from, Loki kept the whole thing a dirty little secret his whole life and so his mother never explained anything. After finding out he was a Jotunn though it probably all began to make sense but he still would have kept it quiet. Hence, Thor *definitely* doesn't know about this.

**The Guise**- Stick with me here because this is a little difficult to explain. Odin didn’t want the guise he used on Loki to be some easy to dispel illusion that could compromise the secret. So, Odin essentially used Loki’s own shapeshifting powers to fuel the guise so that it produces a version of Loki that is an Aesir (hence why he still has the same features only is blue). However, this is a problem when Loki’s female hormones kick in. Most Jotunn in this verse do not have obvious breasts unless with child or nursing however Loki developed them because Aesir girls have breasts from
puberty. The guise basically forced Loki’s body into a defined Aesir female body and then took care of the complexion problems itself. Loki would be able to keep himself lily white if he needed to but not knowing he was Jotunn he’d never had to.
In Search of Adventure

Chapter Summary

The brothers Odinson and their friends decide to go looking for adventure.

Chapter Notes

I forgot to let Twitter know I was working on this... oops. Maybe if more people followed me I wouldn't forget *nudge nudge* @BFayMiller if you forgot... /end shameless plug

Also! Who's seen the new Ragnarok trailer?! Gah! Amazering. I so can't wait to see Thor and Hulk go at it... and Loki again. Because I'm a fan girl. Although... must admit... did not see Hela that way in my head at all... So she's not going to look like that in this fic when I get to her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thor was getting concerned. Three days had passed since ‘the incident,’ and he hadn't seen Loki at all. Their mother occasionally went into Loki's room, but Thor's little brother didn't come out. Not even to eat with the rest of the family. Thor knew that his parents were fighting over the situation though it wasn’t something he’d actually witnessed. The tension between his parents at the breakfast table made it obvious that they were arguing, and Thor was willing to bet that the fighting was, as usual, over Loki. More than one breakfast had been uncomfortably quiet all through, and Frigga kept giving Odin looks that made Thor rather uneasy. Thor was almost in awe of how well his father ignored these looks (if it weren't for the fact that he was sure problems would come of the whole situation), and so wished his father weren’t pretending to not notice.

Frigga told Thor to be patient. That his brother was going through quite a lot right now, but Thor had never been a particularly patient boy or man. He'd tried knocking on Loki's door several times over the three days, but he never got an answer. He knew that Loki was ignoring him and that was not a good sign. Thor didn't want his brother to shut himself away again. The whole reason he had come back was so that this time, Loki wouldn’t have to deal with all of this alone, but that was ruined if Loki hid from everyone. Busting down the door to get inside was probably not the best thing to do if he wanted Loki to listen to him, though, no matter how tempting the option was.

Thor stood outside of Loki's door yet again and thought carefully. How was he going to get in to talk to his brother without getting himself in trouble by destroying something? Could he somehow convince Loki to open up? Unlikely. Loki could be terribly stubborn when he wanted to be.

"Thor!"

The Golden Prince gave a start and turned to see his friends coming down the hall. Fandral was waving enthusiastically at the front of the little group beside a grinning Astrild. Dagr seemed a little put out where he was trailing behind the others, and Hogun had his usual indecipherable and reserved look on his face. "My friends, what are you doing here?"
"We should ask you that same thing," Dagr said with a distinct pout. "We thought we were going out to the woods today."

Thor winced slightly. He had entirely forgotten about their plans to go explore what with his brother's reclusion, not at all helped by the fact that they'd planned the trip ages ago. "I'm afraid I will be unable to join you today, my friends."

"What? Why? We've been planning this for a month, Thor!" Fandral said with a frown.

"Something has come up," Thor said. He knew that Loki would not want Thor to blurt out his personal information to their friends so thoughtlessly, but he wouldn't get out of their plans without some sort of an excuse. "Perhaps we can venture to the woods next week."

Hogun looked between Thor and Loki's door thoughtfully. "Something came up... involving Loki?" he guessed.

"With Loki?" Astrild echoed before Thor could even attempt to answer himself. "What happened?"

"Maybe he finally stopped mooning over Sigyn and tried to court her, and he got shot down?" Fandral suggested.

"I don't know. She doesn't seem to dislike him..." Astrild mused. "Plus, I don't think he's been bold enough to ask her for anything that might remotely be leading to courtship..."

"Well, what else could have happened?" Fandral demanded rather cockily.

"If you give him a minute, maybe Thor would tell us," Hogun drawled.

Fandral and Astrild blinked in surprise before giving Thor a sheepish smile. "Sorry, Thor," Astrild muttered. "Please, tell us what happened. We'll be quiet."

"What makes you think something happened?" Thor asked uneasily.

There was a moment of silence. "... the fact that you said something came up?" Dagr pointed out in confusion. "How could something come up and yet nothing happen?"

Thor felt his face heat up a little. When Dagr said it like that, it did seem to be a stupid question. "It's nothing serious, is all," he said quickly while his mind scrambled for some acceptable excuse. "Loki is simply... not feeling well. I thought I would spend the day with him until he feels better. That's all."

"You're staying with him... outside of his room?" Dagr questioned.

"... maybe."

The long somewhat uncomfortable silence after that made it clear that Thor's friends either didn't believe him or thought that something was wrong with him. "So, next week then..." Hogun said after another few minutes. He still wasn't even slightly certain what was going on, but Thor didn't seem interested in going out exploring that day.

"Yes! Next week. Most assuredly, my friends!" Thor agreed with no small amount of relief.

"We can't do it next week," Dagr protested. "Mother is taking Sif and me to Vanaheim to visit our grandmother tomorrow. We'll be gone all next week. How about after that?"

"After that Tyr has said we'll be starting a new training regiment," Thor argued. All of the other
boys made faces. Whenever Tyr decided that he had something new to teach them it always took two weeks or so for them to adjust to the increased workload. They would probably be black and blue and far too sore to go adventuring.

The five boys stood there for a moment thinking. "Well, we still could go to the woods after training," Hogun mused. "We just wouldn't go as far into the forest as we normally could have."

"I don't know how fun that sounds..." Fandral muttered.

Suddenly, the door beside them opened. "Oh, alright, fine," Loki said in exasperation. "Let's just go if you five are going to whine outside my door all day."

"Feeling better, Loki?" Dagr asked pleasantly.

"He looks like he's feeling better," Fandral said with a grin.

Loki rolled his eyes, and bodily turned Dagr around with a hand on his shoulder and then gave the blonde a hard shove. "You think you're funny, but you're not." Thor smiled widely as he followed his brother down the corridor. He hadn't anticipated Loki coming out, but he was more than a little pleased that he had. Even if it was simply because Loki had gotten fed up with the talking outside of his room, it was an improvement. Loki could have easily shut them up without even opening the door, but he'd chosen to come out and join them instead.

"What are we even going into the forest to find, anyhow?" Astrild asked.

"It's not about going to find anything," Dagr said. "It's about the adventure of it."

"Dagr is right," Thor chimed in. They had spent quite a bit of time planning out the trip. They’d scoured all the maps of Jarnvidr they could find to figure out where they hadn’t yet gone. To be entirely honest, that was most of the Jarnvidr, but Thor and his friends had explored the very edges nearest the palace quite thoroughly. Thor wasn’t sure why he felt the need to explore every inch of what would eventually be Angrboda’s home, but he didn’t think anything bad would come of it. So long as they didn’t venture in too far, they shouldn’t come across anything dangerous. Perhaps, at most, a lone wolf exiled from its pack for being too old or sickly, which they could handle even at their young age.

“Perhaps we’ll find another cave like the last one,” Loki mused.

“You only liked that because it was full of those queer clear stones…” Fandral muttered.

Loki sighed heavily, “Crystals, Fandral. They were crystals, and very helpful in spell casting.”

“You shouldn’t mess so much with seidr. It’s not natural for boys,” Dagr said, parroting off the common misconception of Asgard without hesitation.

“My father uses seidr,” Thor snapped before Loki could do more than open his mouth. “Are you saying the King and a Prince of Asgard are unnatural?”

Dagr’s golden eyes widened, and his mouth snapped shut. “Er, no, course he wasn’t, Thor,” Fandral said uneasily before elbowing their friend. Dagr nodded in agreement though he was still staring in surprise. So were Loki and Hogun, though, the dark-haired members of their group seemed more thoughtful at the unexpected defense.

“Good,” Thor said. He did his best to ignore the looks he was getting. “Anyway. Let’s hurry it’s already almost midmorning.”
The six boys had planned to spend the full day in Jarnsvidr and then camp outside of the borders of the forest before heading back early the next morning. This meant that they had accumulated and packed away plenty of necessary camping supplies into saddlebags. Already having everything prepared ahead of time meant that the six of them only had to stop by the stables briefly to pick up their mounts and supplies before heading out. Thor had a niggling feeling in the back of his mind that he had forgotten something, but after ten minutes of being unable to place what it might be, he dismissed the sensation. Whatever it was, he’d just have to endure without it.

"You would not believe what my sister did last night," Dagr said as the group rode towards the wood at a relaxed pace. He twisted around in his saddle to face the others. "She asked our father if she could get a sword. A sword!"

"What's wrong with that?" Hogun asked.

"What's wrong with that?" Dagr echoed. "She's a girl that's what's wrong with it. Girls just aren't as strong as boys. It's obvious."

Thor caught sighed of Loki rolling his eyes. "There's more to fighting than strength," Loki said with no small amount of exasperation. "Even Tyr says so, and he's all about hitting things hard."

"Well, of course you'd say that," Dagr muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think I mean?" Dagr asked. "Everyone knows you're not able to even lift half the weapons."

Thor reached over and whacked Dagr upside the back of the head but was surprised when Astrild turned. "And what about me then? I'm not the strongest either, but I whipped your butt last practice. Or did you just take a fancy to that patch of ground?"

"Alright, alright, I take your meaning," Dagr said before sullenly rubbing the spot on his head that Thor had slapped. "But it's still silly to expect Sif to be a warrior. I mean, can you even imagine it?"


Thor shifted in his saddle but then nodded. "You do realize that she would look ridiculous trying to dodge an enemy and tripping all over her skirts," Fandral said.

"It's not like she'd be fighting in a skirt," Thor argued. "We don't fight in our best clothes."

"He has a point there," Astrild agreed. "Still, maybe it's just a fancy for her, and once she sees how difficult it is, she'll want to do something else."

"Yes, I can see that," Fandral agreed. "Most girls are flighty with what they think they want to do."

Loki shook his head and sighed. "I think you'd be surprised how entirely untrue that is," he said. "Oh, how would you know," Fandral asked. "You know one girl."

"Sif, Amora, Lorelei, and Sigyn... already I'm up to four girls I know," Loki drawled.

"I think Fandral has a point," Astrild put in before Fandral could reply. "Girls are fickle. Always
have been.”

Thor glanced over to the silent Hogun. Their friend from Vanaheim just shook his head and stayed soundly out of the argument. "I'll just tell Sif you said that then," Loki said lightly. "I wonder if she'll agree with you or not."

Fandral's eyes widened. "Alright, let's not be hasty!"

"What?" Loki asked innocently. "Don't you think she'll agree?"

"This whole argument is pointless," Dagr said. "Father wouldn't let her have a sword. Said that he wasn't about to let his Princess get hurt by letting her fight." Dagr snorted a little. "Too bad he doesn't realize his 'Princess' is a little monster pretending to be a girl."

Out of the corner of his eye, Thor noticed Loki stiffen and his brother's grip on his reins tighten. "You shouldn't call your sister a monster," Thor said. "What if something were to happen to her?"

Dagr made a face. "Depressing, Thor. Besides... you don't have to live with her! Every time Mother says something to me she gets this insufferable smirk on her face. I wish I had a little brother rather than a sister. Then I could at least punch him..."

"You have a brother, Dagr," Fandral pointed out.

"Yes but he's older. And Heimdall is Heimdall. I can't compete with that!" Dagr complained.

Loki scoffed. "Try having four older brothers..."

"Can you even call Thor an older brother?" Dagr asked. "I mean... there's a decade between you. That's hardly anything."

"Then why do you call Sif your younger sister?" Hogun asked. "She's only fifteen years younger than you."

"Because she's a brat," Dagr said instantly.

"I'm just glad to be an only child," Astrild said lightly.

"Agreed," Hogun said.

Dagr scowled darkly at the two of them before settling into a huffy silence. The conversation began to get away from sibling troubles and venture more towards their past adventures into the woods. Fandral seemed intent on bringing up every single misadventure including, but far from limited to, the time Thor and Astrild had tried to cross a river, and the makeshift bridge had broken. They'd fallen in the water from several feet up, thereby discovering that the river was actually much more shallow than it appeared because Astrild broke his collarbone. Astrild had not appreciated that story being told and nearly tackled his best friend off his horse.

After perhaps two and a half hours of travel, the six youngsters reached the edge of Jarnsvidr. The large grey trunks of the trees were scattered in a very faint border. Most of the woods this far from the center were tangled underbrush, and they could see for several hundred yards into the woods between the tree trunks. Further inside Jarnsvidr. The trees began to get clustered closer together, and the canopy grew thicker which led to the feeling of darkness and claustrophobia. All of the most dangerous creatures of the forest lived deep in the center, and only fully-fledged warriors were to venture into such a place.
"Let's leave the horses here," Thor said as he got off. "They'll not like being in Jarnsvindr." Most peaceful animals got spooked inside the Ironwood, so it was generally better to not take them in, to begin with.

"If we're leaving them here we should unsaddle them," Hogun commented as he led his own horse over to a shady spot. Since they weren't sure how long they would be off exploring, the shelter provided by the trees would be safer for the horses.

"Right," Astrild agreed as he got off his own bloody bay mare.

Once the horses were secured and the baggage stowed away in a tree where no bears or boars might try to get into it, the six youngsters followed Thor into the woods. When Thor was first so young, Jarnsvindr held little interest for him until he was old enough to be allowed into the darker and wilder areas. He had also most often flown above the woods until he reached the very depths of Jarnsvindr. So, he had rarely been exposed to the less dangerous edges of the forest. Loki had been more adventurous in their youth than Thor although he was not seeking battle like Thor would have been.

Even now, Loki would sometimes pause to examine some piece of flora or investigate a strange marking in the dirt. He was much quieter than Fandral and Astrild who were still bickering about past misadventures and other things, but Thor was glad to see that Loki seemed happier than he had on the ride over. Perhaps he'd needed this little trip more than any of the others.

The six of them eventually found a small game trail and began to follow it through the brush. “Bah, I hate these thorn bushes,” Astrild complained as he fought to untangle his sleeve from one branch without tearing massive holes into the fabric.

“They’re called Steel Brambles,” Loki supplied absently as he used a stick to push several of the reaching bramble limbs off to the side so that they were easier to pass. “Don’t let them stick you. They have a layer of oil on the thorns that act as an anticoagulant.”

“A what now?” Fandral asked.

Loki sighed and carefully moved yet another thin grey branch covered in very large black thorns off to the side. “Anticoagulant. It means your blood won’t clot. So any cuts you get from them will keep bleeding for hours longer than it should,” Loki explained.

“Sounds pleasant,” Dagr muttered as he paused in their line to unhook several thorns from his pant leg.

“How do animals move through all this mess?” Astrild demanded as his sleeve got caught yet again.

Thor tried his best to not get himself caught on the bushes. “Beasts are stupid compared to us. They probably do not know of the ability of these… Brambles. One can’t expect animals to act intelligently.”

“Or this is an old trail, and the Steel Brambles have grown here while it hasn’t been used. Apparently, they grow quite fast,” Loki suggested as he finally managed to break through to the other side of the bushes where the trail took them into a clearing.

In short order, the rest of the boys came out into the clearing. “On the way back can we avoid any bramble patches?” Astrild asked as he fingered a large hole in his crisp white shirt. “I rather liked this outfit.”
“You shouldn’t wear outfits you like into the woods,” Fandral said with an eye roll.

“You’re one to talk. How long did you spend getting ready for this trip this morning?” Astrild demanded.

“Not the point, Astrild!”

Loki sighed heavily and rubbed his forehead as the two blondes quickly devolved into a small scuffle. Thor looked on with a little smile as the two roughhoused. “It’s hard to believe they’re best friends sometimes,” Dagr said.

After several minutes, Fandral came out the victor by pinning Astrild to the ground with a knee digging into the unfortunate boy’s spine. “Alright, alright! Get off me!” Astrild demanded as he squirmed and tried to dislodge his friend.

Fandral hopped up and grinned widely with his arms above his head. “And again! I win! That makes five hundred and ten to three-hundred and twenty-one!”

Astrild scowled even as he accepted Hogun’s offered hand to get up. “Don’t get so cocky,” he muttered as he tried to brush the dirt off of himself. “That’s hardly the best record in the Nine Realms…”

“He’s still got more wins than you,” Dagr pointed out with almost as wide a grin as Fandral was sporting. After having his own defeat in the training ring to Astrild, he found watching the slighter boy get beaten rather therapeutic in a way. Not that he was holding a grudge or anything…

“If you two are quite done?” Loki asked.

The two blondes at least looked a little sheepish, but since them devolving into petty arguments was fairly routine they weren’t feeling that guilty. “At least they waited until we were out of the Steel Brambles,” Hogun pointed out even as they began to follow the game trail again.

The six boys quickly found the problem with following a game trail for directions. For seemingly no reason whatsoever, the faint line of dirt where the grass had died disappeared in the middle of nowhere. The boys didn’t worry about it too much just then. Because they hadn’t gotten very deep into the woods getting out again should, in theory, be fairly straightforward. Plus, they still had a little less than half a day to explore before they even thought about heading back.

Suddenly, Dagr put out a hand to stop them in their aimless wandering. His golden eyes were fixed into the distance. “I see something out there,” he informed them.

Thor instantly moved closer. “What is it?” he asked, looking into the same direction but not being able to see anything at all.

Dagr seemed to consider his answer for a moment before shaking his head. “I’m not sure. I thought it was a rabbit, but it’s much too large…and much too dark. Its fur is entirely black. I’ve never seen a rabbit that was black before.”

“How large is too large?” Fandral asked, leaning over Dagr’s shoulder as if that would help him see into the distance as his friend could.

“Perhaps three feet tall when on its hind legs?” Dagr guessed. “It’s hard to tell because there’s not much around it to judge….”

“A three-foot tall black rabbit? That would make quite the coat,” Astrild said.
Thor wasn’t so interested in a black fur coat, but he was interested in beasts he’d never seen before, so he gave Dagr a little nudge. “Can we get closer to it without it knowing?”

“I think so,” Dagr agreed.

And with that, the six boys were slowly moving through the underbrush at Dagr’s direction. Often times they would freeze and just stay standing or crouching where they were for many long minutes before Dagr motioned that they could continue on again. Sneaking up on wild animals was a tension-filled exercise that all the boys had done at some point, usually to no real reward. Most animals they snuck up on were domesticated animals in Asgard and had no reason to be nervous around six young boys. This strange creature they were stalking would no doubt be much more difficult.

Dagr kept his golden gaze fixed on their target the whole time he was moving. Very slowly, the six of them spread enough to hopefully catch the rabbit unaware from multiple sides. Almost an hour of slow stop and go movement passed, before the others were able to catch sight of their prey.

Just like Dagr had said, it was a very large pure black rabbit. The rabbit’s eyes were hard to see as they were glowing and the creature was angled slightly away from the boys. The rabbit sniffed over a blackberry bush with great interest as its ears twitched and its fluffy tail flickered around.

“That’s a-”

Before Loki could finish the ground under the boys suddenly gave way, and they were tumbling down with many cries of surprise and a little fright. The sudden slope was muddy and ended in a very unpleasant puddle of foul-smelling muck. The boys cried out as they smashed into one another and splashed more of the watery mess onto each other. A loud cackling laugh echoed, and Thor saw a dark black figure leap over the ravine they had fallen into. For just a moment, Thor could hear a heavy pounding noise as their prey left them behind.

“A Puki…” Loki finished with a groan as he dropped his head back onto Thor’s chest.

“I didn’t think they lived in Asgard!” Dagr protested.

“Well, apparently one does!” Loki snapped back as they all began to get out of the tangle they had ended up in.

“It just had to drop us into mud didn’t it?” Astrild protested as he accepted Fandral’s hand to get up.

Hogun had landed face first and so was busy trying to clear the muck off of his face. Judging from the grimace and the way he was spitting, he’d unfortunately gotten quite a bit in his mouth, and the mud tasted as bad as it smelled.

“How are we getting out of here?” Fandral asked as he glared up at the muddy slope they had fallen down.

“I can get us out,” Loki said as he shook his hands in a rather vain attempt to get some of the mud off of himself. The nearly black mud was sticky and the green streaks of mold or whatever it was made it stringy in places as well. They would all need a very complete scrubbing when this was over.

“Please hurry,” Astrild said. “This place smells absolutely foul.”

Loki nodded, and green seidr started to build around his hands. Thor doubted the Puki was aware
that Loki could magic them out of the unpleasant trap. No doubt the devious little hobgoblin had figured they’d be stuck in the pit for hours slipping and sliding as they tried to climb out. Getting out still took some time as Loki could only lift them one at a time. But it certainly didn’t take hours.

Of course, getting out of the pit was only the first problem. “Now we need to find a river or something. This muck is sickening,” Astrild said. “Serious, the smell might make me actually vomit.”

“Try tasting it,” Hogun muttered.

“I think I’ll pass.”

“I will as well,” Fandral said in agreement.

“I think I saw a stream a little over that way.” Dagr said pointing to the east and further into the woods. “If we make it quick it probably wouldn’t be too dangerous to go further in.”

Thor hesitated for only a second. Though he didn’t want to go deeper into the woods without Mjolnir to call upon, he also really wanted to get the mud off of him. Already it was hardening his hair into thick clumps that were very uncomfortable. “Let’s go. The sooner we clean up, the sooner we can go set up camp. I think we’ve had enough adventure for one day…”

After a short hike towards the east, they came across the small river that Dagr had spotted. It wasn’t much of a river. More correctly it was a stream, and they couldn’t even dunk under the water to have a proper bath, but it was better than nothing at all. “I’m somewhat offended, actually.” Loki muttered as the boys spread out slightly and started washing the worst of the mud off themselves.

“Why’s that, brother?” Thor asked as he aggressively ruffled his hair with his hands.

“I’d think a Puki would rather like me,” Loki said. “But it put me in that damned mud pit the same as you.”

Thor laughed a little. “You are kindred spirits, I would think. Perhaps it didn’t want to show favoritism.”

“I’d much preferred it if it had,” Loki replied as he wrung some faintly brown water from his hair. “Ugh, there’s no way we’re getting this all off of us out here.”

“Couldn’t you… spell us clean or something, Loki?” Astrild demanded as he tried desperately to get the mud out of his own pale locks. He seemed to be having about as much luck as Thor was. At least Loki and Hogun had dark hair, and so the mud didn’t show as obviously on them. Not that Thorimagined it was any more comfortable having giant chunks of dried mud for them as it was for him.

“I could,” Loki said. “But it’ll be draining so get as much off with the water as you can first.”

Astrild grumbled but went back to scrubbing himself. Hogun had nearly face planted in the water to try and get every little bit off of his face. Thor wondered idly if he was planning on drinking the stream as well just before Hogun finally surfaced again.

“I could use a beer after this,” Fandral said as he began to pull off his shirt to get the mud out of the cloth.
“I think the clothes are a lost cause, Fandral,” Dagr said. “Even with magic.”

“He’s probably right,” Loki agreed. “Although, ruining our clothes is likely going to get us into trouble with mother…”

“You boys are already in quite a bit of trouble,” an amused voice said.

Thor jumped nearly straight out of his skin and whipped around. "Baldr! Hodr!" The infamous twin sons of Odin were both standing there with almost identical smiles on their handsome faces. Baldr's shiny blonde hair was held back in a low ponytail, and his sky blue eyes sparkled as he leaned with his arm on his twin's shoulder. Hodr didn't seem to notice he was being used as a leaning post and just stood there with his arms folded over his compact but well-muscled chest. Unlike his twin, Hodr had his long raven hair hanging loosely down his back. "What are you two doing here?"

"Father wrote to us and asked us to come," Hodr said.

"What do you mean we're in trouble?" Dagr asked shifting his weight between his feet uneasily.

"The forest is still off limits," Baldr pointed out. "Or did you forget Father's decree?" Thor felt the blood drain from his face. He had entirely forgotten their father had forbidden them from leaving the palace or city grounds. Baldr chuckled. "You should see the look on little Thor's face... I'd say it's pretty obvious that he did forget," he informed his twin.

Hodr's dark eyebrow rose over his pale milky eyes. "Oh? Now how could he forget that?"

"I would say he didn’t consider it important enough to remember," Baldr said cheerfully.

"It was an honest mistake," Thor muttered. "Are you going to tell Father?"

Baldr’s smile widened. "Thor, Thor, Thor. Dear little Sparky… who do you think sent us out here to get you?" he asked lightly. "Neither of you were in the palace, so Father asked Heimdall to find you."

Thor flinched. "Oh, wonderful," Loki muttered darkly. "I knew I should have stayed in my room…"

Hodr hummed a little. "Yes, he was quite put out when we arrived, and the two of you weren’t home. I think he meant for us to surprise you."

"Surprise us? Why?"

“Couldn’t say,” Baldr replied. “But it would probably be best if you six came back with us now. Or… after you finish cleaning up.” There were quite a few groans but all six of the boys knew better than to argue. Besides, heading home early meant a hot bath, which, after washing in the cold stream, seemed a very welcome prospect.

Chapter End Notes

Odin pt.1- Sigh. He'll get a clue sooner or later. I promise. Right now his brilliant plan is bring in Loki's other brothers and let them talk to him. Because Odin is bad at talking to his sons...
**Jarnsvídr** - The Ironwood. Where Angrboda and other witches dwell. Along with lots of wolves and giantesses. It's only mentioned briefly in like two stanza's so there's not a whole lot in canon to deal with. Though it is said to be east of Midgard but I obviously have moved it to Asgard.

**The Phantom R** - Most of the time when I come across a word such as Jötunheimr or Helheimr or even Hjalmarr I chop off that r at the end. Mostly because modern Anglicized versions of the words are spelled without it, including Marvel versions of the words. Some names I deliberately kept the older spelling such as with Baldr and Hodr (because they go better together than the marvel versions, I think) but for most places I went ahead and chopped the r away. I didn't do that here because Jarnsvíðr just didn't look or sound as appealing. So, yes, there is a little inconsistency in the translations but I'm doing it according to my own aesthetics/preferences.

**Steel Brambles** - Entirely my own invention. I imagined that a place called 'Ironwood' most likely had all sorts of dangerous everything in it, including plant-life. Although Steel Brambles aren't really that dangerous if you are careful.

**Puki** - Also known as púca, pooka, phouka, phooka, phooca, puca, púka, and more including the infamous Puck. Puki is the old Norse version of the name though if the name came from the old Norse is unclear. They were fairies or spirits that often were in the form of animals, almost always black, and were shapechangers. They could take the form of humans but always seemed to have some animal traits. Puck from A Midsummer Night's Dream is perhaps the most famous of the little tricksters. Puki have been described as both benevolent and very much not through different stories of various cultures. Hobgoblin, as Thor refers to their Puki trickster, is another way some have referred to the creatures. The version I'm going with here is that Puki aren't outright malevolent but much like Loki have a leaning towards sometimes cruel tricks. If you manage to befriend them though, they are very nice and helpful... it's the befriending bit that's the hard part.

**Baldur** - Oh dear. Baldur. Baldur's been called the god of all kinds of things but he lacks any... real purpose other than dying it seems like, perhaps simply because that's really the only story surviving that involves him. In both Marvel and Myth he's Thor's brother and his death at Hodr's hands is fated to begin Ragnarök. In Marvel, Odin interferes where as in Myth it's Frigga who sets to protecting her son. Baldur hasn't been seen in the MCU yet. Although in the Comic verse he has a larger role and even sits as King of Asgard at various points.

**Hodr** - Blind twin of Baldur. He actually was given a definite 'God of' title. He's the God of Winter. Unfortunately in both Myth and Marvel, he's tricked by Loki into shooting a mistletoe arrow at Baldur (the one substance that could kill Baldr). Even more unfortunately in myth, this leads Odin to have a son, Vali, with the giantess Rindr who then killed Hodr in return. Because, yeah, clearly the blind guy's fault. In Marvel, he's relegated to a really minor role and is not a brother to Baldr at all much less his twin. And he's an old dude. So, I'm pretty much scraping the Marvel telling of Hodr for the mythological one.
Family Meeting

Chapter Summary

The family has a meeting about Loki and Thor. But mostly Loki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Of all the irresponsible things to have done! Did I not make myself clear enough that you two were to stay near the palace?" Odin demanded. "Or is your safety simply not a concern for you? Did you want to scare your mother half to death?"

Thor and Loki both flinched. "Odin," Frigga interrupted. "No harm was done. Please calm yourself."

Odin exhaled heavily through his nose and tried to regain control of himself. Going to get his sons from their rooms and finding both chambers empty had been a surprise and a rather nasty one at that. But when he realized that his boys were nowhere in the palace or the gardens he'd been terrified. Knowing that raiders were coming and killing his people out in the wilds and that his sons were prime targets for anyone trying to get a foothold in Asgard, the King had been beside himself. Odin was far too aware of how many ways royal hostages could be used. But terror was not helpful, and so he buried that beneath anger at being disobeyed.

"We didn't mean to disobey you, Father," Thor said. "We simply forgot..."

Odin resisted the urge to growl in a mixture of frustration and anger but only barely. "These were rules set for your own safety, Thor! Raiders are killing our people, and they would be only too happy to kill two princes of Asgard!"

"Nothing happened!" Loki protested.

"Then you got lucky!" Odin snapped in frustration. "Being lucky does not excuse you for putting yourself at risk! What if the Raiders had come across you within Jarnsvir? How would you have defended yourselves? Between the six of you, you were barely armed! Even if we weren't currently being beset by raiders, you should not have entered Jarnsvir so casually! It is too dangerous!"

"We've gone into Jarnsvir plenty of times!" Loki argued.

"That does not mean it to be safe!"

Loki glared up at him, but Odin narrowed his eyes in warning. He was not going to budge on such a thing. The King of Asgard was fairly certain that, if there were any place within the Golden Kingdom the Raiders would be hiding, it would be Jarnsvir, and even if they weren't hiding within the Iron Wood, it was not a place to play around within. The two of them stared each other down for several moments before Loki finally looked away. Odin only then allowed his gaze to soften. "You must understand... neither of you are strong enough yet to go into such a perilous place."

"Father... it was my idea-"
"It does not matter whose idea it was, Thor," Odin interrupted. "You both chose to enter someplace you were expressly forbidden to go. Return to your rooms. You will stay there until I decide what further punishment you shall have."

There was a certain discomfort in the throne room before the two youngest sons of Odin left to do as they were told. Odin sighed heavily and turned to ascend the stairs in front of his throne. He sat down rather heavily on the golden seat and rubbed his forehead. If only his sons would just listen to him. "They weren't very far into Jarnsvindr, Father," Baldr said.

Odin cast his son a sour look. "That is hardly the point, Baldr. We have been under siege, and I made it clear they were not to leave the palace grounds."

"We often went into Jarnsvindr when we were younger," Hodr added.

"And I grounded you for that as well," Odin pointed out gruffly.

"But you did not yell at us as you just did them," Baldr pointed out. "But I doubt that you called us here solely to watch you scold our brothers..."

Odin sighed heavily. "No. I did not. I was hoping to get your help with Loki."

The same look of surprise crossed both twin's faces. "With Loki?" Baldr echoed. "What help do you need with Loki?"

There was an awkward silence before Frigga stepped forward. She cast her husband an annoyed look before addressing the twins, "You remember that we adopted your brother, yes?"

"Of course. It was rather hard to miss," Baldr said. They had been nowhere near young enough to assume that their parents had simply had another child. Most of their people hadn't seen their Queen much near the end of the Jotnar War and so simply dismissed the fact that Frigga had not shown any signs of being with child. But her own children knew better.

"We had to tell Loki about it recently, and I'm afraid he is taking it rather hard," Frigga explained.

Hodr frowned and turned his head slightly. Even though he couldn't actually see his mother, he could pick out the slight change in her voice. "You're not saying something... why is he taking the truth so hard?"

There was another uncomfortable silence in the room. "I took him from Jotunheim," Odin said from where he was slumped on his throne. "I could tell just by looking at him he was too small. Jotnar call those like him runts and at the time had laws against raising them. So, I brought him here."

Baldr stared at his father in surprise even as Hodr frowned. "He's a Jotunn? Why did you never tell us this?"

"Because it was not important," Odin declared. "But he seems to be taking the news... badly."

Hodr and Baldr exchanged a one-sided glance. "Badly how?" Hodr asked.

Frigga sighed heavily. "He has locked himself in his room many times since finding out and refuses to come out no matter how I urge him to."

"And...?" Hodr could tell that there was more that his mother simply didn't want to say aloud. Something that was disturbing both her and their father judging by how Odin was shifting uneasily
"He has broken every mirror in his room. And if we replace them he will simply break the glass again," Frigga admitted. "I am afraid he will start taking even more drastic measures if we cannot help him now."

"He's breaking mirrors?" Baldr echoed with no small amount of alarm.

"He says it's an accident," Odin grumbled.

"I'm inclined to believe him," Frigga said with a somewhat dangerous edge. Odin didn't dare meet his wife's eyes with his own. Frigga huffed in annoyance before turning back to her twin boys. "He is so distraught that his magic is lashing out for him and breaking things. It's not unheard of for young mages."

"It's not just his magic either," Tyr said from where he was leaning against a massive column. Baldr looked over at his older brother with a frown. Up until now, he had been entirely silent and just watching. "I've been teaching him how to wield knives since larger weapons are often too heavy for him. He's been doing quite well, but he hasn't shown up for his last few lessons," Tyr explained before Baldr could even ask.

"And... what do you want us to do, exactly?" Hodr asked curiously. Though they cared about their brother, the twins hadn't the closest relationship with Thor or Loki. They hadn't even been living in Asgard when the two youngest had been added to the family tree.

Odin got up from his throne and descended the stairs to stand in front of his twin sons. "If you were to speak with him as well, I would be grateful. He needs to understand his fears are unfounded. That you are his brothers no matter what his birth may be."

"Of course, Father," Baldr said. "We don't want our brother to doubt himself. But... Thor is much closer to Loki than we are. Have you spoken about this to him?"

Odin sighed in pure exasperation. "I had intended to do that today but now... this has happened."

"And you lost your temper," Frigga said sharply.

Another sigh escaped the King of Asgard. He knew he'd lost his temper some, but he didn't think Frigga really should blame him for it. Thor and Loki had been entirely too reckless, and it was only through luck that the worst they'd gotten was dumped into a mud pit by a Puki. "I will speak with Thor about this as well... but not tonight."

"Thor is another issue, actually," Frigga said.

Odin turned to his Queen instantly. "What do you mean 'another issue'?" He wasn't aware of any problems with Thor.

"Thor said that he was already aware that Loki was a Jotunn, but I've not been able to determine how he could," Frigga admitted with a sigh. "He said that the glamour you cast over Loki failed and showed his true skin, but I cannot help but think that would not be enough. Jotnar are not the only species that has blue skin."

A dark frown crossed Odin's face, and he looked over at Tyr. "You did not tell Thor of Loki's heritage did you, Tyr?"

Tyr's eyebrow went up towards his hairline. "No. You were quite clear that you didn't want anyone
knowing besides Lady Eir and Lady Ilmr. I told no one."

Baldr thought on the question for a moment before shrugging. "Perhaps he simply guessed," Baldr said. "Though Jotnar are not the only race with such a skin color, as mother said, they are the ones we speak about most often here in Asgard. Other options may not have occurred to him."

"Possible, I suppose..." Odin murmured. "Although Lady Vor has mentioned to me that a strange change has happened concerning Thor lately. She is not certain what it is exactly, but she says he seems more thoughtful and mature than usual and she isn't certain why..." He hadn't actually considered such news to be a 'problem,' however. If anything it was welcome news.

Tyr shifted where he was standing. "I've noticed it as well. He has become more serious in his training and making massive improvements I wouldn't have expected so quickly."

"So, he has had a sudden spike in maturity... is that a bad thing?" Hodr asked.

"Not bad," Frigga denied. "Simply... unexpected."

"Especially since we can find no reason for such a change," Tyr added. "As Lady Vor has said in the past... Sudden maturity like this is usually brought about by some monumental event, which we can find no evidence of."

Baldr hummed thoughtfully. "Has anyone asked him about it?"

"He is rather... evasive when it is brought up," Tyr said. "Although it's hard because we're not even sure what we're trying to find out..."

Odin frowned. "Thor may not be acting entirely normal, but he is not being destructive... Loki is the one we should be worrying about right now."

"Yes, but, speaking of Thor and all of this... business with Loki," Hodr began, "perhaps since the issue with blood relations has been brought up, it is time to tell Thor the truth of his own birth as well?"

There was an awkward silence following that suggestion. "Not now," Odin said firmly. "I would prefer to not have to try and reassure both Loki and Thor at the same time for something that isn't even important." Frigga looked like she had something to say but didn't actually voice her opinion. None of the three sons of Odin thought it particularly wise to push the matter further.

Tyr finally stepped away from the column and went to stand beside his younger brothers. "Well, since you have ordered Loki and Thor both to their rooms for the night. I think it is a good time for us three to catch up. Come Baldr... you can tell me all about that nephew of mine over a drink or five. And how is Nanna?" he asked as he took the twins by a shoulder each and guided them towards the door.

Baldr seemed a little surprised but didn't put up a fight as they were led out. "She's well. She would have come along with Forseti but Father made this seem rather urgent, and it's hard to simply drop everything at a moment's notice... Plus, Forseti is still so young Nanna didn't wish to travel with him just yet."

As the three of them left the room, Frigga turned to Odin. "Odin... having Hodr and Baldr come is good... but you should speak with Loki as well. I've told you this already."

Odin frowned and turned back towards his throne. "And how would you have me convince him, Frigga? If he does not listen to you, I don't think he'll listen much more to me. He never listens to
me. This entire debacle with Jarnsvindr is proof enough of that."

Frigga huffed. "Childish exploration is hardly the same thing, Odin! What are you so afraid of?"

"I am not afraid!" Odin denied fiercely as he spun back around.

"Then why do you resist just speaking with him?"

"Frigga-"

"No, Odin! Tell me!"

"How am I supposed to tell him?" Odin demanded in a near roar. Frigga recoiled slightly. "How am I supposed to tell him that if I hadn't found him in that temple, he would have frozen to death? That the one who gave birth to him left him there deliberately knowing that he would most likely die? Tell me, Frigga... how do you tell our son that?"

Frigga was quiet as Odin sat back down on his chair and slumped down. Odin's Queen moved up the stairs to kneel down beside Hlidskjalf and put her hand on Odin's forearm. "Is that what has been holding you back? Dearest, you needn't tell him such things... just assure him that he is wanted and loved. That is all he needs to know."

Odin glanced over at Frigga and attempted a smile. It fell somewhat flat as the topic itself was so very saddening, but for her, he tried. He reached over with his free hand to cradle her cheek. "Loki is too smart for his own good, my lovely sun. He will not be satisfied with such reassurances. He will want to know why and what else can I tell him but such a horrid thing?" His thumb brushed over her cheek affectionately. "What am I supposed to do in a situation like this, love? How do I not hurt him when everything I can say sounds so callous?"

Frigga reached up with her own hand to cup her husband's face. "Perhaps, instead of telling him the ugliness of why he had to be left in that temple, try telling him why you love him. Why you gave him the name that you did... make him understand you," she counseled.

He closed his eye and turned his head to kiss her palm. "For the life of me, I cannot understand why I am known as the wisest... You are far wiser than I, my love," Odin murmured against her creamy skin.

"You could be just as wise if only you would stop trying to control everything," Frigga reasoned. "You cannot protect them from heartache, you old bear. No matter how much we may want to do so. It is a part of growing up..."

Odin sighed and leaned forward to give his wife a gentle kiss. "It sounds so simple when you say it like that, but I feel as if I were to try, I would muck it all up. I haven't your way with the boys," he said. "If I wait I can find a better time to do this... when things are calmer, and danger is not on our doorstep."

"Avoiding the situation will not make it easier, Odin. There is no perfect time for such a conversation," Frigga said firmly. "You know that if you put it off, you will just continue to find reasons to keep putting it off. And you cannot do that. You do not allow others to fool you in court... don't fool yourself now when it matters the most."

Another heavy sigh escaped Odin’s chest even as he nodded. “You are right… but I still do not know how to approach such a topic. Give me a little more time, my love… I swear to you I will speak with him, but first I must figure out how.”
Frigga frowned and thought seriously about protesting but then relented. “Alright. But soon, Odin. He’s hurting, and in this you are the only one that can ease those hurts.”

Odin leaned over to give his Queen another brief kiss. “You are too good for me, love.”

Frigga smiled a little. “Yes, you’re probably right,” she said before getting to her feet. “Now, are you really going to punish the boys for simply doing what all boys do?”

“‘I will if it helps them remember that my rules are made for reasons,” Odin said firmly. “They could have been killed, Frigga. These raiders… they’ve killed children before… I’ll not see my sons on a slab as well.”

“‘Be careful, Odin. Children have a way of rebelling, as you well know, and nothing causes it better than rules they do not wish to follow,” Frigga warned. “They’re good boys. But boys will be boys no matter how hard we try. And you know how trying too much can backfire… That was your father’s mistake.”

Odin’s eye flashed. “My father was cruel. I’m trying to protect them. It is nowhere near the same.”

“‘Be sure they know that then,” Frigga said calmly. She knew that Bor was a tender spot for Odin and most likely always would be, but if he weren’t careful he’d end up making similar mistakes.

There was a tense silence between the King and Queen before Odin sat back with a sigh. “I would never do what my father did… Never, Frigga. His death was too good for the likes of him.”

“I know, dearest,” Frigga said.

Just then the sound of ravens filled the throne room. Odin and Frigga both looked up as Huginn and Muninn flew through an open window. They cawed as they circled before landing on either side of Odin’s throne. Odin sat still as his Ravens shared with him what they had seen and heard. Odin’s face grew even graver as he listened to the pair.

“Husband? What is it?” Frigga asked after several minutes.

Odin tore his eye away from Huginn’s own glittering black ones to look at his wife. “There has been another attack…”

“In the day this time?”

“They are growing bolder… this must be stopped.”

Chapter End Notes

Loki Lashing Out- It was a hard decision for me whether or not to show how Loki’s handling all this first person or not. But I finally decided that I didn't want these early chapters in Loki’s voice too much so I decided to not. Perhaps at some point I'll write a oneshot or two about what he's going through but for now secondary accounts will have to do.

Thor- The family has noticed that Thor's been acting off but most of his 'offness' is in
good ways so they've been ignoring it for the most part. There's also a hint at a family secret revolving around Thor that the little scamp has no idea about yet but I'm not telling what that is here. Because I can't give it all away!

**Baldr's Family** - One of the only stories involving Baldr and not his death was about how he came to get his wife Nanna (Who either threw herself on his funeral pyre or died of grief, in myth by the way). In Myth there are a couple different interpretations but basically the stories like pitting Baldr and Hodr against each other for Nanna's hand, sometimes in another interpretation of how Baldr actually dies. In Marvel, Karnilla Queen of the Norns leads to Nanna's death and Baldr never forgives her. Forseti is indeed their son in Myth. There's not a whole lot about him but his name implies he might have been a god of Justice in some capacity.

The now revealed Royal Asgardian Family tree is like so (children not necessarily listed oldest to youngest):

```
Mimir---Bor = Bestla
    \ /
  Frigga = Odin---Vili---Ve~~~Loptr
    \ / 
Nanna = Baldr++Hodr---Tyr---Thor~~~Loki
    \  
    Forseti
```

= is married
\ is child of
--- is siblings
+-+ is twins
and ~~~ is adopted

**Odin's Daddy Issues** - Let's just say Daddy issues run in the family. Odin is very determined to not end up like his father but in his determination is unwittingly pushing Loki further away.

**Odin and Frigga** - I hope their relationship works here because I really don't see Frigga staying with someone she doesn't love. Their marriage might have been arranged in this story but I wanted it to be clear that they really are for the most part a happily married couple.
Hodr traced the familiar gouges in the table beneath his fingers as his twin chattered on, quite proudly, of every minor accomplishment of his son. Forseti was at that age where he was starting to hit all of those exciting benchmarks and, while Hodr was happy for his brother and proud of his nephew, he had heard all of these stories before. Multiple times, actually. Baldr tended to repeat every little accomplishment each time he started resulting in the same hours of conversation over and over.

Through ages of practice, Hodr tuned his brother out and instead listened to the chatter of the pub, Odrerir, which they had frequented ever since Tyr first brought them out drinking. There was plenty of drinking and merriment to be had at the palace, but going out was still a favored pastime of the ex-princes. Odrerir was the best pub in the entirety of the nine realms, at least in the opinion of the three sons of Odin. Heidrun, who owned and ran the bar with her friend Svanhild brewed absolutely fantastic beer. Hodr knew that many also came to fawn over Svanhild who, from what the blind god had heard, was one of the fairest unmarried women in all of Asgard. She ran the front while Heidrun stayed in the back cooking and brewing the beer but more than a few men had made the mistake of thinking that Heidrun, the larger of the two women, was the one that kept the order. They'd quickly discovered that it was Svanhild that dragged drunkards out bodily and threw them into the street, which considering her waifish figure and honeyed voice was very surprising. Hodr heard many people calling out to Svanhild and the sound of her heels along the floor.

After a moment, Hodr heard Svanhild come to a stop beside their table by the fireplace. "If it isn't my favorite patrons... we've been missing you two, my lords," Svanhild said, her voice lightly teasing. Judging by the liquid he heard right by her voice, Hodr assumed she was carrying a tray of drinks.

"Ah! Svanhild, my sweet! Sometimes I think it too bad that I'm married," Baldr said.

"It is too bad," Svanhild replied. "Your poor wife must get quite the headache."

Hodr couldn't help but laugh, and Tyr snorted in his seat across from the twins. "You wound me, Svanhild!" Baldr claimed dramatically. "Truly your temper has soured without us here to cheer it regularly."

"I think it more likely that those three idiots in the far corner are who soured her to us, brother," Hodr commented with a slight tilt of his head towards said corner.

"Mm, shall we throw them out for you, my darling?" Baldr asked thoughtfully.

Svanhild laughed her voice a distinctly pleasant sound high above the usual din. "I think I can handle them. They are no drunken Tyr, so they'll be easy enough to escort out if need be."
"I've never gotten drunk in your bar," Tyr protested.

"No, but I've heard stories about you, Lord Tyr," Svanhild said with her smile easily heard in her voice.

"Tyr!" Baldr exclaimed with false surprise. "Have you been out causing a ruckus and drinking without us? You wound us, brother!"

Hodr rolled his blind eyes at his brother's antics. "You seem to be wounded quite often today, Baldr," Tyr said dryly. "I didn't think you'd had enough to be quite this ridiculous yet."

"I am never ridiculous," Baldr claimed. Hodr coughed but decided to otherwise stay silent. He got a nudge to the ribs anyway, not that he cared. "Hush you. Anyway! Svanhild! I have wonderful news. Nanna has given me a son since last I was here!"

"Yes, I heard," Svanhild said mildly as she put a new tankard in front of them and took away Tyr's empty one. "In fact, I think all of Asgard has heard just from you talking in here. I know I could hear you from the other side of the room without a problem."

"Father made an announcement, you know," Tyr added.

Hodr could hear the pout in his brother's voice. "That does not mean I cannot still announce it myself..."

"You're a proud Papa, it's understandable," Svanhild said while continuing to change out their mugs with new drinks.

"Mm, and what about you, Svanhild?" Baldr asked. "Any little ones in your immediate future?"

Svanhild chuckled a bit. "I think I would need a man in my life before I could have any bairns."

"Aww, nobody's dared sweep you off your feet yet? How terrible," Baldr teased.

"Many a man have tried... but all are lacking," Svanhild replied.

"It's because you turned me down, Svanhild," Baldr said. "I would have done it, and you'd have been blissfully happy."

Hodr shook his head and picked up his drink. "Don't be obtuse, brother."

"It's a game we play," Baldr replied dismissively.

"Yes, a game. Be careful you don't break a rule though, my Lord. I'm not opposed to dragging a son of Odin out of my tavern," Svanhild said before walking off.

There were a few moments of silence where Hodr was sure his brother was watching Svanhild walk off. Baldr was very loyal to Nanna, but that didn't mean he was like his brother and blind. "She breaks so many hearts... and arms," Baldr said almost wistfully.

"It's a good thing she knows you aren't serious," Hodr replied. "Otherwise we'd never be able to drink here." Svanhild was not one to accept unwanted advances. And all advances were unwanted by the beautiful barmaid. Even Hodr was not so blind as to not be able to read between the lines. Svanhild and Heidrun had been 'roommates' and 'business partners' for as long as any could remember. Neither of them seemed even remotely interested in the suitors that would come around and would sometimes send the more persistent ones away with injuries. The few times Svanhild
couldn't handle an unruly patron, Heidrun would come rushing to help and would fuss if the slighter woman even had a bruise. All in all, the truth of their relationship was fairly obvious to any who actually paid attention. Most, however, willfully ignored what they didn't want to think about.

Same-sex relationships were not illegal in Asgard. Not anymore. The battle to achieve that right, however, had been very drawn out and there was still tension about the issue. But the punishments for bigotry and hate had been made clear by Odin, so those that had a dislike for those couples were often best served by pretending ignorance. That wasn't to say that situations didn't flare up and an overall feeling of disapproval wasn't still hanging over Asgard that made more than a few Asgardians hide, but acceptance was, unfortunately, a process. Hopefully, the fight to have real equality would move faster now that Bor had been dead for a while. Odin's Father, Bor, had been a true master of propaganda, so his own views had shaped Asgard's society for thousands of years.

"Now, if you're done flirting with women who aren't remotely interested..." Tyr began. Hodr heard his brother's chair and table creak as Tyr leaned forward. "Any thoughts on Loki and Thor?"

"Should we have?" Baldr asked back. "Father sort of sprung this on us, you know. I still don't even really know what he wants us to do in the first place. You're better equipped for this sort of thing, Tyr, seeing how you're around them so much more."

Hodr hummed and traced the runes gouged under his fingers again. "Perhaps we should take them on a trip," Hodr suggested. "Take them back home with us and let them have a little vacation to absorb everything... though it does sound like Loki needs that more than Thor."

"That might be a good idea... It might also help Father not be so worried about their safety," Tyr commented. "If you haven't noticed he's a bit paranoid about it lately."

"A bit?" Baldr echoed. "I haven't ever heard him go off about breaking the rules before. He certainly never did that to us. Grounding and a talking to, yes... but he ranted for at least fifteen minutes."

Tyr sighed, and after a moment Hodr heard the tankard be set back down on the table. "We were lucky we were born before... that. He's being overprotective of Thor and Loki, but especially Loki. That's why he didn't want anyone finding out about where Loki actually came from... he was afraid some of the soldiers from the Jotunheim War would want revenge and take it out on him. And Loki was already so weak as a baby... I think Father really thought he'd be assassinated and you both know how he would have reacted to that..."

Baldr let out a gusty breath. "The Nine Realms wouldn't be able to recover from that sort of a reaction... Yggdrasill nearly collapsed upon itself the first time he unleashed the full power of Odin-Force." Baldr shivered a little beside Hodr. "I thought for certain we would all die."

"Is he still worried about this?" Hodr asked.

"I'm not sure. Probably not as much before, if at all," Tyr said. "Though now he worries about other things. Loki is naturally more rebellious than Thor, and I think it worries Father. He's even less able to talk with Loki than he is Thor. He's never been particularly able to do the latter, in the first place." Tyr's beer sloshed again before the mug gently tapped the table again. Hodr fiddled with the handle of his own drink as he thought about the situation.

Baldr rapped his knuckles against the tabletop in his own habit of thinking. "I think I will make the suggestion that they come to Vanaheim to visit with Nanna and me. I'm sure Forseti will appreciate meeting the Uncles closer to his own age. Not that he doesn't adore Hodr," Baldr said.
Hodr shook his head slightly. "He adores anyone who gives him attention. You and Nanna spoil him you know," Hodr drawled. "He's going to be a terrible adolescent. Those Centidir years are going to be terrible..."

"Hush your lying mouth. He'll be no such thing," Baldr replied.

Tyr chuckled some in his seat. "I feel for my sister-in-law," he said wryly. "How she puts up with you and your bursting fatherhood pride is beyond me."

"Spare a thought for me. I've been dealing with him from the womb... although the fatherhood part is new," Hodr said before lifting his tankard again. He nearly drained half of his drink in one go and then set it back down. "I have missed the beer here... Vanaheim is more into wine than beer and mead."

"Picked it up from the Olympians," Baldr commented in a derisive tone. "Nanna loves it. I hate drinks that don't tell you you're getting drunk, though. I mean really, beer has the common decency of telling you it's messing with you as you drink it. Wine's too sneaky."

Tyr snorted. "I think you will find the Olympians disagree with you there. When King Zeus was last here, I believe he had something to say about the flavor of our beer, and not too much of it was a compliment," Tyr offered. "Then again... I suppose if you'd never had it before, our beer would be a little overwhelming..."

Hodr smiled at the almost offended noise his twin let out. "And he calls himself a King. He's got not a single working taste bud in his tongue to have an issue with our beer," Baldr claimed. "Really... someone should educate the Olympians..." he added in a low mutter.

"Are you volunteering, brother?" Hodr asked.

"Of course not," Baldr said quickly. "I'd be surrounded by Olympians for who knows how long... I think I'd go utterly mad before I made them see reason."

"If it makes you feel better... he seemed to like mead a bit better than the beer," Tyr said and Hodr could hear the smile in his voice. "He still gave Mother three casks of wine, however. She seemed appreciative although I've noticed not a one has been opened."

Baldr grunted in approval. "Mother always has shown sense."

"Maybe she's saving it for an important event instead," Hodr suggested in his most innocent voice. He knew his brother would be glaring at him but he hadn't been able to resist. "Well, that is what you're supposed to do with such Royal Gifts, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know... I don't run an entire realm," Baldr said dryly.

"Neither do I, technically," Hodr pointed out blandly. "I govern a province..."

"Close enough."

Hodr scoffed some. "There is a huge difference, Baldr. You'd know that if you actually helped Nanna with the one you're supposed to be handling."

Baldr stretched his arms above his head noisily. "The governors don't like me," he dismissed. "I think it's because I'm Asgardian."

"It couldn't possibly be that you ran off and married Nanna against her father's wishes and ruined
her arranged marriage," Tyr said sarcastically. "You nearly started a war and I still hear about it from time to time."

"But I didn't start a war," Baldr pointed out. "And I got the woman I loved to marry me. That's the important thing."

"Let's just hope Thor and Loki don't fall in love with already engaged women," Tyr said with a sigh. "I don't think I could take that drama twice..."

Hodr nodded. "Not to mention listening to the bemoaning," he said pointedly. "I thought I'd go crazy listening to it day in and day out."

"I wasn't that bad," Baldr protested.

"Yes, Baldr, you really were," Hodr replied. "You were like a Centiendir girl with how much you were sighing over Nanna. Not to mention all the time in the morning spent in the bath."

"Hodr!

Hodr smirked and lifted his drink again. "Thank you, Brother, for telling me something I had absolutely no desire to know about," Tyr said, sighing heavily. Hodr hummed a little as he drank the rest of his beer. He was more than happy to embarrass his twin from time to time.

Thor lay back in bed and stared up at the ceiling of his room. So much for their grand adventure. They’d ended up drenched in mud and then being yelled at. Thor wasn’t sure what the punishment was going to end up being but he wasn’t looking forward to it. More cleaning perhaps? He hoped not. Thor was rather sick of cleaning.

Thor had also been hoping to get a word or two with Loki while they were out and about but that hadn’t panned out well for him either. The others had been too close to bring up the Jotnar issue with Loki and then their brothers had dragged them back home before night had even come, ruining any chance he had at talking with Loki overnight. Thor sighed and pushed himself up into a sitting position. He didn’t want to go too much longer without trying to speak with Loki. Though he knew enough to realize that Loki appreciated his time alone to collect his thoughts, if Thor’s little brother was given enough time alone, Loki tended to obsess and over think things. But, of course, now they were both confined to their rooms, making it all but impossible to have that important talk.

After several minutes of thinking, a memory that Thor had all but forgotten popped into his head. Thor had walked into his room and been very surprised to see his brother sitting on the balcony railing. When Thor had asked how he’d gotten there, Loki had just given a bland look and told him that it wasn’t exactly impossible to climb from one balcony to the other. “There are mother’s trellises beneath us and above us, there are more balconies that are easy to reach, Thor. I can’t believe you never even tried…” Well, Thor mused, now seemed like a good time to do what Loki suggested.

Thor got off his bed and went to the balcony. He didn’t keep much out on his and rarely even used it but there were two chairs in the corner and a small table. Thor looked over and instantly recognized Loki’s veranda not too far in the distance. Far enough away that Thor wouldn’t dare try to jump the distance but close enough that he could recognize his target. Then again, Loki’s outdoor living space was a bit more used than Thor’s own. Several strange metal objects were hanging from hooks and spinning in the breeze and catching what little light there was outside. Thor could make out the leaves of several plants crowded around the railings and he was pretty
certain that Loki had dragged a small workbench out onto the balcony, though what he could use it for, Thor hadn’t the slightest idea.

Thor turned his attention to figuring out how he was going to get from his veranda to Loki’s. Climbing down and then up again was probably the safest route but it would also take the longest. The balcony that was a floor above Thor and Loki’s stretched most of the distance so that might be the fastest path. Getting up to it wouldn’t even be that hard. Each of the faces of the columns on either side of Thor’s windows was carved deeply with legendary battle scenes and at the top of each side was a large angry looking goat with massive horns. Climbing it shouldn’t be difficult at all with the number of handholds the stone carvings gave.

Even though Thor was certain it wouldn’t be difficult, he still took his time in climbing up the column. He hadn’t ever actually tried to do this and he didn’t want to hurt either himself or break the carvings under his fingers. He could just imagine what his father would say if the outside of the palace were broken apart by a climbing misadventure.

Getting up the column was as easy as Thor thought but then he had to carefully get to the edge of the other balcony from his position beside the wall. The stone braces were also carved but not nearly as deeply as the columns. Still, it was the only way to climb outwards, which made sense, so Thor cautiously started moving. His entire body had to hang and his fingers were practically screaming at how difficult it was to climb with his full weight hanging by them. He tried to hurry to save his fingers a little bit, but he also couldn’t hurry too much or risk slipping and falling. He would most likely land back on his own balcony but it still wouldn’t be a pleasant accident. Sweat was trickling down from his temple and his arms were burning from effort when he finally managed to grasp the railing of the other balcony.

After scrambling up and then all but dropping down onto the veranda, Thor leaned back against the rail to catch his breath. How had Loki done this? The climb was far harder than Thor had anticipated and Loki had never been one for upper body strength. Maybe he’d magicked himself over the gap? Oh… right. Thor cursed himself for not having realized that. Loki probably had never climbed this distance and had just been teasing him. Again.

Thor let out an annoyed huff, but since he’d already made it halfway, he wasn’t about to stop. Why did he always believe Loki anyway? He should really know better.

Thor walked to the very edge of the balcony and carefully climbed over the side again. This was going to be the trickier part, he knew. Thor would have to somehow get to the window ledge beneath him to then jump the much more reasonable distance to Loki’s balcony railing. And not falling down four stories to hit rocks and die was also a priority. “This is one of the stupider things I’ve done since coming back,” he muttered to himself as he climbed over the balcony to try and climb down. He managed to get his foot on the top of the window and then started to crawl down to the ledge.

After nearly slipping off the ledge when his attempt to crawl ended up more of a fall, Thor had to take a slight break to catch his breath where he was clinging to the wall with his fingers locked around the carvings. He really really wished he had Mjolnir with him right now. If he had his magical hammer, he wouldn’t have to worry about falling to his death. Thor glanced over his shoulder at the ledge he was trying to reach. Suddenly, the jump looked a lot further.

He really should have climbed down and then back up like a sane person. Thor shook his head and then readied himself for the jump. He should be able to make such a distance without a problem. He’d jumped further before. Thor took several calming breaths before finally pushing off from the window ledge to hurl himself across the gap.
Nearly all the air escaped his lungs as he slammed into the railing a bit harder than he’d thought. Thor groaned and pulled himself up onto Loki’s balcony. Yes, next time he was going to do this the saner way.

Still, he had made it. Thor rubbed his ribs a little before shaking the last of the harrowing climb off and going to Loki’s door. His brother was sitting on his bed with a large book in his lap and a distinct frown on his face. Thor hesitated for just a moment before reaching up to tap on the glass. Loki’s head snapped up and his surprise to see Thor at his balcony was evident.

There was a moment where Loki just stared before he put the book off to the side and went to let his brother in. “What in the world are you doing, Thor?” Loki asked as he stepped back to let the older Odinson inside.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Thor explained as he shook his somewhat scraped and numb hands out by his side. “You know it’s not so easy to climb over here.”

“What did you have to talk about that was so important you had to climb over here?” Loki asked, sounding rather disbelieving.

“It’s about what mother told you.”

Loki’s face instantly closed off. “No.”

“Loki-“

“No, Thor. I’m not going to discuss it with you,” he said firmly and turned away.

Thor sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He had known getting Loki to talk about this wouldn’t be easy but he’d thought given a few days to absorb it all, he’d have softened just a little. “I’m not a monster.”

Thor blinked and looked back to his brother. Loki was still facing away but Thor knew what he’d heard. “No, you’re not a monster,” Thor said. He put a hand on Loki’s shoulder and felt the shudder that ran through the younger boy’s frame. “You’re my brother.”

Loki half turned to look back at Thor. “How can… how can you even touch me… knowing what I am?” he asked in a small, wounded voice.

“You’re my brother,” Thor repeated with more insistence. Loki still didn’t look convinced. “You surprised me before… but just because you surprised me doesn’t mean you get out of being my little brother that easily.”

A pained expression flit across Loki’s face. “I’m not even a boy… not really…” he whispered. “I’m some freakish… other thing that I can’t even fathom…”

Thor threw the reasoning out of the window and pulled his brother in tight for a hug. Loki gave a strange noise somewhere between a surprised squeak and a sob even as Thor kept his brother trapped against him. “Do not speak of yourself in such a way. I’ll not tolerate it from anyone. Not even you.”

“Thor…”

“No, Loki.”

Silence filled the room for several long minutes. Loki just stood there and let Thor hug him before
pulling away. “You don’t need to worry about this you know…” Loki muttered without looking up.

Thor snorted some. He knew all too well what would happen if he ignored the revelation of Loki’s true heritage. He had no desire to repeat that mistake. “I’m your big brother, Loki. It’s my job to protect you,” he stated firmly.

“I thought your job was to be heir to the throne,” Loki said sarcastically.

“I can have more than one,” Thor said. “And besides, I wouldn’t be much of a king if I couldn’t even keep my brother safe and happy.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “I’m infinitely more difficult to keep safe and happy, Brother, than a rabble of commoners.”

Thor grinned, not minding Loki’s self-deprecating joke and considered it far more truthful than Loki probably realized. “I consider it good practice.” His eyes wandered to the book still open on Loki’s bed and he was surprised to see a detailed drawing of a Jotunn on the pages. Without bothering to ask he reached over to pick up the book. Loki, realizing what he was reaching for, tried to grab it first but Thor was closer. “What’s this?”

Loki turned bright pink. “… mother gave it to me.”

“A book about Jotnar?” Thor questioned as he flipped through the pages. Out of the side of his vision, he saw Loki nod. There were plenty of very detailed drawings in the book and Thor caught a few words as he skimmed the contents. The brief glimpse was enough to tell the fledgling thunderer that the book was almost disturbingly informative. He finally stopped at an image of a pregnant Jotunn and put the book back down. He didn’t really want to think about that. “It’s a good thing to have,” he told Loki.

Loki nodded but wouldn’t look up at Thor. “I thought it… best, to learn everything about this… curse.”

“You’re not cursed, Loki.”

“I feel cursed,” Loki spat.

Thor sighed and dropped the book back to the bed. “But you’re not. Now come on, I went to all the trouble to sneak over here… we should make the most of it before we get into worse trouble,” Thor said. He had to get Loki off such depressing thoughts, at least for a little while.

Loki looked over at Thor questioningly. “And what do you propose?”

Thor thought for a second before going over to one of Loki’s many bookcases and grabbing the tafl set. “I’m going to beat you one of these days,” Thor said.

“Not today though,” Loki replied.

“I might just surprise you, brother.”

Loki tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. “You surprise me plenty as it is, Thor.”

Thor decided to take that as a compliment as he set up the tafl board beside the thick book about Jotnar. Perhaps he would be able to pry more talk about the subject out of Loki as they played but that wasn’t Thor’s main goal. He just wanted to reassure his brother that nothing was going to
change because of this.

Chapter End Notes

**Odrerir**- A term used to refer to either the Mead of Poetry or one of the containers that it was made within. The whole thing on how the mead was made is kind of a gruesome tale. (strange for Norse myth, I know). Basically this super wise god named Kvasir was murdered and his blood drained and mixed with honey. And that mixture was the Mead of Poetry. I thought it a fitting name for a popular tavern in Asgard.

**Heidrun**- Heidrun, in mythology, is actually a goat. She eats foliage from the tree Laeradr (which some suggest is actually another name for Yggdrasill) and then produces mead for the einherjar. So much of it actually that all of them can drink their fill every day.

**Svanhild**- An Original Character. Her name means swan and battle. And yes, she is a beautiful lesbian that kicks drunkards out of her bar without a second thought.

**The Olympians**- Yes, the Olympians are in this story too. Marvel actually has the Olympians in their line-up too although they aren't nearly as big of players as they are in DC. The Olympians and Asgardians get along rather well actually and even have a direct pathway between Olympus and Asgard. Olympus itself is in a pocket dimension beside Earth which would, if my understanding is correct, actually place it within Midgard. This doesn't necessarily mean that Olympians are *from* Midgard or Earth but that is where they currently reside. Where the Olympians actually came from is not really stated in Marvel other than the usual mythos relating to the Titans and Zeus and all that. Really, there are a lot of commonalities between Asgardians and Olympians. They are all sort of the same super durable long lived super strong versions of humans with advanced tech and magic and have been worshiped as Gods. And Zeus and Odin have more than a few similarities too (coughwaytoomanychildrencoughcough).

**Baldr's Stealing of Nanna**- This is essentially what has led to Baldr abdicating his claim on Asgard's throne in this story. He made a huge inter-realm problem when he ran off to elope with Nanna when she was already sort of engaged to this other dude. So much so that it was best if he just... took a lower profile... Odin was not happy with the whole situation as you might imagine. This story is somewhat a reference to the various accounts in myth of Nanna's hand being fought over by Baldr and Hodr, although here Nanna wasn't engaged to Hodr and Baldr actually got the girl where in myth... not so much. He tended to lose and die in the various mythological tellings.

**Centidir/Centiendir**- This is a completely made up term I came up with. Basically that's their version of saying 'teens' or 'Teenagers' only it's literally about the last few hundred years before hitting 1,000 years old. Centiendir is a smashing together of the word Centi and the Norse root of End (endir). If I'm reading my research right, of course. Researching root words was not something I ever thought I'd be doing for a fanfic so I'm far from an expert...
Chapter Summary

The situation with Loki comes to a somewhat explosive confrontation over breakfast.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So, what do we think, lads?"

"Think of what?"

The group of mostly grown Asgardians jumped and turned to see Loki leaning against a tree with his arms folded over his chest. His dark clothes and hair almost seemed to blend into the shadow he was standing in. “Loki! You’re just who we need!” Fandral said excitedly.

Loki’s eyebrow went high on his forehead. “I am?”

“Yes! You and Sif still talk even after you cut all her hair off! How did you get her to forgive you?”

Loki unfolded his hands and held up two fingers on each one. “Talk,” he began with air quotes around the word, ’Is rather generous. As is ‘forgive.' We’ve reached an understanding is all. She doesn’t annoy me, and I don’t disfigure her in her sleep anymore."

“But still!” Fandral said as he crossed the distance to grab hold of Loki’s coat. “You have to tell us how you avoided being gutted!”

“I teleported away,” Loki said blandly.

Fandral’s face fell. “You are absolutely no help."

Loki smirked. “I’m so terribly sorry about that,” he said cheerfully. “What did you do to annoy her anyway?"

“Nothing,” Fandral said indignantly. At Loki’s disbelievingly raised eyebrow, Fandral shifted where he stood. There were several long minutes of silence. “Well, we might have... implied - slightly mind you- that she’s only a shield-maiden because her brother is watchman to the entire realm...”

Loki laughed loudly and knocked Fandral’s hands away from his coat. “You are idiots. You said something that foolish to the first shield-maiden of Asgard in centuries?” Loki shook his head and stepped back from them. “You deserve whatever you get.”

“Loki, please! I really don’t want to die!”

“You should have thought about that before you were an idiot.”

“Are you really going to let Sif kill your brother?” Volstagg asked with a sweeping gesture towards where Thor was sitting on a nearby tree stump.
Loki looked over at Thor before snorting. “Like Sif would ever hurt Thor seriously,” he said. “If you’re so afraid of her… leave Asgard for a while and let her calm down. I was about to go to Olympus… apparently, they have a monstrous half-man-half-bull trapped in some maze I thought might be interesting to take a look at.”

At the mention of some beast that could prove a challenge to them, the other young Asgardians perked up substantially. Loki rolled his eyes. “I take it you’re interested?” he asked. At their instant agreement, Loki sighed. “Oh, very well. Go home and grab some supplies… apparently, this maze is magicked to keep it from actually having an end. It’ll be easy to get lost and starve to death if we aren’t careful.”

As the others quickly ran off to go do as Loki suggested, Thor got up and walked over to his brother. “Although, I suppose if we all have to, we could eat Volstagg and survive several years,” Loki mused aloud.

Thor chuckled at that and wrapped his arm around Loki’s neck to bring them closer together. “I thought when I asked to go with you last night that you didn’t want me ‘bumbling around and getting us killed,’ Loki,” he prompted. Thor had been rather put out by his brother’s denial but since there were plenty of creatures to fight in Asgard as well he hadn’t put too much time or energy into being upset about the dismissal.

“Yes well, that was before you, and your friends found mortal danger here in Asgard. A giant half bull that rends people limb from limb seems preferable to an angered Sif,” Loki replied flippantly. “What sort of brother would I be if I let you meet such a fate… besides, Fandral will be good bait, I imagine.” Thor could only laugh in response to that.

Thor woke up when bright sunlight hit him in the face and birds decided to sing seemingly right beside his ear. He groaned a little and buried his face into his pillow in trying and blocking it out. Thor had been in the middle of a wonderful dream, and the young prince wasn’t terribly thrilled to be pulled out of it. Truly friendly encounters between his brother and their friends had been depressingly few, and Thor would much prefer remembering them than all of the other things he’d been dreaming about lately. Thor smiled as he remembered that venture. They had indeed gotten very lost in the Labyrinth, but they’d managed to fell the Minotaur successfully. And when they’d gotten back Sif was more annoyed that they’d left her behind than the insult that had driven them into another realm in the first place.

Thor finally opened his eyes, and his smile widened when he came face to face with Loki’s still sleeping face. Last night, after playing hours of Tafl and Loki soundly beating him each and every time, the two Princes had stayed up late talking. Thor had tried to subtly bring up the topic of Loki’s actual species again, but Loki had not been willing. Instead, they had whiled away the time discussing anything and everything else. Loki had told some truly outrageous stories, which Thor had dutifully listened to, and then Thor gave Loki a brief summary of everything that had been happening while Loki had been holed up in his room.

By the time they had finished, Thor had been far too tired to bother climbing back to his own room. So, he had just curled up in Loki’s bed and they’d both fallen asleep. Thor shifted to rest his forehead against Loki’s and tried hard to not wake his brother. The brothers had not done this sort of thing, sleeping curled up with each other, in many decades. There had been a time when Loki would often find his way into Thor’s bed late at night and vice-versa.

Loki let out a soft exhale and shifted closer to Thor under the blankets. Thor automatically reached out to adjust the sheets to not be quite so tightly tangled around them. As he did so, he noticed that the deep ‘V’ in Loki’s sleep shirt, which was a common style for male’s sleeping garments, was
showing a very distinct curve of skin. Thor quickly looked back up at Loki’s face instead. Loki’s words from days ago came back instantly. ‘You don’t wake up in different forms and spend an hour each morning trying to get back to how you are!’

Thor frowned at the memory. This must have been what Loki was talking about. He could easily see why this sort of thing would be bothersome to Loki. Asgaedia’s Eyes, Thor would be disturbed by it too. Actually, he was a bit bothered by it even though he was trying his best to not be. If what their mother had said was true, this was as much a part of Loki as… as his ability to turn into a fish apparently was. Thor wasn’t comfortable with it but what could he even do?

Loki made a noise and shifted where he was lying. After a moment, Loki slowly opened his eyes. The younger prince seemed very confused for a moment before his green eyes cleared up. “Thor… you’re still here.”

“I was too tired to go back to my room,” Thor said.

Loki chuckled some, and his long lashes fell again. “You’d probably have fallen to your death if you’d tried…”

“I would not.” Loki’s laughter just continued. Thor frowned and poked Loki hard in the stomach. “Show some respect to your big brother,” Thor ordered despite knowing he’d never be getting that.

Loki opened his eyes again. “Make me.”

Before Thor could respond there was a rapid knocking on the door, and both princes looked over. “Loki! Is Thor in there with you?” Frigga called, sounding mildly panicked.

“Yes, Mother!” Loki called back.

Thor rolled over so that he wasn’t craning his neck as uncomfortably as Loki began to push himself up. The door opened before Loki could do more than sit up and Frigga came into the room looking frazzled but also relieved. “Thor! You were supposed to stay in your room. Not come to Loki’s. Your Father thought you were kidnapped and is about to call all the Einherjar into a search.”

Thor winced. “I’m sorry, Mother. I didn’t mean to worry you…”

“I didn’t ask him to come,” Loki added.

Thor sent his brother a slight glare. “Thank you, Brother,” he said dryly.

Loki had given a wide grin before Frigga cleared her throat. “Your shirt, Loki, dear.”

Loki blinked at their mother in confusion before turn his eyes down to his shirt. He gave a strangled sort of yelp and quickly moved while also grabbing at the wide opening of his tunic. Thor winced a little as Loki actually fell out of the bed before yanking a dressing gown off a nearby chair to hide behind. Loki’s face had turned bright red as he looked up over the edge of the bed. “Thor! Why didn’t you say something?”

“What was I supposed to say? Hey, Loki, your breasts are showing?” The blonde prince asked.

“Oh course not!”

Frigga cleared her throat again, louder this time. “Thor, I think we should let your brother get dressed. You should go to your room and get ready for the day, as well. No doubt your father will want to speak with both of you.”
Thor winced but climbed out of Loki’s bed to leave the room with Frigga. “Thor, next time you are told to go to your room. Do not leave it. Your father was very worried something had happened to you.”

“I didn’t mean to stay all night…”

“You shouldn’t have gone in the first place,” Frigga replied in a lightly scolding tone. Thor couldn’t quite help hunching his shoulders as he walked. He did so hate it when his mother took that tone. “How did you get to Loki’s room without anyone seeing you, Thor?” There were two guards stationed between Thor and Loki’s rooms. One of them should have seen the young Prince sneaking about.

Thor stared down at the polished floor and tried to think up a reasonable lie. He didn’t want to add to his inevitable punishment by admitting to climbing over the side of the castle. “Just… lucky, I guess?” Thor gave his mother his best smile to hide how unsure of that excuse he was.

Frigga studied the wide and slightly nervous smile she was given and hummed thoughtfully. “I see,” she said despite in no way believing her son. Thor was simply not very good at lying. He always tried to look too innocent. Still, Frigga didn’t think it was worth a more complete questioning. Unless this became a habit of her son’s to sneak out of his room and go to Loki’s. Then she would press for a more truthful answer. She stopped walking beside Thor’s door and gestured. “Get ready for the day, Thor. I’m sure your father will want to speak with both you and Loki over first meal.”

Thor winced but nodded and went to go get washed and changed. Not being terribly interested in the scolding he knew that he was going to be getting very shortly, Thor took his time in scrubbing himself and brushing his hair. The golden prince wished that his hair were longer so that Thor could use that as further excuse to delay, but his hair grew slowly and hadn’t yet gotten long enough. Thor tried to push his hair back several times but it just fell in his eyes again, and he gave up to finish getting dressed. The young Thunderer picked out a clean blue tunic and pair of dark brown trousers before pulling his boots back on.

Thor was surprised when he opened his door, and he saw Loki leaning against the wall waiting for him. “Loki. I thought you’d be at the table already,” Thor admitted.

“Alright…”

Loki shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “You… you’re not going to tell the others about… this are you?” Thor could only stare uncomprehendingly. Loki sighed in exasperation. “About what I am,” he hissed with a vague gesture towards his once again flat chest.

“Oh. No, I’m not going to tell anyone,” Thor assured him. “It’s not any of their business anyway.”

“And… you’re really alright with this?”

Thor sighed this time. “Loki. You’re my brother. Nothing’s going to change that… not even… not being my brother,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong, Loki, it’s still… weird. But I know you didn’t ask to be this way, and you can’t help it. I’m just sorry I can’t help you more, but I know nothing about being a girl.”

“You’re lucky that way,” Loki muttered.

Thor reached over and grabbed the back of Loki’s neck to pull them close enough so that their
foreheads were touching again. “I am lucky. But no matter what, Loki. I’ll not abandon you. Especially not over something you can’t help.”

Loki closed his eyes and brought his own hand up to grasp the back of Thor’s neck. Though he never fought Thor’s touch he rarely returned it in such a way. “You are the best of brothers, Thor. Truly, I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Not have nearly as much fun,” Thor responded with a smirk. “Who else would you play your pranks on?”

Loki chuckled darkly. “Who indeed. Now, we should go, we’re going to be quite late if we linger here any longer.”

Thor lightly squeezed the back Loki’s neck for just a moment before breaking away. The brothers made their way through the golden halls to the dining room. All of their brothers were already there although Baldr looked a bit rough. Hodr seemed to be teasing him mercilessly, and Tyr was laughing at them both. Frigga and Odin weren’t paying their sons much attention, however. They were listening to an Older Aes that was reading off a piece of parchment. Thor instantly recognized the braided moustache and rather large gut of the one-legged Aes as Andhrimnir, Iimr’s husband, and the ‘official’ head of the palace kitchens. Really, Andhrimnir was never all that interested in the tedium of running the kitchens, he just liked to cook and was the best at it. So, he let his wife handle the day-to-day running, and he focused on his cooking and any feasts that might be in the works.

Andhrimnir was listing off a truly mind-boggling number of dishes, and Thor realized a feast must be planned for the next few days. Not only was that one of the only ways to get Andhrimnir out of the kitchens, but that would be the only reason for so much food to be prepared. “What’s that about?” Thor wondered as he took his usual seat at Loki’s left.

“Probably because Hodr and Baldr are here,” Loki murmured back. “You know how mother and father like to try and bribe them to stay longer with feasts.”

Thor chuckled and grabbed a nearby basket of fresh bread. “You alright there, Baldr?” he asked, perhaps a little louder than he really had to, considering that Baldr was only two seats down and across the table from him.

Baldr opened his reddened eyes and glared through a curtain of hair and his own hand. “Brat. Why did you get me up for this, Hodr? I’d have been happy to sleep until midday meal…”

“Because if I let you sleep that long, Nanna will be on me for letting you get off schedule, and I’d rather not have your wife mad at me. She might be a joy of a woman but she’s also far too terrifying now that she’s a mother,” Hodr replied as he carefully spread some butter on a piece of bread.

Baldr groaned and let his head fall to the table. Tyr shook his head and called a servant over. “Get my idiot brother something for his hangover, please. His whining is going to drive us all mad if it goes on much longer,” he asked.

“I would yell at you, but I’m too glad for relief, so you get off easy this time, Tyr,” Baldr’s voice, muffled by the table, said. “You’re a better brother than this one,” he added with a very obvious kick to Hodr’s leg under the table.

“Boys, no fighting at the table,” Frigga said without even looking at them.
“Yes, mother,” came the automatic response from all five sons of Odin.

Thor paid only a sliver of attention to all the beasts that Andhrimnir was saying he was going to be roasting along with the various other dishes that no doubt Ilmr would be in charge of making over the next few days. After another few minutes, Odin gave his approval of all the plans. Andhrimnir gave a bow before leaving, the metal of his prosthetic leg clacking loudly along the stone floors for a full minute after he’d left the room.

Odin turned his attention to Thor, and the young Thunder God instantly felt tiny under the disapproving glare. “Thor-” Thor flinched, “was it not obvious, that when I sent you and Loki to your rooms yesterday that you were to stay there?”

Thor turned his eyes down to his eggs and pushed them around with his fork. “Yes, Father.”

“And might I ask why you weren’t there when I went to get you this morning?” Odin demanded with a slam of his fist against the table. Baldr’s head snapped up, and he looked very pained, but Odin didn’t seem to notice. “Do tell me just how much trouble you are looking to get into before you are done, Thor! It will make all of this much easier if I just give you all the punishment at once rather than doling it out as you break my rules!”

Thor didn’t have any sort of answer for that, so he settled for the next best thing. “I’m sorry, Father. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Obviously!”

Baldr lifted a hand to his forehead to rub there. Frigga reached over to put a hand on Odin’s forearm. “Dear, the shouting is unnecessary, I think,” she said calmly. The servant from earlier brought a tankard over to Baldr who downed nearly the whole thing in three massive swallows.

Odin took several deep breaths before sitting back. “I should keep you grounded for the next decade for this stunt you pulled,” he said. Thor turned pleading eyes on his father instantly at that. He had never been grounded for such a long time. The longest he’d ever been confined to his rooms in either life was three months, and that had been bad enough. Thor wouldn’t be able to make sure nobody was cruel to Loki if he was stuck in his chambers for a decade. Odin didn’t seem bothered by Thor’s puppy dog eyes in the least. “You are lucky that your Mother’s already spoken to me about this or you’d be getting just that.”

Thor let out his held breath in relief. “What will I be getting then?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“When you get back to Asgard, you’ll be helping in the stables for the next year on top of any and all other responsibilities,” Odin decreed. Thor winced a little at the thought of both having to wake up early to help with the horses and then go tend them after his training as well. That would make for some very long days indeed.

“What do you mean ‘get back to Asgard’?” Loki asked.

Odin was quiet for several minutes, and Thor thought that perhaps his father hadn’t meant to say that. At least, not right then. Because Odin had his lips pursed rather tightly. “I have decided to send both you and your brother with Baldr and Hodr to Vanaheim,” Odin finally answered.

“You’re sending us away?” Loki asked, sounding utterly horrified.

Thor was equally alarmed. Their father hadn’t let them visit their brothers in Vanaheim until they were almost fully-grown the last time. “To Vanaheim? Why?”
“For your safety,” Tyr offered before Odin could.

“Safety?” Loki repeated in disbelief. “No place is safer than Asgard! How many times have you said that to us, Tyr? Why are you really doing this?”

“It really is for your safety, Loki,” Hodr said.

“Don’t lie to me!”

Thor was even more alarmed now. This wasn’t the reaction he would expect from his brother. Loki had always loved visiting Vanheim. “Darling,” Frigga said. “With these raids on our people we are concerned with your safety. You and Thor. It will not be forever.”

“Then why only now?” Loki demanded, his grip on his fork was so tight his knuckles were turning white. “They have been raiding at our borders for months now, why only now do you want to send us away?”

“The Raiders are growing bolder. It isn’t safe for you here,” Odin said.

“But that’s not it is it?” Loki pressed. “You’re not sending us away because of raiders. It’s because of me… isn’t it?”

“Loki-”

“Isn’t it!?”

“Loki!” Odin got to his feet, and Thor felt no small amount of alarm. How had this breakfast turned so badly so quickly? “That is enough of your outburst! This is not a matter for debate. You and your brother will stay with Baldr in Vanheim until things are safe here in Asgard and that is final!”

Loki put his fork down a little harder than necessary, and he glared down at the table. Thor reached over to put a hand on his brother’s shoulder. Loki shrugged it off angrily. “Leave me alone, Thor.”

“You will be leaving at the end of the week,” Odin told them. “Lady Vor has graciously agreed to send you work to do so that you will not fall behind in your studies while you’re gone.” Loki grew even tenser in his seat. “This truly is for your safety. No matter what you think.”

Loki looked up again and gave Odin a heart-stopping glare. “And you’re going to make us go even if we don’t want to, aren’t you?”

“It is my job as your Father to ensure you’re safe,” Odin said. “And that is a responsibility I take very seriously, Loki.”

“But you’re not my Father are you?” Loki yelled, jumping to his feet.

“Loki!” Frigga’s voice was both shocked and somehow scolding.

For the first time in Thor’s memory, Loki ignored their mother entirely. “I’m not your son at all! I’m just some orphaned runt you picked up, and now you’re ashamed of me! That’s why you’re sending me away, and you’re sending Thor because otherwise, everyone would be suspicious! You don’t care about our safety! You just want me gone!”

“Loki!”

But Loki had already turned and ran from the room. Thor quickly jumped to his own feet to hurry

“But Father-”

“I will speak with Loki,” Odin said firmly.

“Do you need any help, Father?” Hodr asked uneasily.

“No, Hodr. I will do this myself,” Odin said. When Frigga went to get up from her seat, Odin put his hands on her shoulders. “I know, Frigga,” he said before his wife could even open her mouth.

Thor shifted in his seat uneasily. He wanted to go and talk with Loki. He’d never seen an outburst like that before, and Thor couldn’t help but think that it was the beginning of the same dark spiral his brother had gotten caught in before. Odin left the dining room, and Thor tried his best to return to eating. He’d found his appetite had entirely disappeared and all he could do was worry that his brother had been suffering more than he’d let on. Again.

Thor looked over his shoulder at the door that Loki and Odin had left through. He bit his lower lip anxiously and prayed to the Norns or Asgaedia, or whoever might be listening, that things worked out better this time. He didn’t think that he could take seeing Loki self-destruct again.

Chapter End Notes

**Asgaedia**: This is an original concept that I've come up with for this story. Well, not entirely original. I'll try to explain it as clearly as I can here. Basically, I was looking at the Olympians and realized that even though Jord and Gaia are the same being in Marvel she is essentially the embodiment of the planet Earth or what the Asgardian's would call Midgard. Therefore, in my mind, she should most likely have a counterpart in each of the other realms for their lands. So, each of the Realms is going to have a Mother Goddess figure that is part of their own religions. So when Thor says 'Asgaedia's Eyes' that would be like a Greek God using Gaia's name as a curse. Or a Midgardian saying 'Odin's Beard'. If you're having difficulty visualizing it think of each Realm as it's own planet and each of those planets having a Goddess that embodies it. So there will be one for Vanheim and one for Jotunheim and so on and so forth. Will they appear in this or even all be named? *shrug* Doubtful but having beings that Gods use for their own curses add a lovely layer of flavor, I think. I probably could have used the Celestial Beings but it's kind of confusing what with how the Greek Pantheon is set up with the Titans and then Gods. Which leads us to...

**Levels of Power**: If you know Marvel (or seen the latest Guardians of the Galaxy) you know there's these super powerful beings called the Celestials. However at the very top of the power structure are the Cosmic Entities such as Mistress Death and Eternity. Then the Celestials are under them. Then the Elder Gods (of which Gaia is one), and then the straight up Gods of the various Pantheons. Now, this is a rather simplified and abbreviated chain of power but well, everything is over complicated in Comics so I've had to streamline. So, if you're following that would make Asgaedia an Elder God along with Gaia, just from another realm.

**Andhrimnir**: The cook of the Gods. His job is to kill and cook the boar Sæhrímnir for the Einherjar in Valhalla. That's pretty much it. So, I decided that's really all he cares
about so while he is *technically* in charge of the kitchens of the palace really it's his wife running it. She was that nice lady that gives Loki sweets when he bats his eyes at her.
Odin Borson, King of Asgard, All-Father of the Nine Realms, tried his utmost best to not storm down the hall after his child. In all of his years of raising his sons, never had he had one act the way Loki just had at the breakfast table. Such disrespect was entirely unacceptable. Judging by the way his guards stiffened as he walked past he wasn’t sure he succeeded in not showing how angry he was. Several maids ducked down various side halls as he passed but he barely spared them a glance.

Loki had spelled his door closed against all but himself. When Odin reached for the handle, it snapped with green and gold sparks, and a faint illusion of poisonous vipers rose up to hiss at him. Odin ignored the slight sting of seidr against his skin and dispelled the illusion with barely even a thought. His own seidr, pale gold and silver combination like the essence of light, easily unlocked the door. Though Odin was in such a rush, the latch had barely finished moving back before he stormed through.

Odin’s one eye instantly found Loki, who jumped up from where he’d been sitting on the bed and scrambled to the other side of it so that the furniture was soundly between them. Odin closed the door behind him with a bang, and his magic obediently slammed the lock back into place and then shot out across all the walls of the room to ensure nobody could get in or hear what was about to happen. “Loki! I will not tolerate such disrespect from you! Nor such disrespect to your mother!”

“It’s not disrespect if it’s true!” Loki shot back his own venomous green seidr wrapping around his hands and arms.

“You know nothing of what you speak, Loki!”

Loki actually laughed although it was strangled and slightly hysterical. “No? I heard you clear enough, Odin! You called me a runt! I know what that means! It’s all in the book that mother gave me!” he said pointing to the book left open in the middle of his bed.

“You were eavesdropping!” Odin hissed in outrage. He had never intended for Loki to hear the word ‘runt’ at all. Bor's son made sure to never say it unless it couldn't be helped. The only time he had in the last hundred years was to Hodr and Baldr to explain what was going on when he’d asked for their help. Loki shouldn’t have known anything about that talk. But to realize that his son had been snooping around where he shouldn’t angered him greatly. Eavesdropping was a dishonest tactic, and he had raised his sons better than that, he’d thought.

“I wouldn’t have to if you were honest!”

“Do not presume to lecture me on honesty, Loki!” Odin snapped. His seidr flared where it coated the room, and with great difficulty, he pulled back to ensure it did nothing more than keep this
private.

Loki was trembling in rage where he was standing and glaring through his tears. “What do you know of honesty anyway?” he asked. “After all the lies you have told me! I don’t even really look like this!”

“The guise is for your own protection, Loki. Do not make the mistake of thinking you know more than you do,” Odin order.

“I know enough!” Loki snapped.

“No, you do not!” Odin growled. The tears hadn’t escaped Loki’s eyes yet, but Odin was all but certain that was through strength of pure will. “You know nothing of it other than your own childish fears.”

Loki breathed with deliberate slowness for a few minutes. “… They left me to die… didn’t they?” he asked, his voice ragged.

Odin felt the very real urge to lie. He hadn’t realized the laws about runts had been in the book his mother had left and if he had known it, he would have forbidden Frigga from letting their son hold onto it. But Loki obviously already knew the answer to his question so lying wouldn’t save him any of that pain. “… yes.”

“Then why did you take me?” Loki demanded, the tears finally breaking free from his lashes. Though he made a play at trying to still look angry, he looked far more heartbroken than furious. The obvious pain on his youngest’s face made Odin want to say something, but he didn’t get a chance. “You had just fought a war with Jotunheim! Was I supposed to be some-some war trophy? Some horrid plaything for your real son to be kept entertained with?” he demanded, pointing off to the side in the direction of Thor’s room.

“Of course not!” Odin growled. How dare Loki even make such a suggestion!

“What then? I know that I am disappointing to you! I’m not some… perfect Aesir like Thor! And now I know why! I’m just some pathetic little cast away that you picked up!”

“You know not of what you speak, Loki,” Odin repeated in a warning tone that was getting close to anger again. He would not allow this sort of talk.

Loki’s eyes blazed. “I know everything about what I speak! You’re the one that doesn’t know! You think I can’t tell? I can! I know you love Thor more than me! Of course, you do! He’s your real son! You have no idea how it is to be me! The weak, sickly, little brother that nobody actually wants to tag along! I can’t believe I thought for even a second I was meant to be here! You should have left me there! Then at least I wouldn’t be some dirty little secret you keep hidden away like the monster I am!”

The second the words actually left Loki’s lips the young prince looked horrified but he forced himself to close his mouth and just stand there. Odin could tell that Loki was trying desperately to cling to anger even though he’d just said more than he’d meant to say. What anger Odin still had evaporated and was quickly replaced with regret. “You are laboring under mistaken ideas of my intentions Loki,” Odin murmured.

Loki gave another somewhat hysterical laugh. “Am I? I don’t think so. If I wasn’t something shameful then why am I only hearing of all this now? Why wait until I think I am going crazy to tell me what I am?” Odin winced a little. He definitely hadn’t meant to lead Loki to that
conclusion. “You have no idea what it’s like… to wake up and no longer be a boy… to be afraid to leave your room because it might happen again and the one thing you’re good at… that you love to do is making you that way…”

Loki turned and sat down on his bed, but Odin could still see his thin shoulders shaking. Odin made his way around the bed to stand in front of Loki again. Hastily, Loki wiped the tears away from his face and looked away. “I never intended that, Loki. And I am truly sorry. I underestimated your physiology. I thought the guise would make it so that you would never have to deal with such thoughts or fears.”

“But it didn’t work…” Loki said and wiped his cheeks again. His fair complexion had become blotchy, and his eyes were swollen and bloodshot, but still, he was trying to put on a brave face. Odin almost smiled, but the sorrow in every line of Loki’s body prevented that. This was the boy that thought Odin was disappointed in him. Even at such a young age and in the throws of a fit of pique and sorrow Odin had never seen before, Loki displayed more dignity than some members of court.

“I am sorry it didn’t, Loki,” Odin said sincerely. “If I had realized I would have told you sooner.”

Loki stifled a scoff behind his arm and continued to look as far away from Odin as was possible. Odin could easily guess that Loki didn’t believe him. “…you still love Thor more…you can’t deny that.”

Odin studied Loki’s closed off face and sighed heavily. Perhaps… perhaps Frigga was right. His son was in pain and just brushing it off wasn’t going to fix things. He hated these sorts of talks, however. They made him feel like an idiot grasping at nothing and not at all like King of Asgard. Oh, over the years he’d gotten better at the diplomacy aspect of ruling, but he’d never actually improved when it came to having heart to heart conversations with anyone. Especially not his children. Still, he should probably start out with the most important thing. “I do not love Thor more than you, Loki,” Odin murmured sincerely as he sat down beside the distraught boy he’d taken in. He had never meant to do anything that would lead to such an impression. “And, I do know how you feel.”

Loki didn’t bother to hide his scoff of disbelief this time. “No, truly,” Odin said. There were several long moments of silence as Odin thought on how to best say what he needed. “I know that you know about my mother. Bestla. It seems… when one is half-Jotnar what traits you inherit from which parent is rather unpredictable. I turned out much like my father in size and strength… my brothers were all far stronger than I in hand-to-hand combat. Compared to the other Aesir I was more than capable, but against them I was the weak runt.” Odin tried his best to not sound as bitter as those words tasted on his tongue but judging by the look Loki was giving him he hadn’t fully succeeded. He couldn’t help it, though. Odin hated that word, and perhaps it wasn’t only for Loki’s benefit that he tried his utmost to avoid using it.

“Vili and Ve had father’s complexion -like I did- but they were taller than I. And Loptr… Loptr was full Jotnar… It has been so long, perhaps I forgot how it felt to be the smaller brother,” Odin conceded. Looking back he could recall being outpaced too easily by his brothers but he’d long forgotten that in light of simply missing their presence.

“But I am not Thor,” Loki said, his own bitterness shining through. “I am not really your son.”

Odin felt a flash of anger rekindle, and he tried his best to temper it with patience. “You are my son,” he said firmly. “And say that again, and I will prove it by tanning your backside, Loki.” That at least got Loki to look at him fully again although the boy looked more than a little startled. Odin took a breath to try and regain some calm. “Do you know why I named you Loki?”
Of course, the youngest in the house of Odin shook his head. “It is a Vanir form of my brother Loptr’s name. I thought it fitting to name my son that looked so much like him after him.”

“You mean the one that is blue…” Loki grumbled unhappily.

“You don’t look like him just because of your skin, Loki,” Odin denied with a slight frown. He examined Loki thoughtfully for a moment before elaborating further, “It is in the shape of your face… especially your cheekbones. Loptr had the same structure…”

“I loved my brothers, Loki. All of them. And I love my sons. Each and every one of them,” the Allfather said firmly. “When I saw you so small and helpless and reminding me so much of Loptr… Loptr who was so kind and good and taken away so cruelly… there was no way in all the Realms I could not take you home and keep you safe.

“I did not disguise you for my sake, Loki. But for yours. As you said, we had just come back from a war with Jotunheim. If they saw your skin, the people would have assumed, as you did, that I took you as some penance or some sort of trophy. My father did that on occasion. But that is not why I took you in,” Odin explained as he hesitantly put a hand on Loki’s shoulder. He didn’t want to make his son recoil further, but he was desperate to make certain that Loki truly understood. “I brought you home because you are my son.”

A ragged noise somewhere between a gasp and a cry escaped Loki and Odin reacted on instinct before he could even register the sound fully. He used his hand on Loki’s shoulder to bring his son close and brought his other hand up to brush over Loki’s hair. Little noises were escaping Loki as he turned into Odin’s chest, suddenly looking much younger. “I don’t want to be a Jotunn! Please… can’t you change me? Make me like you and Thor?”

Odin closed his eye and tightened his hold on his son. He hadn’t wanted this. Not in the least. This exact reaction was why he’d wanted to keep the whole thing silent. “I cannot, Loki,” Odin murmured. “No more than I can change who I am… or who Thor or your Mother are. But you do not need to be changed, Loki.”

“I do!”

“No, you do not,” Odin insisted. “This all has been a shock to you, but I promise you that it is not as bad as you are thinking.”

Loki curled up against his father’s side, and Odin let him simply let all of the pain out for however long it would take. “Why do you want me if they didn’t?” Loki asked, though his voice was muffled.

Odin tried to be as patient as he could. He couldn’t expect Loki to be able to process everything when he was so upset. He’d worked himself into a painful misconception, and it would take time to get through that. “Why would we not want you, Loki?” Odin asked back. “You are skilled, intelligent, and perhaps a bit more clever than is truly good for you. And, I am not so convinced that your parents left you because they truly wanted to.”

Loki finally looked up at that. “How can you say that?”

Odin sighed and brushed some tears away from Loki’s face. “The actual wording of the Law says that they were supposed to drop you into a pit, Loki. I found you in a temple. Inside shelter… admittedly not enough to have kept you alive for long but it wasn’t the drop to certain death that they were supposed to give you,” Odin reasoned. That very reason was why he kept pushing Laufey to acknowledge, even if it was just between them, that he regretting following his own
laws.

“They had no way of knowing you’d take me!” Loki argued.

“No, I know that,” Odin agreed. “And I’m not saying that they were right, Loki. But the only reason you were alive when I came upon you was because of the fact you were in that temple with a blanket wrapped around you. They would not have done that if they’d cared not a shred for you.”

Loki seemed to struggle with that thought. “Do… do you know who they were?” he asked although Odin wasn’t convinced that Loki really wanted to know. He studied his son’s torn face. Lying here would most likely only lead to a similar argument later on, and he would prefer to avoid this situation in the future.

“I do,” Odin said. “Your markings are distinctive… but I think you should honestly consider if you want to know or not. There is no rush. The information will not change if I tell you now or if I tell you years from now. Wait until you are ready, Loki.”

The green of Loki’s eyes seemed even more vibrant due to the red around them. “You think I can’t handle knowing?” he demanded. A challenge if ever Odin had heard one.

“Do not twist my words, Loki,” Odin warned. “I want only what is best for you, and I don’t think you really wish to know. Not right now. Do not force yourself to ask only for your pride. What is important right now, is not knowing who gave birth to you, but knowing that your mother and I do care about you. That you are our son no matter your blood.”

Loki looked off to the side and released his grip on Odin’s jacket. “And you will make me leave Asgard to prove that will you?” he asked with no small amount of petulance.

“No matter what you think, it is for your safety,” Odin said. “You are right that is not only for your safety that we want you to go to Vanaheim but do not be so quick to say that reason is untrue.”

“Then why do you want me to go?” Loki demanded.

“Vanaheim is much more open than Asgard is currently,” Odin said. “It’s unfortunate but true. It would be good for you, we believe, to go to where you can adjust without worrying about what Asgard expects. You brothers will be there, we are not sending you to the middle of nowhere or some tower to lock you away, Loki. Besides, did you not always want to go to Vanaheim?”

Loki grumbled something under his breath and shifted. Odin sighed heavily and shook his head. “Stubborn boy… you are determined to be unhappy about this, I see. Well, that is unfortunate because your mother and I are not going to be changing our minds about it.”

“Thor will be bored stiff,” Loki muttered.

Despite himself, Odin couldn’t help but smile. “I’m sure you can keep him entertained well enough, Loki. But do try not to embarrass him too badly,” he said as he got to his feet. “Your mother may be going with you at first. She has been eager to meet your nephew Forseti since he was born and we haven’t had a chance to leave Asgard yet.”

Loki snorted a little. Odin would have left, but it looked very much as if Loki was trying to work himself up to saying something else, so he waited there for several minutes. “… you won’t leave me there, will you?”

Odin felt a pain in his chest at the quietly asked question. He should have expected such a question, but he honestly hadn’t. Odin felt foolish for the possibility to have never crossed his mind. He had
an unpleasant flash of foresight telling him this was not the first time he’d be hearing this particular question. “No, Loki. I will not leave you there,” he promised.

Loki nodded but still looked apprehensive about the idea of going to Vanaheim. Odin wasn’t entirely certain what was giving Loki such reservations about the trip besides the obvious fear of abandonment. He decided Loki needed more incentive to want to go if he was going to be in the least bit agreeable. The trip to Vanaheim was not terribly long, but an unhappy Loki could make even a short trip seem to take ages. Odin’s eyes drifted back to his mother’s book on the bed. “How much of the book have you read, Loki?”

The young prince gave a slight start of surprise. Loki blinked at his father for a few moments as he tried to process the sudden question. When he realized what Odin was asking, his face flushed and he reached over to close the book. “Not as far as I should… but it’s… I don’t like reading it…”

Odin tried hard to not let his surprise show. He’d never heard of a book that Loki didn’t enjoy reading. Then again, this particular book was far more personal than any other he could find to read. “Well, I think that I perhaps know of a way for you to find out anything you would want to know without having to read something that embarrasses you,” Odin mused. He wasn’t sure if asking would be any less uncomfortable for his son but the more the thought was in his head, the more Odin thought he should at least make an effort.

Loki shifted in his seat. “How?”

“You know of Freyr, yes?” Still looking confused, Loki nodded in agreement. “His partner is Jotunn. Gerd. I’m sure that Gerd would be willing to speak with you and answer any questions you might have,” Odin suggested.

Loki looked almost horrified by the thought. “You don’t have to,” Odin added. “I just give you an option that I think you should think about.”

Loki still stared. “I did not know Freyr was married to a Jotunn… I thought that Aesir could not touch a Jotunn without frostbite appearing instantly…”

“That is a defense mechanism, Loki,” Odin explained. “It is part of their own magic, and if they are not in danger, they have little need to use it. I highly doubt Gerd feels the need to defend against Freyr.” Loki still looked skeptical. “Think about it, Loki. You have time.”

“I will,” Loki agreed softly.

“Good. Now, though I understand you were upset, I don’t want to have another outburst like the one at the table this morning,” Odin said firmly. “Understood?”

“Yes, Father…”

Odin smiled and reached over to brush Loki’s hair back comfortingly. “Come along then. You haven’t eaten yet, I don’t think, and your mother would be most vexed if I allowed you to stay here instead of returning to the table.”

Loki winced. “Must I?”

“You must,” Odin confirmed. Loki just sighed, and Odin waved his hand to release the spell surrounding the room.
Seidr Colors- It's a fairly common trope in fantasy for magic from different people to be different in appearance through color. I have always rather liked this idea and have used it here. I'm going to do my utmost best to not have any characters have exactly the same color. They might share one color but not both. Like gold will most likely be in all of the Asgardian Royal family but none in the family besides Loki will have green along with it.

Odin pt.2- I thought it would be nice if Odin and Loki shared a bit of their insecurities. I mean, Loki might be weaker than Thor but you gotta think Odin was raised beside a literal giant so he probably had a little smidgen of inferiority complex himself. Also a little hint into those illusive Giant genetics!

Freyr and Gerdr- I kind of didn't want to include these two so soon but really they just fit so nicely into a possible source of information for Loki. Not that Freyr doesn't pose some huge problems. He did, in the Poetic Edda, fall in love with Gerdr with one look from a distance and then proceed to pretty much threaten her with some pretty horrible things to make her marry him. Things like being driven mad with lust and being forced to crawl and only being given goat urine to drink... I mean... so romantic right? Well, to be entirely fair it was Freyr's servant, Skírnir, that made these threats but it's implied that they came from Freyr so... there's that. I happen to think they were empty threats but they were still obviously terrifying enough for her to agree to make sure it didn't happen. So, with that in mind, we're just going to forget about that stuff for this story if that's okay with everyone. Heck, even if it's not.
Cheering a Trickster

Chapter Summary

The brother's Odinson find themselves bending to Loki's whims all in an effort to cheer him up.

Chapter Notes

So, I needed a fluffier chapter after last one and also as I was reading there weren't many times where Loki was acting like a real kid. Don't get me wrong I've always pictured him mature for his age but I did want to make it clear he did still have his childish delighted side. Plus I... I really wanted Loki to have a tree house. Sue me.

When Loki and Odin reappeared in the dining room, Thor noticed that his brother's eyes were red and puffy as if he'd been crying. Though, considering that he was allowing Odin to have his hand on his shoulder and that he muttered a sullen apology for 'disrupting breakfast' before retaking his seat, Thor hoped that their talk had gone better than he'd feared it would. The young Thunderer imagined that if it had blown up too severely that Loki wouldn't have come back to the table at all no matter how Odin demanded it. There seemed to be some unspoken agreement that nobody bring up what had happened just twenty minutes earlier and, despite the fact that Loki still looked unhappy, Baldr and Tyr spent quite a bit of effort in coming up with other, more amusing topics of conversation.

Loki kept his head down and poked at his food on his plate with his fork as if it would suddenly spring upwards and give him the answers to all of life's questions. Thor leaned over closer to his brother. "Are you alright, Loki? Father didn't upset you did he?"

Loki shook his head a little but continued to stare at his plate that was now a mixed up pile of potato and egg. He poked at one particularly well fried chunk so that it slid around the plate. Thor's frown grew at the lack of response. Loki rarely went quiet. Usually, when he was unhappy he'd have something to say about it, even if he disguised his opinions behind jokes and double speak so that it was harder to respond to. Thor hadn't ever noticed Loki acting sullen. Something had to be done to distract his brother, that much was clear. The question was, what?

They may not be allowed to wander from the castle but there were things inside that they could do. Practicing their fighting was discarded nearly instantly as an option. Even if Loki were in a better mood he most likely wouldn't choose to train. The library would almost certainly bore Thor to no end, so that was something he'd resort to only if he had to. So, what else was left really? After a moment's thought, Thor came up with something that he was fairly certain would get his brother to act more like himself.

Thor poked Loki's leg to ensure he had his brother's full attention. "Loki. Come out with me to the gardens after breakfast?"
Loki finally looked away from his plate to fix Thor with an appraising gaze. "Why?"

"Because I'm bored inside," Thor replied instantly. "Come on, I'll even let you lead the way. Surely there's something in the gardens to keep us busy." The 'gardens' of the palace were separated into three distinct sections. Their mother's garden which she insisted that she tend to herself, the kitchen gardens which was a working field that the cooks could draw from, and the formal gardens which were open to the public. The formal gardens spanned almost four hundred fifty acres and was packed full of winding paths, fountains, various greenhouses, and more than a few places for public gatherings. The formal gardens wrapped around the palace and the private gardens in a large half oval shape. Anyone could spend hours wandering the paths and not retread any areas at all. Unfortunately, to Thor, most of the different flower beds and greenhouses began to look the same to him after only an hour or so in the gardens.

Loki's eyes scanned over Thor carefully. "You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Thor replied. "Maybe we can go through the maze or something..."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "We've both solved that thing at least ten times," he said. The public gardens had two hedge mazes one was always being cut down and replanted into a new configuration while the other was open, but since it took years to regrow hedges large enough to not see over, they still had solved the current one many times in boredom.

"Well, I'm sure you can come up with something for us to do in four hundred acres," Thor said.

"Why do I always have to come up with something to do?" Loki asked, a bit of his usual haughtiness coming back.

"Because you always hate my ideas," Thor answered. "You just shot down the one I gave. So you come up with something."

Loki gave a large sigh. "You are so utterly hopeless. Fine. It just so happens I do have an idea of what we can do. But we'll need someone taller..." he mused as he glanced over to their brothers thoughtfully. Thor raised an eyebrow at that and wondered what was going through Loki's brain this time. "Tyr..." Loki called to their tallest brother his most beguiling tone.

Instantly the table's attention shifted, and Tyr looked over somewhat warily. "Yes, Loki?"

"Are you doing anything today?"

Tyr still looked a little wary at Loki's tone. "Nothing besides training my recruits... as usual. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was just thinking you could help me and Thor today," Loki said innocently. "But if you're too busy... maybe Hodr could help us instead..."

"Hey now," Baldr complained. "Why go to Hodr before me?"

Loki continued to put up the innocent front. "Well, you were so hung over earlier... I didn't want to disturb you," he said as if it were entirely obvious.

"I'm fine!" Baldr protested. "What do you need help with?"

"I never said I couldn't help," Tyr said with a frown.

Thor watched as his brothers shot arguments back and forth and couldn't help but be amazed. How
had he missed how easily Loki could do that the first time around? He'd barely said anything and somehow got their brothers clamouring to be the one to help. "Well," Loki interrupted lightly. "You could just all help," he pointed out.

And so, to Thor's bewilderment, after breakfast all five sons of Odin were out in the gardens, having been roped into whatever Loki had planned. "You are amazing, Loki," Thor murmured as Baldr loudly chattered on to Tyr behind them. Loki just gave a smug smirk and continued to lead the way through the winding paths of the public gardens.

"You do realize we got played, right?" Hodr said as they walked.

"Don't be silly, Hodr. We're helping our baby brothers," Baldr replied. "It's a perfectly normal thing for us to do."

Hodr sighed heavily. "How in the world did I get roped into this along with you?" he muttered.

"Because when faced with puppy dog eyes from both Thor and Loki... there is no force in the Nine Realms that can fight them," Tyr replied matter-of-factly.

"That might work on you... but I'm blind. I'm immune," Hodr argued.

"Well then you have no excuse and are just a pushover," Tyr said.

"Rude," Hodr said.

Thor glanced behind him at his three elder brothers. Even though Hodr was protesting he had a slight curve to his lips that said he wasn't really that upset at being dragged out into the gardens. Tyr sent Thor a quick wink and Baldr was staring at the large pool of water that they were now walking behind that reflected the golden palace. "You know... Nanna would love a new garden... perhaps I can get mother to help make one for her..."

"Didn't you just give Nanna a ship?" Hodr asked. "That she has no use for?"

"Everyone can find use for a ship," Baldr replied instantly. "And besides, my ship is too large to get into most ports. Hers is more versatile."

"And the ship for your son that isn't even old enough to sail yet?" Tyr asked.

"It's called preparation, Tyr," Baldr responded haughtily. "I thought you of all people would appreciate that!"

"I think you just like spoiling them," Hodr muttered. "You're going to get into debt if you keep it up."

Baldr snorted in derision. "Hardly. I know my limits."

"No, I don't think that you do," Tyr said.

Thor couldn't quite help but laugh though he did try to at least stifle it behind a faked cough. "Oh, I see how it is," Baldr said indignantly. "Ganging up on your poor brother Baldr."

"Yes, our poor brother Baldr who is so blissfully and sickeningly happy in his life it makes people want to throw rocks at his head," Hodr drawled.

Baldr gave an utterly fake and exaggerated gasp. "Hodr! You wish to throw rocks at my head? I thought you loved me!"
"I do love you," Hodr replied. "From a rock throwing distance."

Loki finally lost his composure and laughed along with Thor who was failing even worse than before to hide his own giggles of amusement. "This family is so cruel," Baldr pouted. "Now you laugh at my pain. I shall never get over the mistreatment today."

"I think you'll be fine," Tyr said dryly as Thor's amusement quickly dried up. He knew that Baldr wasn't being serious but such things echoed unpleasantly of other things in Thor's mind.

"Well, so long as Baldr is scarred for life... would you mind telling us what we're doing out here, Loki?" Hodr asked. "What did you need our help with?"

Loki turned to flash a smile even though Hodr wouldn't be able to see it. "You'll find out," he said before taking a sharp turn to the left. The path he chose led further away from the large reflecting pool and towards the nearest edge of the gardens. "I'm glad you all came, though. I've been needing the help."

"Help with what?" Baldr asked again.

"He's not going to tell you," Thor said. Loki never told anyone anything until he was ready. "He loves the reveal almost as much as keeping the secret in the first place." Loki gave Thor a sharp jab in the side with his elbow. A grunt of pain escaped the young Thunder God and he rubbed his side where Loki's elbow had hit. "You are so boney... your elbow is like a dagger."

Loki rolled his eyes. "Don't exaggerate. I'm not that thin..." he muttered.

"Well, you didn't exactly make records with how much you ate at breakfast, Loki," Baldr said, suddenly dropping into a much more serious demeanor. "You think we didn't notice you pushing your food around, but you'd be mistaken. You barely touched anything on your plate. You should definitely make more of an effort at midday meal." Never before had Baldr sounded more like a gentler and younger version of their father. Then again, he was the only one of them that had children of his own so perhaps that wasn't so shocking after all.

Loki made a face at the mention of him not eating breakfast. "I simply wasn't hungry," he muttered.

Baldr frowned. "You 'weren't hungry' after you were sent to bed without dinner last night?"

Loki's face turned pink. "It's not a crime to not be hungry."

"Leave off, Baldr," Tyr said. "Practice being a father to your own son. You know Loki's always been a dainty eater."

"I am not a 'dainty' eater..." Loki grumbled, his face still pink. Hodr thankfully decided to change the subject from Loki's eating habits to the gardens around them. As they walked, Loki's face slowly returned to his usual color.

After another ten minutes walking, the brothers reached the edge of the public gardens. A large flowerbed of Vanahiem Sky Lilies bordered the gardens. Vanahiem Sky Lilies were their mother's favorite flower, probably because they were from her homeland and also because the flowers were incredibly unique. The petals changed colors from bright orange and yellow to rich purple and blues depending on the day-to-day conditions around them. Currently the countless long ruffled petals of the lilies were a deep purple with streaks of blue. "Wow... I forgot these lilies were over here," Baldr murmured.
"So, what are we doing here?" Tyr asked even as Loki stepped carefully into the flower bed.

"You'll see," Loki said as he made a line across the thick band of flowers. Without much choice, the rest of Odinsons had to follow along until they reached a wooden fence that was not in the best shape but separated the flowers from a seemingly endless expanse of golden wheat. Off in the distance were mountains but Thor could honestly not tell if there was anything between the rolling hills of tall grain and the base of the peaks. Thor assumed these were some farmer's fields. Loki kept walking, making a somewhat arcing path back around closer to the side of the palace.

A river, probably made for irrigation, cut through the fields and Loki began to follow it. After a few hundred yards, the brothers crested another hill and spotted a massive gnarled oak tree. The thing looked like it had been growing on the side of the river for over a few thousand years it was so huge. Quite a few branches that looked as thick as some other tree's entire trunks spread out low enough to climb and even shaded the whole bend of the river. A thick rope hung down from one branch over the river and a platform was wedged in between two of the higher limbs.

"How did you find this place?" Baldr asked as they approached the tree.

Loki shrugged. "I was exploring."

"Did you put that rope up?" Tyr asked. "And the platform?"

"No... I found it this way. But it's a good idea. I'm just... not so good at building," Loki said a little sheepishly.

Thor couldn't stop the wide grin from crossing his face. "Don't worry, brother! Together we can make the most magnificent place to spend our time!" The idea of having what the Midgardian's would call a 'tree house' had always appealed to him and now he had a chance for one.

Suddenly Baldr gave a shriek and jumped back from the tree. He hid behind Hodr bodily. "What is your problem now?" Hodr asked with a put-upon sigh.

"Save me, brother! It's got mistletoe growing in it!" Baldr cried from his spot behind his twin.

"Asgaedia save me..." Hodr muttered. "It's not like it's going to jump out and maul you to death, Baldr. It's just a plant!"

"You wouldn't be saying that if it could kill you!" Baldr snapped. "It's a devil plant..." he added darkly.

Hodr sighed again. "It is not a devil plant... it's hardly the mistletoe's fault you're allergic to it..."

"... it is a demon in plant form..." Baldr continued to mutter.

Loki snickered some and even Thor had to try hard to not smile. Though allergies were rare for Asgardians, when they did develop them they were almost always the most severe forms. And Baldr was indeed deathly allergic to mistletoe, as was discovered one midwinter when Hodr had decided to be festive and decorated their, at the time, shared room with the plant. They probably shouldn't find Bald's reaction to a legitimate danger to his life funny but it was hard not to. "Kill it for me, brothers..."

Tyr rolled his eyes. "Oh, for the love of... fine, Baldr. We'll protect you from the big bad plant that you can crush under your foot," he said as he went over to the tree. He reached up to the first branch and hauled himself up.
"I cannot believe you, you big baby," Hodr said as Baldr continued to use him as a human shield.

Luckily for Baldr, and Hodr who was still an unwilling barrier between the tree and his brother, the infestation of mistletoe was not very severe. Between Tyr, Thor, and Loki, it only took a hour or so to rip all of the invasive plant-life away from the oak and discarded. Only once he was sure the tree was safe did Baldr step out from behind Hodr’s form. “Thank you, brothers, you have saved my life.”

Hodr rolled his blind eyes. “Yes, I’m sure we have. Now let’s help with what we were actually here to do rather than deal with your phobia of a simple plant.”

“It isn’t a phobia if the fear is reasonable,” Baldr said with a huff. “The damn stuff can kill me, Hodr.”

Tyr shook his head and climbed up the tree to stand on the platform. Like Loki had said the platform had obviously been in place for a while. There were even some spots along the edges where the tree had started to grow around the platform and absorb it back into one form. “This looks like it’s been here for centuries…”

“I wonder who built it,” Thor said as he climbed up onto one thick arm and shimmied his way further up so that he could take in the view. He hadn’t gotten very high in the branches yet but he didn’t doubt that if he tried he would be able to see for miles around.

“It’s hard to say at this point,” Tyr said as he watched a black bird circle high above. One of his father’s ravens no doubt. “I’m rather impressed the old thing has lasted this long. I would have thought that the farmer that owns these lands would have cut it down for firewood well before now. Or one of his ancestors at least.”

Loki shrugged. “Maybe it has sentimental value. I found a carving in the bark there on the far side of the trunk where you are, Tyr.”

“A carving?” Hodr asked. “What kind of carving?”

Tyr went to go look at where Loki was pointing. “It’s a lover’s mark,” he informed. “Kind of hard to make out really because it looks like someone tried to take a hatchet to it.”

“So it didn’t end well then,” Baldr surmised. “You’d think they’d just chop the whole thing down…”

“Perhaps it was someone else who was jealous who defiled the mark,” Hodr offered. “Then whoever owned the mark might still want to keep the tree around anyway. But if the mark’s as old as the platform… whatever happened is now old news.”

“That’s kind of sad…” Thor said as he sat in a comfortable dip in one of the tree’s limbs. “Are you sure it’s alright for us to take this place over?” He didn’t want to offend anyone or defile someone’s pleasant memories.

“I think so…” Loki said although he sounded thoughtful. “I’ve never seen anyone by it and nobody’s come to complain when I’m here.”

“Just how often are you here?” Tyr asked curiously.

Loki gave a deliberately casual shrug. “Not that often,” he said.

Tyr hummed but looked disbelieving. “Of course not… so you want us to help you build a…”
structure here?” he asked, looking for some appropriate word. The idea of building in a tree was not exactly common on Asgard. Many smaller and less primitive creatures lived in trees and climbing trees was a fairly popular activity among youths, but building a real structure of some sort was decidedly unusual.

“A fort!” Thor offered from his seat above Tyr’s head. “It is in the perfect vantage point for a fort!”

Loki’s eyes instantly lit up with excitement. “Yes! This is the perfect place! Please, Tyr?” Tyr tried hard to be practical. The land wasn’t even part of the royal gardens and so they didn’t exactly have the right to even be wandering on it much less building structures in ancient trees. But huge green eyes pleading up at him crumbled his resolve far easier than he’d like to admit. He sighed heavily and nodded his agreement. Loki beamed and instantly scrambled up the tree. “Thank you, Tyr! I know you will make a wonderful fort for us!”

“And you called me a push over,” Hodr muttered.

“Shut up,” Tyr said although there wasn’t any venom behind it. He was just glad that Loki was acting cheerful again. So he had to build a strange… fort in a tree to make that happen. All in all not that steep a price.

Thor reached down to offer his brother a helping hand and the two youngest were quickly up near the top of the oak while the elder sons of Odin discussed how one might go about building something in a tree. Thor wrapped an arm around the still large trunk of the tree. “So, how did you really find this place?” he asked quietly enough for only Loki to hear.

“I was exploring,” Loki said a touch defensively as he leaned over to peer into a birds’ nest a few branches lower. The nest was cradled in between a few particularly large branches right beside the tree trunk and was currently empty.

“What kind of a nest is that?” Thor asked when he noticed where his brother was looking.

“Magpie, I think… hard to say for sure without any eggs in it, though.”

“Magpies…” Thor echoed thoughtfully. “Will they come back if we build a fort here?”

Loki hummed and thought for a moment. “They should so long as the fort doesn’t come up this high. “We’ll just be careful to not disturb their perch. This nest is part of why I like this tree so much.”

“The nest is?” Thor echoed.

“Yes, I’ve always rather liked Magpies… I don’t know why,” Loki mused. “You’d think what with Huginn and Muninn always hanging around I’d be done with all the crow family… but I suppose not.”

“Maybe you’re more like father than you want to admit,” Thor ventured.

“Bite your tongue. I’m nothing like him at all,” Loki grumbled.

Thor rolled his eyes. “Right. Nothing at all in common,” he drawled.

Loki scowled at Thor. “Sarcasm doesn’t suit you, Thor. You should leave it to the experts.”

“But I learned from the experts,” Thor said sweetly.
“You’ll learn how to fly in a minute…”

“I think I’d be pretty good at flying, actually.”

Loki sighed heavily. “You are such a never-ending pain.”

“And yet without me you’d be so bored.”

“I’m not entirely convinced it’s worth it…”

“Brat,” Thor said as he reached over and lightly kicked the branch that Loki was on. The branch jerked even from that light a kick. His brother yelped and grabbed hold of the limb before glaring at Thor.

“You could have killed me,” Loki hissed in annoyance. “I’m going to turn you into a tiny little bug!”

The young Thunderer smiled. “Maybe if you could catch me,” he said before quickly climbed down the tree as fast as he could.

“Thor! Get back here!”

“I’m not that stupid!” Thor yelled back before jumping the remaining distance to land heavily between Hodr and Tyr. He gave them a smile before another shout of his name had him darting back towards the palace.

Chapter End Notes

**Palace Gardens** - At first I was going to just go with the idea of Frigga's garden being the only one at the palace but then I went thinking and realized quite a lot of castles and palaces have showy formal gardens and I kind of love the idea that on one side the palace of Asgard is just the backdrop for crazy impressive horticulture. And then I went well, they have a kitchen too... they probably grow at least some of their own food or at the bare minimum herbs. So now they have hundreds of acres of garden behind the palace. On the front side is all city and the harbor and then the back there's basically a massive park that is all the Palace Gardens and then the city continues around that. So sort of like Central Park only it's the palace's back yard. But on one side there is a lot more farmland (that would be the East side by the way) and that is where Loki's tree is.

**The Brothers** - Not really a note so much as a comment... I just love writing their banter... like it's not even healthy how much I adore writing them bickering. And Baldr is so ridiculous I just can't even. Pretty sure he's nothing like his Comic counterpart personality wise but I can't help it when I write him he's just so happy in my head he comes out ridiculous in the best way.

**Vanaheim Sky Lilies** - These came into my head when I was looking at pictures of Holland and all of their impossibly beautiful tulip fields. Not that I'm saying that Vanaheim is Holland... I've always pictured it more Oriental in their cultural design (possibly because of Hogun) but now they have Holland-esque flower fields full of impossible flowers.
**Mistletoe** - If you'll remember, Baldr in myth was killed by a mistletoe arrow. Here he is deathly allergic to it and perhaps a little overly cautious. Also the story of Hodr nearly killing Baldr with it by accident is a not very subtle reference to that same myth. But I couldn't help it. Also, yes, Mistletoe is a semi parasitic plant that grows on others and if it gets bad enough will choke the tree or whatever host it has to death. And some species of Mistletoe is poisonous. So there is that. Being allergic to it on top of all that it's little wonder Baldr calls it a devil plant.

**Magpies** - Loki in the comics is rather strongly associated with magpies even turning another version of himself into a magpie familiar named Ikol. (Loki backwards if it isn't obvious). And if you don't know about that series with Kid Loki you should definitely check it out. I have always found the fact that Loki is strongly associated (with good reason) to a member of the same bird family that Odin's own bird familiars are in, quite interesting. As Thor said here, it does lead one to think they might have more in common than they want to admit. So, I couldn't resist when I decided to give Loki a tree house for it to be home to some magpies as well. Magpies (and others in the Corvid family) are incredibly intelligent some say to the same level as Great Apes are. They have been observed using tools, episodic memory, cutting up food for their young, and even recognizing themselves in mirrors (which is more significant than it sounds). Some think that they are able to feel complex emotions such as grief even. They have kind of a bad reputation and in Europe are associated with bad luck. Incredibly intelligent, emotionally complex, and has a bad rap? Yep, sounds a lot like Loki to me.
Girls

Chapter Summary

The girls of Asgard are all different from one another but all intimidating in their own ways.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Royal Library of Asgard was several stories tall in the main chamber with a seamless domed glass roof above, which was sitting atop a row of intricately carved wooden arches. Pillars of the purest white Vanaheim marble were scattered throughout with gold filigree twining like vines around them and holding up lights like clusters of fruits. The stone floors were covered with runners in Asgard's Royal colors of vibrant red and gold. The massive bookcases were made of a light blonde wood imported from somewhere that Thor didn't know and silver nameplates were affixed to indicate what subjects were to be found in each section. Scattered throughout the library were rich red leather couches worn soft through centuries of use and tables to study at that had a slab top of Muspelheim Petrified Wood polished to a high sheen.

Spiral staircases were placed in all four corners of the room and decorated with even more gold filigree. The second levels and above overhung by a dozen feet and were left with their beams exposed so that detailed wood carvings were visible. Identical carved dragon heads were peering down at the main chamber from each level at regular intervals with perpetual snarls that Thor actually found very off-putting. Lights hung down from the floors above with sturdy golden chains so that even in the shadow of the other floors one could easily read their selected book.

At the very end of the room was an alcove where a forty foot tall statue of Mimir was standing behind of a large metal brazier that was kept burning even during the day. The warmth from the always burning fire never failed to make Thor sleepy if he sat down for too long. Particularly in the central chamber where the couches seemed to absorb whoever sat on them. The main room was only the general collection, Thor knew within the side rooms there were rarer or more specialized collections and of course the Art wing that wrapped around the whole library that Thor and Loki had cleaned so recently.

Thor could predict that what he was looking for wouldn't be found in the general collection and so made his way to the nearest staircase. In each riser of the stairs was carved knot work that looped back on itself so that it had no end. Thor followed the stairs up to the third level of the library and then started through the stacks to one of the side rooms that his brother frequented.

The silver plate hanging above the door spelled out Advanced Energies. Thor had never tried to read any of the books or scrolls inside, but Loki had probably memorized all of them by the time he was eight hundred. So, when Thor opened the door and didn't see Loki sitting at the desk with piles of books around him he was rather confused. He'd known that Loki had been planning to come to the library today and yet he wasn't in his usual room?

Thor glanced around a few more times just to be sure, but Loki truly didn't seem to be there. Confused, the young Thunder God went back out to the main chamber and looked down at the first floor more carefully. He didn't see Loki down there either. Without any sort of clues as to where
his brother was, Thor began to wander the library aimlessly. Here and there within the massive room were students and servants and some librarians but nobody seemed to be paying any attention to who was walking past so Thor didn't stop to ask if they'd seen Loki.

Thor had never realized just how many people could be hiding away in the library until he started looking for one in particular. There were dozens of little alcoves and reading nooks that seemed to spring up out of nowhere. The perpetual quiet of the library didn't help Thor's continual surprise when he stumbled across someone new or yet another set of chairs he hadn't even known existed.

After perhaps half an hour of wandering through stacks and poking his head into the different study rooms and special collections, Thor finally spotted the familiar dark silhouette of his brother. Thor was about to call out when Loki's demeanor finally registered as odd. Loki hadn't even noticed Thor and was instead looking down at a lower floor while leaning against the inside of one wooden archway.

"Loki! What are you doing?"

Loki actually jumped in surprise and whipped around quickly. "Thor! What are you doing here?" he demanded and Thor paused in confusion to see a pink blush begin to creep up Loki's neck and cheeks.

"Mother asked me to find you. She says we must finish packing for Vanaheim..." Thor explained. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Loki said. "Other than being given heart attacks by you."

Thor didn't believe that and walked over to the banister to look over even though Loki had tried to step in the way. Thor wanted to see what had gotten so much of Loki's attention that he hadn't noticed Thor coming up to him.

"Alright, let's go then!" Loki said quickly, grabbing Thor's wrist and beginning to walk off. Thor didn't let himself be dragged and leaned further over the rail. "Thor!"

Then Thor spotted what must have had Loki's attention. Sigyn was sitting the next floor down and across. Many books were on the table that she was sitting at. Her long hair was tied back in an intricate braid, and her pretty face was screwed up slightly in concentration. "Oh... I see," Thor said as he straightened and looked back to Loki. His brother was now entirely pink in the face. "Have you spoken to her?" Thor asked.

Loki's eyes widened almost comically. "Of course I have spoken to her! You saw me speaking with her!"

"I meant after that first time," Thor said, slightly amused by how flustered his usually calm and collected brother seemed to be.

"Yes," Loki said. Thor narrowed his eyes to try and read any minuscule tells in Loki's expression. Loki stood there calmly for a moment before breaking. "Alright, no. But can you blame me? Girls don't exactly flock to me because I'm attractive or anything..."

"You know more females than I," Thor protested.

Loki waved a hand dismissively. "Because I helped them with their studies. Over half are studying Seidr in some way... the only one who isn't is Sif, and I only know her through Dagr... I am not exactly the sort of boy they'd be looking for..." he said as he looked back down at Sigyn sadly.
"That's not true!" Thor argued. "You have many excellent qualities that I certainly don't possess!"

"Thank you for the defense, Thor, but we both know that's not really a plus in this case..." Loki muttered. "I'm far from the ideal... Not of Aesir... not even of Jotnar. Besides, Sigyn's been speaking with Bjarke..."

"Bjarke is an idiot," Thor said immediately. Even by Thor's rather lax standards, Bjarke was all muscle and little thought. He was in the class ahead of Loki and Thor and was a typical boisterous Aesir. He had a mass of bright red hair and used a heavy staff modeled off of the ones employed by the berserkers, which he idolized with no small amount of zeal.

"He is... but he's the one Sigyn is interested in..."

"I doubt that," Thor said. "She doesn't seem as if she would be interested in loud pig-headed boys."

Loki looked over at the girl the next floor down and sighed. "It doesn't matter anyway since we're getting shipped off to Vanaheim tomorrow..." he muttered.

"We won't be there forever," Thor pointed out. "You should go and say something to her."

Loki looked apprehensive and almost seemed to be about to do so before shaking his head. "I'm not going to go and embarrass myself, Thor."

Thor frowned. "You won't be embarrassing yourself," he argued. He knew for a fact that Sigyn had always adored his brother. Even through a somewhat rocky marriage that resulted in Sigyn moving back to Vanaheim, they had always ended up drawn back to one another given enough time. Usually, once Loki managed a grand apologetic gesture to Sigyn for whatever he had done that upset her.

"That is easy for you to say," Loki muttered as he turned away again and started walking.

"Loki!"

Loki didn't stop, and Thor had to jog a few steps to catch up. "Loki, you underestimate yourself. I think she would like you much more than Bjarke."

Loki gave Thor a look that was some mix of anger, hurt, and annoyance. "Stop harping on this, Thor," Loki snapped. "What business is it of yours, anyway?"

"I just want you happy, brother," Thor said, unable to hide his own wounded tone.

"I'll not be tricking myself, Thor," Loki grumbled.

"Tricking yourself?" Thor echoed in confusion as they descended the stairs. "What do you mean by that? How would talking to Sigyn be tricking yourself?"

Loki paused and whipped around to look up at Thor, who was still standing a stair above Loki. "Because what if you're right?" Loki demanded. "What if she does like me? What will I do when she finds out what I am? She'll be disgusted, and I can't blame her for that! Who wants a man that... is like me..."

Thor reached out and grasped Loki by the back of the neck and lowered his own so that their heads were close together. "There is nothing wrong with you, brother. Any woman would be lucky to have you in her life."
"You're a terrible liar..."

"I'm not lying, Loki."

Loki looked away first. "Before all this... I actually thought I'd finally found someone I had a shot with... even though I wasn't you..."

"You still do," Thor pressed. "I think that you should give her the chance to get to know you and decide for herself if she wants to be with you or not."

"Your optimism is sometimes very frustrating, Thor," Loki muttered. "Do you know that? You run the very fine line between delusion and optimism, and have completely unrealistic expectations of success..."

Thor frowned. "Or maybe you're projecting your own issues onto others," he shot back. Loki blinked, quite obviously taken aback. Thor sighed. "You see yourself as this horrible monster, but that is not what you are, Loki. Nothing is wrong with you."

Loki was silent for a few long minutes before grabbing Thor's arm. "Come with me," he ordered before continuing down the stairs. Thor could have refused, and Loki wouldn't have been able to drag him but decided to not do so. He was curious as to what Loki wanted.

The two princes left the library at a fast pace and went to Loki's room. Loki dropped Thor's wrist once they were inside and went to grab the large dark tome from where it was sitting on his desk. Thor sat down on the edge of Loki's bed as the trickster began flipping through the book. Thor wanted to ask but decided to remain quiet until Loki walked back and put the open book on Thor's lap.

Thor looked down at the book open across his knees. A drawing of a scrawny Jotunn child was across one page. Written beside the image of the rather unhealthy looking youngster were the words "Banthum Syndrome: Runts" in the largest runes on the page. Thor glanced up at Loki, but his brother wasn't looking at him. Thor wasn't sure if he was going to like reading the page but figured that Loki wouldn't have put it in front of him if he hadn't wanted Thor to do so. With no small amount of trepidation, Thor began to read.

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**Banthum Syndrome: Runts**

*Banthum Syndrome*, named after the first known sufferer of the condition, is a syndrome in which one does not grow above 180 cm tall even as an adult. Banthum sufferers (colloquially known as Runts) lack the ability to properly absorb growth hormones resulting in short stature and difficulty in producing ice and maintaining *Frost Touch*. Runts are better able to withstand warmer temperatures due to an underdeveloped *thurmenial* gland, but conversely have more trouble surviving the cold of Jotunheim, particularly while children or when otherwise weakened. The first hundred winters of a Runt's life are often the most challenging and, without near constant attention, they will likely die from external conditions.

Other genetic conditions often are found in conjunction with Banthum Syndrome that can lead to a variety of other problems. Some of these possible complications include mental deficiency, fragile bones, and others that may result in a severely shortened life span. Even those Runts born without accompanying conditions have a bleak prognosis. Lack of stature and muscle development means that even as adults, Runts
are physically inferior to other Jotnar and can easily perish in accidents that would not otherwise be fatal to one of average size including crushing and drowning.

Runts are ill-suited to life on Jotunheim, and there are few tasks one of such small size can easily do. Interpersonal relationships are also complicated due to Runts' short stature as most Jotnar feel uncomfortable being themselves around such fragile persons. Fear of damaging Runts often lead to few friends and almost no family.

Though it is possible for Runts to produce children of average stature such a thing is ill-advised at best. The strain of carrying a child of average size in their smaller body may prove fatal, and Runts lack the capacity to be dominate during a coupling.

Due to the many difficulties that Runts will face in their life, most of which result in either death or misery, it is far kinder to end their suffering early. If you find you have given birth to a Runt, easily discernable by a babe, the size of one born prematurely yet is not, the most moral choice (and lawful) is to drop the unfortunate Runt into the Crevice of Myrun.

Thor was no less uncomfortable after reading the passage, and was, in fact, less at ease. "... And?" he asked, still not sure why Loki had given him the book.

"And?" Loki echoed in disbelief as he whipped around. "And there are things wrong with me, Thor! It's all right there on that page! Did you even read it?"

"Yes," Thor said as he closed the book. "But you are far from stupid, and we do not live on Jotunheim among those so much larger than you." Thor got to his feet and grabbed Loki by each bicep. "So, you are more like us than them. That is not such a bad thing. You live here in Asgard."

"I should be dead..."

"But you're not," Thor said. "None of what is in that book matters here in Asgard. What they wrote shouldn't stop you from being happy or finding someone special."

Loki shook his head. "You would not say such things if it was you who had learned that you were some misshapen thing that shouldn't have even survived..."

Thor sighed heavily. "You’re not misshapen. You’re just smaller than they are. That’s all. I’m shorter than you. Does that mean I’m misshapen?"

“It’s not the same thing, Thor!”

“I think it is," Thor insisted as he folded his arms over his chest. “Other than being smaller than them there is nothing wrong with you. And all of that talk about trouble surviving in Jotunheim doesn’t matter because we aren’t there and Asgard gets nowhere near as cold as that realm."

“No, here I’m just some nightmare monster,” Loki spat.

Thor was more than a little fed up with the conversation and huffed. “Can you look like that when you want to?” he demanded.

Loki was startled by the sudden question. He had been about to say something else and hadn’t expected Thor to even want to know something like that. “I... haven’t really tried. Why would I?” he asked. He didn’t want to look like that. He didn’t even want to think about how he actually looked.
“Try. I want to see.”

Loki gaped at Thor. “You want to what?”


“No!” Loki denied instantly.

Thor sighed. “Loki, please. I’ll tell you if you’re as hideous as you think you look or not. I’ll tell you the truth. I promise. Just let me see.” Loki was too caught up in his own fears to judge his appearance anything but badly so Thor would have to throw his opinion into the mix and hope that helped somehow.

“I’m not going to show you, Thor,” Loki said firmly, no longer looking shocked but now a bit angry. “And don’t ask again.”

Thor growled and rubbed the back of his head in annoyance. “I thought I was supposed to be the stubborn one here,” he grumbled. “I want to help you, Loki, but I can’t if you won’t let me. I just want to see for a minute. I won’t ask again. I promise you.”

“And what if you do find me monstrous? Am I supposed to stand here and let you kill me?” Loki asked.

Thor figured it was a good sign that Loki didn’t want to be killed, but he was rather annoyed that Loki thought that he would be if Thor didn’t like what he saw. “I won’t ever hurt you, Loki,” Thor said firmly. “Just let me see.”

Loki frowned and folded his arms. “No, Thor. Absolutely not.” Thor ruffled his hair in agitation, but before he could try and argue his point anymore, Loki spoke again, “I know you won’t hurt me, Thor…” Loki wasn’t looking at him anymore. “But I don’t think I can have you seeing me like that. Please, try to understand.”

Thor didn’t. Not really. No matter what he looked like, Loki was still his brother, but he could at least see that Loki really didn’t want to lower the glamour. Thor supposed that, if Loki really wasn’t comfortable with the idea, he couldn’t in good conscience demand he change. “I don’t understand,” Thor said. “But I’ll stop asking…”

Loki visibly relaxed and gave the smallest smile. “Thank you, Thor…”

Thor nodded. “I’m just trying to help, brother. Truly.”

“… I know, I’m just not sure how you can… other than helping me pack,” Loki said with a smile.

Thor made a face. “I don’t want to help you with that,” he protested. Packing was one of his least favorite tasks. Once he’d gotten old enough to have a page he had made the boy do it every time he had to go somewhere. Loki had been the opposite however and never allowed anything he owned to be dealt with without him at least there to oversee it. He claimed it was because he had fragile tools and trinkets in his things but Thor just thought he was a little paranoid about his possessions.

Loki chuckled at the face that his elder brother made. “Consider it compensation for pestering me earlier.”

“I was not pestering,” Thor denied.

“You were. It’s one of the things you do best,” Loki replied before pointing to a bag open and half
filled on the desk chair. “Think you can put clothes in that without messing it up too badly?”

“Depends… do you want all your clothes or just the most uncomfortable ones?” Thor asked.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Oh come on… you help me I’ll even be nice and help you afterwards. I know you can’t have done any of it yet.” Thor made a face but decided to not agree and prove Loki’s point.

“Fine, but only if you really do help and don’t just sit on my bed and ‘supervise’ like you like to do,” Thor stated firmly. Loki put a hand to his chest and looked remarkably wounded.

“But Thor… I am so good at supervising you,” he said with mock innocence.

“You are good at avoiding work,” Thor replied.

Loki snorted at that and went to his dresser to pull out several clothes that he was going to pack away. “You’re one to talk. I seem to remember not that long ago when you escaped cleaning your room by deciding that you should go to the other side of the city to get Rødgrød, which you could have easily gotten here.”

Thor frowned; it had been a long time since that particular story had been brought up for him. He had gotten into quite a bit of trouble for the misadventure, but it hadn’t exactly stopped him from avoiding chores to go revisit the little old lady and getting some treats. “Lady Solveig makes it better is all…”

“Oh, does she now? I’m sure that Ilmr would be interested to hear that,” Loki said loftily.

Thor snorted. “Ilmr doesn’t scare me.”

“That’s because you don’t know her as well as I,” Loki replied as he handed Thor another set of pants from his chest of drawers. “Why do you think Andhrimnir only has one leg?”

For half minute, Thor almost believed his brother. “Don’t lie! I know he lost it in battle!” Thor said as he carelessly shoved the pants into the bag with the rest of the clothes.

“… battle with his wife,” Loki said solemnly.

Thor paused and thought back to everything he knew about Andhrimnir. Now that he thought about it, nobody ever had spoken of the exact circumstances behind the cook losing his leg. Suddenly he realized he was letting himself be fooled and shot Loki a glare. Loki was smiling far too innocently. “Why do I listen to you?” Thor demanded as he tossed a nearby book at his brother.

Loki dodged easily with a laugh. “You’re so gullible, Thor. And don’t throw my things… throw your own.”

“I don’t have anything of my own here.”

“That’s hardly my fault.”

Thor was about to retort when there was a knock at Loki’s door. “Loki, darling, are you packing in there?” Frigga asked.

“Yes, Mother. And Thor is helping,” Loki said with a wide grin. Thor could hear Frigga laugh on the other side of the door and glowered.

“Well, the feast will be starting soon, so you boys be sure to finish up and come,” Frigga called
through the door. Both brothers called their agreement, and Thor tried his best to start hurrying
Loki along. A feast was a lot more appealing than packing their things.

Even with Thor trying to hurry things along, by the time both brothers had their things pack and
had changed into something more appropriate the feast was already started. Luckily, not yet being
full-grown, they didn’t have to change into anything too grand. But Frigga always insisted that they
be in something clean and with no holes or stains or anything else that might have happened over
the day (a rule made mostly due to Thor himself, he admitted).

In the center of the feast hall, a huge bonfire was burning on the stone floor, and a massive boar
was roasting above it. Several other beasts were already cooked and stretched out on golden
platters to be cut into. Long tables were filled with food and drink, and all the members of the court
were sitting around talking loudly and eating. In either corner by the entrance to the room were
musicians playing enthusiastically even though they weren’t being listened to very closely.

Thor and Loki made their way through the room, dodging servants carrying even more platters
filled to the brim with meats, potatoes, vegetables (some of which were stuffed or mixed with more
meat), thick stews, dark loaves of bread, and tankards of beer. Though the path through the party
wasn’t entirely straight, the two brothers managed to get to the high table that the rest of their
family was sitting at without too much incident. Odin was seated in the middle of the table in a
large high-backed chair that had every inch of its surface carved. He was leaning far to one side
with his cup in his hand as he whispered to Tyr. Almost absently, Odin lifted one bit of meat with
his free hand up above his head. Huginn (or Muninn, Thor couldn’t tell them apart) leaned down
from where he was perched on the back of Odin’s chair to snatch the bit of flesh. The other
squawked in protest and flapped so that the King of Asgard lifted another for it in only a moment.

“There you boys are,” Frigga greeted with a smile. She was sitting at Odin’s other side and beside
her was Hodr and beside him Baldr. Both twins seemed to be in the middle of a rather heated
debate about something. “I was beginning to worry about you,” Frigga added before glancing to
Odin. “Odin, dear, don’t feed them at the table!”

“Hmm? Oh, of course, dearest,” Odin replied although Thor knew it was only a matter of time
before another bit of meat disappeared into a pair of sharp beaks. Odin had a habit of not eating his
own food at feasts due to how distracted he’d be, so he fed his familiars instead.

“Well, you boys better have a seat and eat something before Huginn and Muninn eat it all,” Frigga
said with a sigh.

Thor grinned widely and dragged Loki around the long table to their seats on the other side of Tyr.
“I don’t know why she bothers trying,” Loki said as he took his seat beside Thor.

“Habit?” Thor suggested as he didn’t even bother sitting before loading his plate with meat and
potatoes. And after Frigga’s warning voice, Thor put a few vegetables on his plate as well. Loki
snickered a little as Thor finally sat down with his plate heaped with food. “Oh hush, you’ll have to
eat them too.”

“I know, I still like seeing you cringe though,” Loki said with his wide grin still in place.

Just then, Thor felt hot breath on his hand. He looked down and saw the panting face of a wolf.
Judging by how dark brown the fur of the face was with just a little grey around the base of the
nose and along the mouth and the almost eerily light amber eyes, Thor knew it was Geri. He just
stared down at the wolf looking up at him. “You’re not getting it,” Thor said abruptly.

Loki chuckled some. “Poor, Geri,” he said as he lowered a hand to rub the frosty grey ears of Freki
who was chopping on a piece of something and beating the floor with his tail. Geri, upon seeing this, abandoned Thor’s lap in favor of Loki. Thor sighed and shook his head. Though he wasn’t too surprised, the wolves had always preferred Loki over him. Loki laughed a little at the other wolf now begging him for scraps and gave Geri a piece of roasted boar.

“Loki,” Frigga warned leaning forward to look down at them. “Don’t feed them scraps either.”

“Yes, Mother,” Loki said even as he slipped another bit of meat down beneath the table.

Thor snorted and reached for his tankard. “You are so bad,” he muttered.

“I am perfect,” Loki replied haughtily. “Isn’t that what you’ve been telling me a lot lately?” Thor elbowed his brother in the side. Loki grunted and then kicked Thor under the table.

“Boys,” Frigga said with some exasperation. “No fighting.”

“Yes, Mother,” both Thor and Loki said automatically.

After quite a while, Thor finally pushed his plate to the side having eaten his fill. Loki had, as usual, finished much earlier and was palming off more scraps to Geri and Freki who were so close Thor couldn’t even see Loki’s legs. The eating around the hall wasn’t fully winding down yet, though. Platters of food were still coming out to all the tables although more and more of the servants were carrying trays full of mugs. The musicians were getting more attention now that people were less hungry. Some were even getting up to start dancing although they didn’t all bother going to the space cleared out to one side for that purpose.

Thor was reaching for the fresh tankard that had just been put in front of him by one of the servants when something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He paused and nudged Loki.

“What’s going on there, do you think?”

Loki looked up from where he was ruffling Geri’s fur to where Thor was nodding. By one of the balconies quite a few ambassadors sons had gathered into a clump. “Don’t know… let’s go see,” Loki said as he got up. Thor got up as well and together they made their way towards the group. Geri and Freki pranced along with them, still looking for attention from Loki.

When they quickly spotted the source of all the commotion. Sif was looking particularly enraged as she stood facing Lorelei. The redhead had a haughty expression on her face and tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Well, it is true after all,” she was saying.

“I will knock your teeth from your skull, Lorelei!” Sif snapped and was just barely stopped from lunging by Dagr who caught her under the arms. “Let me go, Dagr!” she demanded as she struggled.

“Not a chance,” Dagr grunted as he fought to keep hold of his sister.

Lorelei grinned and put her hands on her hips. “Now that’s hardly lady-like, Sif,” she taunted.

“What’s going on here?” Thor asked as he pushed his way forward.

Everything went surprisingly quiet in the group and Lorelei’s grin faded almost instantly. “Why… nothing,” Amora said as she stepped forward from the other side of the group. “Just a slight… disagreement, Thor. That’s all.”

Loki hummed loudly as he looked between Lorelei and Sif. “Slight disagreement about what, exactly?” he asked neutrally.
Lorelei and Amora exchanged a wary glance but before they could come up with something Sif managed to break free of Dagr’s grip. Nobody could quite grab her before she slammed into Lorelei and both hit the ground. There was the sound of a fist hitting flesh and Thor hurried to pull Sif off the now screaming Lorelei. After a slight struggle, Thor managed to get Sif up and pushed away towards Dagr. Amora quickly pulled Lorelei up from the ground. “You dirty little cow!” Lorelei nearly screeched. “How dare you!”

“Calm down, Lorelei!” Loki snapped. “Dagr, hold her!” he added when Sif tried to go after the redhead again. Thor managed to catch her that time and placed himself between the two.

“What is going on over here?”

The sound of Odin’s very unhappy voice had everything stopping. Only when Thor looked over did he realize that the wolves must have gone to get him because they were now standing behind the King of Asgard staring down the kids like they were waiting for one to run. When nobody answered Odin narrowed his eye. “Well? What is going on? Thor? Loki?”

There was another awkward moment. “Sif and Lorelei were having a… disagreement of some sort,” Loki finally answered.

“About?” Odin asked.

“We… hadn’t gotten that far,” Thor admitted.


“She hit me!” Lorelei said pointing to Sif accusingly.

“And why did she do that?”

There was another long silence. “I was just telling the truth,” Lorelei said.

“And what truth is that?” Odin asked, his patience visibly beginning to wear dangerously thin at the lack of information he was getting.

“She said I was a troll pretending to be a girl!” Sif spat.

“It is true! All your talk of fighting and swords! You’re a brute!” Lorelei snapped back.

“Enough!” Odin ordered. “Lorelei, I will mention this to your father next I see him. Sif, you shouldn’t hit those that insult you. We have other methods,” he said. He studied Sif thoughtfully for a moment. “You are Dellingr’s daughter aren’t you?”

Sif nodded a little. “Yes, Allfather…”

“And yet you are not in any Seidr classes…”

“I’m… not very talented with Seidr, Allfather,” Sif muttered.

Odin hummed thoughtfully. “You would rather a sword?” Sif shifted uneasily but then nodded. “It wouldn’t be easy for you. There are no special exceptions, no different classes, for girls.”

“I know that. But you can’t just get better at Seidr if you don’t have much,” Sif pointed out.

The King of Asgard grunted slightly. “Then I’ll tell Tyr to expect you tomorrow. The rest of you get back to the feast. This was supposed to be a celebration,” he said. “Thor, Loki, come along.”
With no small amount of surprise, Thor and Loki hurried after their father as he went back to the high table.

“Father, are you really putting Sif in warrior training?” Loki asked.

“Yes, Loki. If she feels that strongly about it that she’s attacking others over insults then I see no reason not to,” Odin said. Though Thor was a little shocked at the turn the night had taken, he wasn’t quite as surprised as Loki was by Sif being put in warrior training. Sif had managed to get into their class before but it hadn’t been Odin that put her there. In Thor’s other life, she’d managed to get Tyr on her side and he’d recommended it. A recommendation from Tyr was one of the few sure fire ways to get Odin to put you in the elite training classes at the palace.

Loki looked over at Thor, who just shrugged. He knew better than to fight the inevitable and that Sif would grow into one of their best warriors. “I guess we’ll find out when we get back.” Thor said.

Loki made a face. “All the more reason to not want to go… this sounds as if it will prove to be amusing…”

Thor shrugged, “I guess we’ll just have to hope we get back before everything exciting ends.”

Chapter End Notes

The Palace of Asgard- It is rather difficult to combine ancient Norse architecture with the few images of the palace that we get from the movies along with the grandeur of an Imperial Palace. It is the ‘Golden Realm’ among other names so the temptation to have everything gold is definitely there but it also can't look like the Palace of Versailles because they aren't French. So part of the way I tried to settle this was by bringing in more wooden details more like what the ancient Norse would have employed along with materials that would have had to be imported from the other realms for the Imperialism flavor. But then I still have to update it all because while the images of the palace are awesome looking they are a bit more Wizard of Oz than Viking Longhouse. I hope I'm making a clear enough image of the places I'm describing because while I like drawing I don't have much practice with drawing architecture.

Bjarke- Bjarke is an OC... sort of. He is the grandson of Arngrim, who since he has twelve sons I assume he has a few grandchildren in there. But Eddic poetry didn't go beyond how many sons he has so that's why I had to come up with one for him. That is also why Bjarke is so gungho about the berserkers. Anrgrim was one, if you'll remember, and was quite a famous one at that.

Loki's Confidence- Loki's normally a pretty self confident sort but that has been very soundly shaken. Don't worry, he'll find that snarky self-assurity soon enough.

Banthum Syndrome- That sort of technical sounding writing is hard to write but I did want it to be obvious it was from essentially a text book. But I did want to give what Loki is a name other than 'runt' because I've already sort of established that as a slur. Basically the idea with Banthum Syndrome is that it's the Jotunn form of Dwarfism. The problem being that of course Dwarves are a real thing in this universe so the
Jotunn wouldn't use that as a word for a disability/disorder. So, Loki would be, in our terms, a giant suffering from Dwarfism as ironic as that sounds. I based it primarily on pituitary Dwarfism caused by hormone problems, which leads to proportionate Dwarfism. *Is not medical expert so pardon any errors in understanding.* The idea that these Jotunn really would have trouble surviving was important to me to get across because that will come into play later. Whether it is true or not doesn't matter so much as the fact that it's accepted as truth by the Jotunn community.

**Rodgrød** - It's a pudding made of whole grains and fruit. According to one source I found vikings made it and its still being made today. The old lady that Thor claims is better at making it than Ilmr is just a random name I pulled from a list. Nobody important.

**Odin's Eating Habits** - Odin is said to not need to eat and survive solely on mead. In a few stories that claim is made, and in the story of Freyr and Gerdr, Odin is sitting there drinking while giving his pets all his food, much like how I have him here. He does eat in this story though because it would be a little much to say he didn't, I think.

**Geri and Freki** - Odin's pair of wolves. There are quite a few wolves in Norse Myth from these two to the giant wolf Fenrir (which we saw in the first chapter) and Garm, Hel's hound and the one slated to kill Tyr during Ragnarök. I thought briefly of having Geri and Freki be related to Fenrir somehow but then decided not to do so for timeline purposes.

**Sif** - Sif is one of the only female Asgardians not to practice any Seidr. I decided this might be just because she didn't have much Seidr to use hence her desire to fight with a sword is entirely understandable. Here we see her long standing rivalry/hatred of Lorelei beginning to blossom, although it didn't go quite how Lorelei was expecting.

**Side Note**
I'm currently listening to the book Norse Mythology (Unabridged) By Neil Gaiman and it is amazing. It's not even that long but it covers a lot of the main myths in a sort of timeline that really does make sense and includes little details that might otherwise get lost if you're unfamiliar with how Eddic Poetry works. I highly recommend checking it out if you'd like a good beginning dip into the actual myths. Or even if you just like mythology in general or fantasy for that matter.
Travelling

Chapter Summary

Thor and Loki go on a ship for the first time to travel to Vanaheim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hringhorni was perhaps the biggest ship that Thor had ever been on. In order to travel through the void between realms and space itself, any ship would have to be large, but Hringhorni was even more so. Baldr’s ship was half a mile long from bow to stern and all along the golden hull were intricate carvings of dragons and sea serpents. Hringhorni could carry ten thousand Aesir easily and was one of the fastest ships in the entire fleet of Asgard even if it was rarely near the Golden Realm. Though the ship could get into Asgard’s port, it usually wasn’t brought that close due to the amount of delicate handling that was required to not bash into anything especially smaller ships which weren’t easily seen while on Hringhorni’s decks.

Though the magnificent ship Hringhorni was long, it did not have very many levels, only five, in fact. The lowest of these decks was where all the propulsion came from, and the very first thing that Thor and Loki were told when they boarded was that they were expressly forbidden to enter there. Loki seemed less than pleased when he was given that rule, but didn’t outright argue about it. Perhaps he knew that the rule wasn’t going to be changed even though he didn’t like being told where he couldn’t go.

Getting all the passengers and luggage onto Hringhorni took several trips, and as everything was getting brought aboard, Thor and Loki explored the decks. Within the primary deck of the ship, there was a sunken section. The lower portion of the floor held a huge table straight down the middle and through some skills Thor couldn’t fathom it seemed as if the table was a single piece that had been pulled up from the deck itself. Long benches were equally melded into the floor on either side of the table. Little else was on the primary level but the table and benches, so the brothers headed down below.

The first level down was when the chambers for passengers began. There was a hall circling the deck and one going straight down the center with some of the grandest rooms ever found on a ship placed between. The largest rooms were on the first deck below the primary and below that the rooms became smaller with multiple beds in each. The lower chambers were meant for transporting soldiers or servants.

The next level down had rooms only on the outside ring of the deck and in the middle was a series of public rooms. Thor noted that there was another room with a long table within it. Large golden shields were hanging off the walls between magnificently woven tapestries.

Before the pair could explore further, Baldr came to find them. “Alright, you two. We’re ready to leave. Father wants to speak to you both before we go,” he said gesturing for them to head back up the stairs. “What were you two doing down here anyway? Your rooms are on the first deck.”

“We were just exploring,” Loki said. “We’ve never been on your ship before, brother. It’s huge. What do you even use it for?”
“To show off mostly,” Baldr replied with a smile and a wink. “It was first made for grandfather’s conquests. As wonderful as the Bifrost is, it’s very risky to transport scores of people through it. All the forces arrive in the same place, and if something goes wrong, the whole of our army would be trapped. Not only that but keeping the Bifrost open long enough for a large group of people to use it could very easily cause damage that Grandfather Bor wouldn’t want. So he commissioned Hringhorni. It’s quite impressive to see my ship arrive on a horizon filled with Asgardian warriors. But since we’re at peace with everyone there’s no reason to use it to transport troops.”

“How long does it take to travel this way?” Thor asked. Thor had never actually taken Hringhorni before. In his first life, by the time Odin had allowed his sons to visit Vanaheim they had used Bifrost and not Baldr’s ship.

Baldr hummed in thought. “Well, usually it takes two days for us to navigate Ginnungagap and arrive in Vanaheim,” Baldr said. “But it’s hard to travel through nothing at all and not lose your way. Should we stray, it might take longer. Though we don’t usually. My navigator has travelled this path many times.”

On the primary deck, Odin was standing there beside Frigga with his spear in his hand. Whatever the royal couple was discussing, they went silent as their three sons approached. “Father,” Thor greeted. “You wanted to speak with us?”

“Yes,” Odin agreed as he turned fully to face his sons. “I know that you’re worried about this trip, but you shouldn’t be. Vanaheim is a peaceful place, and I’m sure you will both find something to do to entertain yourselves. I hope you will not have to be away from Asgard too long.”

“As do we, Father,” Thor said. “We’ll wait for word that we can come back home.”

Odin reached out and put one hand on both Thor and Loki’s shoulders. “I will come up with a way to stop these raiders soon. Until then, try to enjoy yourselves,” he said with a particularly stern look at Loki who was still looking incredibly unhappy.

“Yes, Father.”

“Listen to you Mother. And your Brothers.”

“Yes, Father,” Thor and Loki answered automatically, barely even registering what they were saying they would do.

Odin grunted. “I’m sure you will. Try not to cause trouble.”

Again, they answered automatically without actually listening to his words, “Yes, Father.”

Odin looked unimpressed, and Frigga tried to hide her smile. “Alright, Odin. It isn’t as if they are going off without anyone to watch them,” she said in amusement. “They will be fine and while we’re gone do try not to miss us too much.”

The King of Asgard grunted. “I’ll enjoy the quiet,” he declared.

“Of course you will,” Frigga agreed neutrally before leaning over and kissing Odin’s cheek. “I will be back in a few months. Hopefully, by then, you’ll have a plan to enact to protect our lands.”

“I’m sure I will,” Odin agreed. “Do be careful, dearest.”

“We will be fine, you Old Bear,” Frigga said. Odin didn’t look terribly thrilled but after a little more prodding from his wife, finally left the deck to return to Asgard’s docks. Once the last of the
skiffs that had loaded Hringhorni were fully clear, the massive warship of Baldr began to move.

Loki and Thor moved to the railing of the ship and looked out as the ship slid silently through the endless black of space. At first, Thor was quite disappointed, but as Asgard fell away, he realized something odd was happening before his eyes. The stars seemed to dance and swirl and, as Hringhorni sped up, streams of starlight shimmering in a rainbow of colors, not unlike Bifrost, flowed out from beneath the ship’s hull. The stars continued to swirl, and massive galaxies entirely unfamiliar to Thor slipped past as if they were clouds.

Tangled nets of stardust and light in every conceivable color in fantastically elaborate shapes seemed to morph as they sailed past. Loki leaned further out and stared wide-eyed at the galaxies that neither prince had ever imagined before. “Amazing…” Loki breathed. “Have you ever imagined?”

Thor shook his head. “No. Never.” Thor doubted that he could ever have imagined such an amazing sight. As he continued to stare, a massive comet blazed past a yellow nebula that looked like mountains and was radiating green streaks of stardust. The bright stars shone like hundred colored gems around the nebula.

The two princes continued to stare in awe until they reached a massive hole in space. Stars, light, dust and other particles swirled into the hole, which was glowing a blinding white. A radiant pillar was exuding from the middle of the hole like a spear going through an orb. “What is that?” Thor asked, inexplicably uneasy at the sight of the swirling shape.

Hringhorni was heading dead for the white hole in space. “I’m not sure.” Loki said with a frown.

“That is how we will leave the realm of Asgard and enter Ginnungagap,” Baldr supplied. “From the void, we can then find a large enough portal for Hringhorni to go through so that we can reach Vanahem.”

“We are going into the Void?” Thor asked, more than a little alarmed.

“Going through it,” Baldr said. “But that is the same thing that the Bifrost does. Only the Bifrost does it faster than even Hringhorni can. I’m afraid that there isn’t much to see in the void, but there is little else for it. Part of the reason there aren’t many windows.”

Loki shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Is it entirely safe to take Hringhorni into that? I mean… it’s moving very fast…”

“We go through it all the time,” Baldr assured him. “But… we should go down below. The entrance and exit are always a bit rough. We’ll want to be inside for it.” He put a hand on both of his brothers’ shoulders and guided them down below.

“I didn’t think we were going to be going through the void,” Thor said. He didn’t know what he had been expecting but not the void. He didn’t really want to see what the void was like. Passing through it in a blaze of rainbow light was one thing… sailing through it for two days was a very different prospect.

“Don’t worry. It’s perfectly safe. There are dozens of entrances and exits to the void that we know of. It’s rather impossible to be stuck there forever if you have some form of propulsion,” Baldr explained.

Thor hummed and somehow, through pure will, kept his eyes on the ground instead of glancing over at Loki. Baldr took them to the rooms that their things had been put in. “You two should stay
in here until dinner. Things are going to get a bit hectic around here until we manage to get situated in the void.”

The two cabins were larger than Thor had been expecting. The bed in his room wasn’t as big as the one he had in the palace but considering they were on a ship it was impressively sized indeed. An entire corner of the room was dedicated to a wash area that was hidden behind a partition wall. There was a window in the cabin, but a heavy curtain made of thick tapestry fabric was pulled over it. Against one wall was a large bookcase and a pair of armchairs. The wall where the door was also kept a huge dresser that Thor couldn’t imagine actually needing to use. What trip would take so much time it would warrant unpacking their luggage into a dresser? You would just have to pack it all up again and to Thor that was not worth such effort. He’d have to be stuck on the ship for months to warrant the need for a dresser.

A door that Thor hadn’t noticed at first opened and Loki poked his head in. “Ah, it’s a joined room.”

“Joined?” Thor echoed as he walked over. “That seems odd.”

Loki shrugged. “Perhaps at one time this was all one suite, and they broke it into two bedrooms,” he suggested. “Either way. It’s handy. I did want to talk to you.”

“What about?”

Loki came entirely into Thor’s room. “I wanted to apologize.”

Thor blinked several times in confusion. “Apologize for what, brother?”

“For dragging you along with me. I know you’d probably be more happy back in Asgard, and Mother and Father are making you come with me,” Loki said as he leaned back against the bookcase with faux nonchalance.

“I’m not being dragged along anywhere,” Thor denied. “I might not have picked Vanaheim myself, but there are worse places… besides, I’d rather be with you no matter where we are.”

Loki’s head tilted to the side. “You know… a few years ago I could have sworn you were beginning to forget all about me. You kept going off with Fandral and the others and half the time you never even bothered to ask if I wanted to go too… I’m glad I was wrong.”

Thor couldn’t quite find it in him to not look ashamed. “I… I might have been a bit… but when I realized you weren’t there I missed you,” he said. “It won’t happen again, Loki,” he added with fierce certainty.

There was a long silence between the brothers that neither made any real effort to fill. Loki seemed to be thinking, and Thor wasn’t sure what else to say. He felt awkward and didn’t want to somehow stick his giant foot in his even larger mouth like he was prone to doing. There was a reason he’d always allowed Loki to do most of the talking whenever they were in trouble. Loki always knew what to say. Thor wished he had such a gift.

A sudden knock on the door had both Odinsons looking over. “Thor, midday meal will be served shortly. Come along,” their mother called.

“Yes, Mother!”

The room that Thor and Loki had discovered when they first boarded turned out to be a private dining chamber. The crew ate on top at the massive sunken table. The food wasn’t exactly like
what Thor would have expected. He had been prepared for less elaborate dishes and smaller portions, but that didn’t seem to be the case. The Thunderer wasn’t sure if the meal the sailors were getting was the same, but the one he and his family was served was every bit as fine as what he’d expect in the palace. Perhaps with a bit more emphasis on pickled and dried foods but still with a wide variety of fresh dishes as well.

After their meal, Thor and Loki went back to their exploring. Well, as much as they could with the engine deck magically sealed by their mother. She didn’t seem to trust them to not wander into it. Loki made a show of looking very hurt by the realization, but Thor didn’t take him seriously.

Unfortunately for Loki, who always loved getting into things he shouldn’t, there wasn’t much of any interest to explore on the ship. Mostly it was arranged to carry things. Either people or supplies. Thor remembered from his first life a news story about a ‘cruise ship’ having beached itself somewhere. He’d been baffled and asked his friends about it. He still wasn’t sure he understood the concept of paying lots of money to sail in a ship that was so laden down with things it didn’t really need just so that one could ‘relax.’ He’d never needed pools or ‘casinos’ to enjoy himself or relax.

Still, exploring every corner of the ship’s many store rooms kept them occupied for the majority of the day. Once they’d sufficiently gone through everything to explore, Thor could see that Loki was getting bored. A bored Loki was never a good thing. He tried to intervene but somehow found himself going along with Loki to play a joke on Baldr. Thor truly hoped that in the morning they wouldn’t be thrown overboard when their brother discovered that all of his soaps gave his body a truly annoying sparkle.

Thor supposed there was no point in worry about it then, however, and tried just pretend as if he knew nothing about it. He also made a mental note to check his own soaps on his foot or somewhere first before daring to use them. Thor didn’t put it past Loki to have tampered with more than just Baldr’s bathing supplies. Thor pulled his covers up higher over his side and closed his eyes, only vaguely registering the fact that there was still light coming out from under Loki’s door.

The air was freezing cold; so much so that Thor could see his own breath. The fact that there was no light and so Thor shouldn't be able to see anything at all didn't occur to the Thunder God. He shivered causing little flecks of ice to break away from his skin. He stared in a strange fascination as the bits of frost slowly floated away into the lightless space. The specks of white moved as if caught in gooey black tree sap. Thor looked around him, but, aside from the ice off of his own body, he could not see anything. He wasn't even sure what he was standing on now that he thought about it. There was no pressure under his feet as if he was on something solid and yet he didn't feel as if he were floating either.

Some of the frost pirouetting through space stopped dead and drew Thor's eye. As he watched, all the rest of the frozen flakes were drawn towards the same area and stopped near each other. More ice than Thor had thought had been floating around him began to cluster before his eyes. Speckled spots of frost grew into larger blotches of sparkling white.

Suddenly, Thor realized shapes were forming from where the ice was clustering. No sooner had he figured that than the last of the frost collided with the shape and Thor was staring at his brother's pale face. "Loki..."

Loki stared silently, and Thor felt uneasy at the anger and hate in his brother's green eyes. This wasn't his Loki. This was the other Loki. The one that was full of hate and bitterness. "Why look so surprised, Thor? Did you think yourself rid of me?" Loki’s impassive face twisted into an ugly sneer. "It will take more than dropping me into a void to end me, Thor!"
"I did not drop you," Thor denied. "You let go."

Loki's mouth curved into a wicked smile that seemed to curl his whole face unnaturally. Thor saw streaks of red along his teeth, and slowly blood began to drip down Loki's mouth and chin. "Did I now? How can you be so sure when we both know Odin is not above using his magic to erase his problems?"

"Because I was there, Loki," Thor said as his fist clenched around nothing. "You didn't want to be saved... you've never wanted to be saved. No matter how I tried. And I did try. I did everything I could think of to save you..."

"And yet here you are... doing it all over again," Loki said in a mockingly sweet tone. "Just how much punishment do you want from me, Thor? I can dish out a plenty... just ask. It will save us so much time. Just tell me which of your friends you want me to kill in front of you this time. The righteous Captain perhaps? Oh no... the redheaded little quim. I am still rather annoyed at her..."

Thor's teeth ground together as he tried to suppress his rage. "You can't hurt them, Loki. They are mortals and have not been born yet," Thor pointed out although it was partially to remind himself of that. The threat to Lady Natasha and Rogers-son triggered every protective instinct that Thor had. His friends were dear to him. More so because they were so fragile and mortal.

Loki's smile somehow, impossibly, grew even more. "But they will be," he said, as his eyes started to sink into his face. "And when they are, I will rip them limb from limb and feed them to my sons. Fenrir is always so hungry... I swear he could eat the whole sky..."

A shiver went down Thor's spine but somehow managed to remain mostly stony faced. "You will not hurt my friends, Loki. This time your insanity will not take root. I swear it," he said firmly.

Loki's pale face started to turn translucent, and Thor could see the thick blue veins under his skin. Blood still dripped, and the Trickster's face almost began to sag as if hanging off his bones. "You seek the impossible, Thor," Loki said before pulling a section of darkness against him. Thor watched in fixated horror as Loki's bony white fingers dug into the void as if it were solid. Blood from Loki's face dropped and landed on something solid. Color slowly seeped out from that drop. Another droplet hit near the first and began to trail down a pale, smooth curve. Thor's eyes widened as the image of a much younger Loki suddenly made sense to him. The other Loki was gripping the younger version of himself to him tightly as the blood curled along young Loki's cheek. His young green eyes were wide, and pleading as another drop of blood hit his face from his elder self. "... Thor."

The Thunderer felt his skin break under his nails he was clenching his fist so tightly. "Let him go, Loki!"

The older Loki's bloody smile didn't even falter slightly. "I can't let him go... no more than you can let him go. Face the truth, Thor. We are the same. No matter what you do... I am the future. My children and I will destroy your precious Midgard and Asgard. And all the Nine. Nothing but ash will be left in our wake."

"That's not true!"

"It is. You are just blinded by your misguided optimism... You cannot keep me from existing, Thor. I already do."

The darkness began to thicken and pull as if they were suddenly sinking into a lake of pitch. The
two Loki's didn't seem to be affected even as Thor struggled to not be dragged away. As the two versions of his brother grew further away, Thor struggled even more. "Loki!"

Thor woke with a gasp he very nearly choked on. After a minute where he tried to calm his breathing, he became aware that someone was sitting on the side of his bed. "Are you still going to try and tell me it's nothing?" Loki asked softly.

"Loki..."

"You kept screaming for me..." Loki said, his green eyes shining in the dim light coming through the mostly closed door that led to Loki's room. Thor hated how worried Loki seemed to be. "Please, Thor... just tell me what these dreams about me are at least."

Thor pushed himself more upright and pushed his sweat damp hair from his face. "It's just I know that it isn't real... and I don't want to upset you over things that aren't real."

Loki tilted his head to the side. "Thor... what is upsetting me is how you won't tell me what keeps making you scream for me in your sleep," he said as he shifted and laid down beside Thor. Thor was too tired to protest being pulled back down or how Loki made himself comfortable over at least half the bed. "Tell me, Thor."

"You can't get upset..." Thor warned, looking over.

Loki smiled. "I promise I won't get upset, Thor," he said before adjusting his head so that his chin was resting on Thor's shoulder. "So, spit it out."

Thor sighed but couldn't quite help the smile, which unfortunately faded once he thought of the disturbing dream he had just woken from. "... you hate me."

"I hate you?" Loki echoed, looking confused.

Thor nodded. "Yes, you hate me and are yelling at me for things that I did."

"... like what things?"

"I'm not sure," Thor murmured. Well, that wasn't true, but he couldn't tell Loki the truth. If he told Loki the truth, then Thor was sure that all his work would be undone. "It doesn't really make sense, but I know that you're blaming me for something terrible that happened, and now you hate me. You got all bloody... like a corpse, and then I'm being pulled away, and that's when I woke up..."

Loki was silent for several minutes. "You know I don't though, right?" he ventured.

Thor nodded. "Yes, I know. And even if you did hate me I don't think you'd tell me like that," he said, trying hard to lighten the mood.

"No, probably not," Loki agreed with a half smile. "But I don't, you know. I love you more than anything."

"I thought I annoyed you," Thor replied, mostly teasing.

"Well, you do that too," Loki said. "But I suppose I can overlook that for a while."

There were a few minutes of silence between them. "... I'm sorry," Thor said, unable to hold back from the urge to say it any longer.

"Thor, you haven't done anything to be sorry for," Loki pointed out.
"I still feel like I should say it," Thor replied. "You were so angry, Loki... If I ever upset you like that... know I would never do so intentionally."

Loki tilted his head to the side again. "Thor... you're worrying over nothing. I can't imagine being that angry at you. You're my brother." Thor grabbed Loki in a tight hug, ignoring the slight squawk of protest from the young trickster. "Thor! Don't squeeze me to death!"

Thor loosened his grip a little but kept his arms wrapped around Loki's middle. "Sorry."

Loki sighed. "Stop apologizing, Thor," he said. Thor buried his face in Loki's shirt to keep himself from saying sorry yet again. Especially since he was apologizing for something that hadn't even technically happened. Thor abruptly stopped when he realized Loki wasn't currently male.

Thor pulled back sharply. "Sorry."

"I told you to stop that," Loki said, looking annoyed and blushing faintly. "We're both clothed. Just try and get back to sleep."

Another apology almost left Thor's mouth before he caught himself. Bringing more attention to Loki's body wasn't going to help anything. Loki was doing better than Thor would have thought. Certainly doing much better than how Thor would be if their positions were reversed. So, Thor forced himself to swallow his protests and just settled in bed. "... does this happen every night?"

Loki didn't seem to want to answer, but after several minutes he sighed, "No. But most of them..." Loki stared up at the ceiling of Thor's cabin. "Mother says I probably go back and forth all night long... I'm glad I'm asleep for most of it... Although sometimes it gives me weird dreams."

"What kind of weird dreams?"

Loki shook his head. "They don't make any sense. I keep seeing these children that... aren't children. I don't know how to explain it. I don't even know how I know that they *are* children." Thor bit his tongue and fought the urge to panic. Just because Loki was dreaming about 'children that aren't children' didn't mean anything. Besides, Thor wasn't going to give Loki or his children reason to hate Asgard this time. "Makes about as much sense as you having dreams about me being upset with you," he added with a slight grin.

"I guess we should try and get some sleep," Thor said as he shifted to give Loki more room. Loki took the space instantly like the bed hog he was. "Greedy," he muttered.

"If you want something, take it," Loki answered as he closed his eyes.

Thor let his own eyes close and tried to make himself relax. He was still exhausted, and that wouldn't be changing if he didn't get any sleep. Loki shifted closer and curled up against his brother. The silence and dark of the room slowly began to help Thor relax back towards sleep. He was only half awake when Loki murmured something else. "Mm?" Thor asked, not having caught whatever it was.

"It's too quiet here..." Loki murmured slightly louder than before. "I don't like it. It shouldn't ever be this quiet. It's not natural."

"It's night... it's always quiet at night," Thor answered.

Loki shook his head. "Not like this, Thor. There's no noise at all outside. Usually, you can hear insects or bats, or sounds from the city, or even owls and other night animals. There's nothing like that here. It's just... nothing." Loki sounded profoundly disturbed. "I don't think I could stand this..."
for many nights. I'm glad we will only spend one in this place."

"I suppose you're right," Thor muttered. "I never really thought about it, but there is a lot more noise in Asgard." Now that Loki had mentioned the unnatural silence around them, Thor found it much harder to relax. He was right that it was eerie and disturbing for there to be so little noise. "Great, now I'm not going to be able to sleep."

"Sorry, brother," Loki said with a small chuckle.

"Yeah, you sound it," Thor grumbled.

"Think of it this way... now you can stay up with me. Your favorite pass time."

Thor grumbled some more. "So you were already awake when I was having my nightmare?" he asked.

"Partially," Loki answered. "I was trying to fall asleep again by reciting runes..."

"Yeah, that'll put you to sleep."

Loki snorted in amusement. "Well, I figured that if it worked so well for you, it was worth a shot."

"You are so cruel to your big brother."

"My sincerest apologies."

"I'm sure."

Despite what Loki said, the Princes of Asgard did eventually get to sleep and slept long into the next day. Not even when their door was knocked on by an irate and sparkling Baldr did they wake up. But they could not sleep forever, no matter how tired they were. Eventually, their stomachs got them up around midday.

When they finally got changed and made their way to the dining room, the only one there was Hodr drinking from a mug. "There you two are... Baldr has been complaining all day. What did you do to him? He wouldn’t say…"

"I enchanted his soap," Loki said as he and Thor sat down at the table still laden with food. "... It’ll make him sparkle for a day then it’ll wear off. Really it’s nothing that terrible."

Hodr chuckled into his tankard. "And he has volunteered to put up with you in his home while you’re in Vanaheim... I think he forgot your pension for practical jokes…"

"It’s harmless," Loki replied. "And there’s nothing to do on this ship... what else do you expect me to do?"

"I suppose it would be too much to ask you to just stay in your room and keep yourself entertained," Hodr mused.

Loki gave his older brother a sour look, which was utterly wasted on the blind God. "None of the books in my room are interesting," he said. "And my books are all packed away somewhere."

"Ah, well, we won’t be on the ship too much longer," Hodr said. "We should be arriving in Vanaheim just after dinner."

Thor put down the piece of bread he’d been devouring. "I thought it would be later than that."
Hodr smiled and waved a hand to the side. “Baldr is proud of this ship for good reason,” he said. “Plus he is eager to get home to Nanna. You will get sick of him fawning over her soon enough, I promise you that.”

“What is Sister Nanna like?” Loki asked curiously.

“Oh, beautiful I imagine… most people say so. And very nice,” Hodr answered. “She’s always been very polite to everyone that I know of and rather quiet. I think you’ll like her. Although she’s spending most of her time looking after Forseti right now so we might not see too much of her.”

Thor hummed in thought while chewing on a piece of dried meat. “How old is Forseti?”

“Hmm… Sixty-four, I believe?” Hodr said thoughtfully. “That sounds about right anyway.”

“So… we can play with him then?”

“He’s not a toy, Thor,” Loki said. “He’s our nephew… don’t break him.”

“I’m not going to break him! I’ll be very careful,” Thor said indignantly. He was capable of being gentle. He had many mortal friends in his other life, and he hadn’t ever hurt them!

“I’m sure you will, Thor,” Hodr said before Loki could shoot back what was undoubtedly something clever and a little scathing. “But seeing how it will be quite late when we arrive in Vanheim, I doubt you will see Forseti right away. He will probably be asleep.”

“But we will see him tomorrow,” Thor pointed out.

Hodr smiled. “Yes, I imagine you will. Nanna will probably appreciate you distracting him for a few hours. He’s quite the rambunctious child. I’m sure you and he will get along quite well, Thor.”

There were a few minutes of quiet as the younger Princes focused on eating. Loki, always a quick eater, finished his plate first and turned back to Hodr. “Hodr… Do Freyr and Gerd live near Baldr?” he asked quietly.

“Hmm, Freyr and Gerd? Not really. Baldr and Nanna are outside of the city while Freyr and Gerd are on the other side, at their own estate. Why do you ask?” Hodr asked as he turned more fully and put his now empty tankard down on the table in front of him.

“Hm, Freyr and Gerd? Not really. Baldr and Nanna are outside of the city while Freyr and Gerd are on the other side, at their own estate. Why do you ask?” Hodr asked as he turned more fully and put his now empty tankard down on the table in front of him.

Loki shrugged and turned back to his empty plate. “Just curious, is all…” Hodr hummed thoughtfully but decided to not voice any of what he was thinking about. He could guess why Loki would be wondering about Freyr and Gerd but didn’t think that Loki would appreciate it being said aloud.

Thor glanced between his brothers with a bit of confusion even as he continued to eat his way through the massive pile on his plate. He was fairly sure he’d missed something. Perhaps it was because of how often such a thing happened, but Thor was usually pretty good at telling when he had missed something even if he didn’t know what that something was. “Freyr and Gerd?” He echoed.

“What about them?” As far as Thor could remember he’d never met Gerd. He’d met Freyr lots of times, of course, but not his beautiful wife. Thor’d only heard about her. He’d heard lots actually since Freyr always talked about her.

“I suppose they visit Baldr and Nanna often enough that I should at least tell you,” Hodr mused mostly to himself. “Gerd is a Jotunn, Thor.”
“A Jotunn?” Thor echoed, a bit sharper and louder than he’d intended.

Loki winced visibly, but Thor just couldn’t help his reaction. He never would have imagined the wife that Freyr called the most lovely thing to ever inhabit the nine realms to be a Jotunn. The young Thunderer couldn’t imagine a lovely Frost Giant no matter how hard he tried. They just were not a beautiful species to him, although he was trying his utmost to not see them as monsters any longer.

“Yes, Thor,” Hodr said calmly. “Though Gerd will sometimes disguise themselves to avoid staring they much prefer to not do so.”

“I… I just, didn’t expect you to say that…” Thor said as he wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand. “I promise if I see them I won’t say anything stupid or be upset,” Thor added quickly. Well, he would do his absolute best to not anyway.

“Good, Freyr doesn’t take kindly to his partner being slighted for being a Jotunn and the last thing we need is Freyr upset with the house of Odin,” Hodr said.

Thor nodded in agreement and noticed that Loki had gone incredibly silent. He gave the quiet Trickster a little nudge and was pleased when he got an annoyed glare back. “What should we do until landfall, Loki?” He asked to keep his brother’s mind off of Jotnar or whatever else had gotten him looking so sullen.

“Well, I don’t know… if we do anything else to Baldr he might really kill us,” Loki mused. “Tafl?”

“I’m sick of tafl,” Thor admitted. “Isn’t there anything else?”

“Well, if you two would like something to do…” Hodr began. Both young Princes looked over instantly. “I might have a thought or two.”

“Like what?”

Hodr got up from his seat and dropped the napkin he’d had in his lap on top of the table. “Follow me, and I’ll show you.” Now insanely curious, Thor and Loki scrambled to get up and follow after their blind brother.

They travelled back up to the first deck where the grand bedrooms were, and Hodr led them down the hall to where Frigga was staying. Thor and Loki exchanged a few suspicious looks. Usually, they had done something very wrong if they were being led to their mother, which probably shouldn’t be the case, but it was. Frigga opened the door only a moment or two after Hodr’s knock and gave them a bright smile. “Oh, there you two are. Finally woke up? Have you boys eaten?”

“Yes, Mother,” they answered automatically.

“It seems that Loki and Thor are bored,” Hodr said. “And I think it best if no more of our family is sparkling like a pixie than already are.”

Frigga laughed merrily at that. “Yes, that is probably best. Well, come in then. I have just the thing that they can help me with.”

“Yes, Mother,” they answered automatically.

“Oh, yes. The perfect thing for bored little boys looking to get into trouble,” Frigga replied. Thor wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that.
Twenty minutes later, when he was stuck in a chair with so much yarn and thread tangled around him he wasn’t sure he would ever get out, Thor was certain he didn’t like the sound of it. Of course, he wasn’t the only one ‘helping’ Loki was similarly caught in all of their mother’s weaving supplies. Loki had the added difficulty of having several bolts of fabric cradled in his arms while his hands held dark black threads between them.

“That’s right, darlings, don’t move,” Frigga said as she swept around them and rolled the balls of yarn back together. “Honestly, I knew that entry into the void was violent, but I never thought it would topple my chests over.”

“Unfortunate,” Loki grumbled to which Thor nodded in agreement.

“How many more chests of weaving supplies do you have, Mother?” Thor asked as he gratefully let Frigga take one of the many lengths of yarn he was holding from him. That only left him with about thirty others now to get rid of.

“How many more chests of weaving supplies do you have, Mother?” Thor asked as he gratefully let Frigga take one of the many lengths of yarn he was holding from him. That only left him with about thirty others now to get rid of.

“Only a couple, dear,” Frigga replied as she tucked the bright red yarn into one chest and came back over to her captive sons. “You two are being very helpful.”

The door opened, and Baldr came in. Thor suppressed the smile of seeing his brother literally sparkling. “Hello, mother. I heard you had a few helpers and had to come see for myself.” Thor’s smile fell at that, and he glared at Baldr darkly. Maybe it wasn’t so bad to sparkle like you’d gotten hit in the face by a fairy after all. At least Baldr could move around.

“Yes, they were bored, and Hodr thought they might like to help me,” Frigga said as she took a light yellow mass of yarn from Loki this time.

“Aa, of course,” Baldr said with a huge smile.

Frigga glanced over at the smug looking Baldr. “Darling, do tell your navigator to be more careful next time. It might be something more delicate than threads and fabrics that fall.”

“There’s only so much we can do, Mother,” Baldr said. “But I will let him know.”

Baldr stayed and made many sly comments until Frigga suggested that he might like to help her as well. He quickly found something else to do and left his younger brothers’ to their yarn drenched fates. Judging from the dark look on Loki’s face, Thor was willing to bet revenge was already being plotted in his clever brother’s mind. Probably for both Hodr and Baldr this time. Thor wondered what it was going to be and rather hoped it was something worse than just being made to sparkle. Being a living post for their mother was not the most entertaining things that Thor had ever done. Not by a long shot. He’d much rather they’d have played tafbl now.

Chapter End Notes

Hringhorni: Baldr’s ship from legend. Not the biggest ship in mythology but it is considered the ‘greatest’ ship. What that means, I imagined, was that it could probably hold the most troops or something like that seeing how that was what the Vikings used their ships primarily for. It was so huge that they needed a Giantess to launch it after Baldr’s death for his funeral. On it they burned Baldr, Nanna, Baldr’s horse, and Thor decided to randomly kick a dwarf named Litr into the fire as well as he was in a bad mood or something. I made Hringhorni into a new version of a Drekar ship, which
from what I read were more ornamental versions of Skeid ships, which were large warships.

**Ginnungagap** - The yawning void in Norse Mythos. Before all the realms were really made and defined there was Ginnungagap, which I’m using here as another name for that Void that poor Loki fell into. Basically it is the space between the realms, which are essentially contained within their own universes connected by Yggdrasil.

**Traveling the Realms** - There are various different ways to travel the realms in this fic. The first is of course, the Bifrost. In this fic the Bifrost has a few set points it always lands on each planet/realm and only takes so many at a time. So using it to transport troops could be a tactical mistake. The second method is ships like Hringhorni. These ships take longer but can take more troops and land pretty much anywhere they want. The third is walking Yggdrasil itself, which is not something many do at all but Loki will eventually. The ‘fourth’ is essentially the same as the third. It is how Loki took them to the Dark World in the second Thor movie, secret passages between the roots and branches of Yggdrasil that are very tricky to navigate and not really anyone uses them.

**Ages in Asgard pt.2** - I have decided that since every 50 years equals one in Asgard that it is around toddler age i.e. around two years old that the aging slows down. Because having a newborn baby for fifty years would be just ridiculous. Of course having a toddler for a century isn’t a whole lot better but what can ya do? So being 64, Forseti would be the equivalent of a human three year old.

**Loki's Dreams** - In Myth, there are a few stories dealing with dreams. The most famous in Norse myth is the one that leads directly to Baldr's death. Baldr keeps dreaming he's in danger and that leads to them making promises nothing will hurt him and that leads directly to him dying in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Here, Loki's dreams aren't so much prophecies but references to the traditional roles Loki and his children play in Ragnarok. Fenrir eating the sun for example.
When the ship finally arrived outside of Vanaheim's port, the sun was set, and the moon had risen high in the sky. Vanaheim's moon seemed larger than that of Asgard (or perhaps it was just closer) and was currently just beginning to wane. Across the night sky, there was a long streak of stars and bits of pink cosmic dust making it almost seem as if the sun hadn't set after all. The harbor of Vanaheim was an elongated crescent shape that had many lamp posts glowing in various shades of pink, purple, red, and yellow. Though Thor couldn't see details from on the deck of Hringhorni, he knew that right in the middle of the docks was where the Bifrost landed. The runes had been engraved into the grey paving stones from continued impacts over the centuries.

Beyond the harbor, the capital city of Vanaheim spread out and up. Thor didn't think he'd ever seen a building in Vanaheim that wasn't at least three stories tall. The tiered buildings almost all had green roofs although a few here and there were grey or brown colors. The city, like the buildings, was tiered upwards with the palace on the highest level. Thor could see the many-storied building clearly from any part of the capital. The palace had a more elaborate roof than most with sculptures of winged horses at the peaks and more sunset colored lanterns hanging from the eaves. At night, like it was currently, the palace glowed softly like its own version of the sun.

Vanaheim had more than a few canals and rivers cutting through the lowest level of the city, which often times came right up to the sides of the houses. Due to a long rainy season and how they were positioned in a valley, Vanaheim could be a very wet place. The canals were meant to ensure the waters were kept under control although sometimes floods were inevitable. When building the city the streets had been carefully graded to direct water into trough-like gutters, but even that wasn't enough to prevent their walkways from sometimes getting flooded in heavy rain. Side streets had the channels placed in the center to help separate the traffic, but the largest ones, including the main thoroughfare, had the gutters put on the outside with small bridges stretching across them for people to walk over. These channels dumped rainwater into canals and rivers so that the streets would hopefully keep from getting swamped. Thor had tripped many times while drunk over the center channels in the smaller streets, much to his chagrin, and so tended to stick to the main roads whenever possible, where it was less likely to happen.

After perhaps an hour of boat trips back and forth from Hringhorni, the royal family of Asgard had reached the docks and was standing right where the engraved circle of the Bifrost was. Loki, despite trying his best to still be unhappy, was looking around with an expression that Thor recognized as the one when Loki had a million questions to ask. They were not standing there waiting for very long when a group of Vanaheim warriors in their golden yellow cloaks came towards them. At the front was an elderly God with his stark white hair braided back and a circlet of silver and sapphires resting on his brow. Frigga smiled widely and stepped forward with her arms open. "Father!"
"Frigga, my dear, it is so good to see you," Fjorgynn, King of Vanaheim, greeted with a broad smile. After Frigga and her Father embraced, the elderly King turned kind grey eyes to where Thor and Loki were standing somewhat awkwardly. The youngest sons of Odin rarely interacted with their Grandfather, as he disliked travel immensely and they weren't generally allowed to travel due to their age. "Ah, and my other grandsons... last I saw you two, you were barely walking," he said with a chuckle.

"Hello, Grandfather," Loki muttered as Thor shifted and gave his own greeting. Baldr was much more jovial in his greeting and gave the King a hearty embrace. Hodr stayed back, but then he wasn't one for hugs or any large displays of affection like his twin.

"Ah, Baldr, Nanna would have come down as well, but Forseti had a nightmare and was refusing to go back to sleep," Fjorgynn told him.

"I had better go to her, then. I'm sure that I can help," Baldr said before leaning over and kissing Frigga on the cheek. "I will see you in the morning, Mother."

Frigga smiled. "Of course, dear." And with that, Baldr hurried away towards the palace. "How have you been, Father?" Frigga asked.

"Oh, well enough," he replied. "Somewhat lonely. The Palace seems even larger when I'm not visited for so long. I'm glad that Nanna and Forseti have been here with me for almost a month waiting for Baldr to return. It's been a lovely change of pace."

"I'm sure they were glad to keep you company," Frigga said hooking her arm around one of Fjorgynn's. "I do wish I could visit more often, but it's so hard to get away."

Fjorgynn patted Frigga's hand. "I know how it is, dear. You forget... I've been doing this for a while myself," he said. "Although now, Freyr takes over most of the work. He'll make a good king... hopefully soon. I'd like to retire."

Frigga laughed as they started walking. "You will have to convince Gerd to come to the capital first, and you know how that conversation will likely go." Thor and Loki exchanged a glance but were ushered along by Hodr behind them. "Besides, he cannot be the ruler of two realms. That would be far too much work even for Freyr."

Vanaheim's King sighed heavily and nodded. "Yes, I know, but one can dream." Frigga laughed again as they walked. The handful of soldiers flanked them as they made their way back through the city streets towards the palace. "Perhaps if Baldr would stop offending my council he could take Freyr's place," Fjorgynn said.

"You may have to wait a while for that, Grandfather," Hodr said.

"You could do it too, you know," Fjorgynn pointed out a little sourly.

Hodr shrugged. "I would make a poor King."

Thor paid little attention to the conversation as it started wandering to statecraft. Apparently, something very complicated with the Dwarves of Svartalfheim was going on. Although, Thor had to admit absentely that he had no idea that any Dwarves still lived on Svartalfheim. He had been all but certain both the Dwarves and the Dark Elves that lived there had been wiped out entirely. He noticed Loki studying the buildings they were walking past intently and wondered what exactly had caught his attention. "What is it?" Thor asked quietly.

"The walls..." Loki answered without looking away.
Thor blinked several times and looked closer. When they passed by a lantern, Thor realized their own images were being reflected off the wall. "They're windows," Thor said. Vanaheim liked windows, and they had developed a unique glass that turned a milky cream color for privacy at a touch. These windows were massive, in as many places as the Vanaheim people could conceivably put them, often times taking up entire walls, and most were currently set to opaque.

"I wonder how they are made," Loki mused as he continued to study the ones he walked past. A breeze made chimes somewhere jingle, and Thor looked around for the source. He didn't spot the wind chime, but he did notice a large tree in a planter nearby that had been decorated with hundreds of colorful ribbons tied to branches and even wrapped around the trunk. Thor wasn't exactly used to seeing such a sight, but he found it rather charming in a way.

After another few minutes of walking, Thor realized something that hadn't actually registered to him during his first life. There were many more trees and planters in Vanaheim city than there were in Asgard. They framed walkways and canals, and large trees created a barrier between the different levels of the city. Most planters displayed their famous Sky Lilies, but some had other sorts of native foliage including a smaller tree that flowered a soft peach color all season long and lush green bushes that were lightly veined with yellow. That wasn't to say Asgard didn't have courtyards and small gardens sprinkled throughout and even vines that got out of control on peoples houses, but the plant life wasn't nearly as prominent as it was here in Vanaheim.

Vanaheim appreciated more foliage around them than Asgard seemed to. Or perhaps it was just that their plant life looked more... colorful than the plants in the golden realm. Thor supposed that must be it.

There were three tiers to the capital city of Vanaheim with a set of stairs between them that Thor thought had to be nearing two hundred steps each. His calves were burning with the effort by the time they finally reached the top of the second set of stairs and came to the front of the palace. He thought that there were a lot of stairs in Asgard. They hadn't even reached the Vanaheim Palace yet.

The courtyard outside of the palace was very carefully manicured with several large statues on either side of the wide paved walk. The statues, which were of lions, each held some sort of glowing ball beneath their paws that lit up the path but also made them look very ominous with harsh shadows. Thor heard wind chimes again and again couldn't seem to figure out where the noise was actually coming from. He was confident he didn't imagine the sound and yet he couldn't spot a wind chime to save his life.

Fjorgynn lead them into the central hall of the palace, which was filled with carved columns and more of the lanterns that were outside. The room was not as tall as say the rooms of Asgard but it did not feel any less spacious, partially because of the many windows that were scattered about. The walls didn't seem all that sturdy either. Thor thought he might be able to rip through the walls with a sneeze they were so thin looking, but he figured that there must be something else to them he didn’t know about because otherwise a palace wouldn’t be built from them. Well, at least he didn’t think that his great-grandfather or whoever built the castle would have made it out of something flimsy. Where would be the sense in that?

Suddenly, Thor had a flash of himself trying to fly a ship out of his father’s throne room and stifled a snort of laughter. Loki looked over at him in confusion. “What’s so funny?”

Thor shook his head, “Just... Nothing really.”

Loki raised an eyebrow at that. “You get more and more strange every day. I think you might be the one adopted after all...” he muttered.
“And people call you the clever one,” he said sarcastically.

“I am the clever one,” Loki said even as several servants came to gather up their things and take them wherever it was they would be staying for the next few nights.

Frigga had already informed them that, since they so rarely got to see her father, they would be staying at the palace for a month before they would continue to Baldr and Nanna’s home outside the city. Then Frigga would visit for another month before returning home. The fact that the Allmother was able to get two months away from Asgard was impressive, but trying to get any more than that would most likely never happen. Though much of the governing of Asgard fell on the shoulders of Odin Allfather, Frigga took care of most domestic issues and couldn’t be away for too long either.

“Boys, it is late. Go with your things and get ready for bed,” Frigga said. “You got up very late today. I don’t want to hear you’ve been up until all hours tonight as well.”

Loki made a face but wasn’t about to argue outright with their mother. Thor didn’t feel remotely tired either but let himself be led out of the main chamber while Frigga began talking with their grandfather about something or another. He was certain he heard his mother mention something about a shipment of Pegasus from Olympus, which since only the Valkyrie used them, Thor found only mildly interesting. He’d never even been allowed to see the stables that the Valkyrie used for their winged mounts.

One of the servants paused to wait for them. He was a light elf as evident by his lightly golden hued skin and long pale hair held back in an intricate braid to expose his long ears. The servant led Thor and Loki through several long hallways that seemed to have no doors whatsoever. As they walked, Thor took note of the directions that the servant was giving to places such as the dining room and their mother’s room. No matter how Thor paid attention to the walls they walked past, he could not for the life of him see any doors; though, he knew they had to be passing some. Therefore it was a little confusing when the servant showing them the way paused at one spot and found a handle that had been sunken into the door to be flush. Only a few indents where one put their hand showed where the handle even was, making it very easy to miss. The door to the left was Loki’s room apparently, and Thor was just across the hall.

Thor had to admit that his room in his Grandfather's palace was impressive. The room was large, and the windows were currently turned to their opaque eggshell color. A section of the floor in the corner of the chamber was raised up by one step and upon this raised area sat a large low bed. The bed was a large circle and had a dark wooden ledge all around it that blended seamlessly into a decoratively carved headboard. Gauzy curtains hung around the bed but were currently pulled back against the wall on either side of the headboard where they were held in the crook of the tail of angry looking lion sculptures. Many tapestries and walls scrolls with thick, elaborate, borders that must have taken ages to create hung on all the walls. Thor could see that there was a second room on the same side that the bed was on, though it was hidden behind a heavily painted screen that would have been mistaken for the wall itself had the door not been slid back.

Thor glanced into the second room to see it was a bathing chamber with a large stone tub that had a spout that looked like a lion's roaring head. There was a dressing screen across most of the room, blocking what else was in the bathroom from Thor's view at the door. A short dresser against one wall had a wide assortment of bottles and containers on top, probably bathing salts and the like for him to use in the tub if he wished.

After a quick glance behind the dressing screen, Thor went back to the main bedroom. There was a large table with thick legs that ended on ball feet almost twice the size of Thor's fist. On the table
was a tray with heavy looking gilded tea pot and matching cups. In another corner of the room, was a dressing table with a large three-fold mirror propped up on it. Several containers on the dressing table were gilded just like the tea set. Thor picked up a weighty but small jar and turned it in his hands. The scene was of a shorescape with a windmill in the back and Sky Lilies wrapping around the lid. Thor wondered if this room was really meant for a woman or a girl because flowers weren’t a theme he was used to seeing anywhere but in his mother's presence.

Thor put the jar back down and made his way over to the windows. After about a dozen attempts, Thor finally found the spot that turned the windows from opaque to clear. Outside, there was a huge deck that Thor knew wrapped around the entire building, or near enough to it. The moonlight cast everything in a silvery hue and down below the lights of the city were twinkling between the tree branches. Thor hummed thoughtfully before reaching over to the controls again. Instead of turning, the window slid to the side. Thor frowned and looked more carefully. The controls were just barely visible circles on the edge of the window frame and bore no markings.

"It's the top one."

Thor turned to see Loki leaning against his doorframe. "Top button opens or closes it, and the bottom changes the color," he added as he walked over to where the young Thunderer was standing. With a quick press of his fingers, Loki had closed the door again, and another turned the window opaque. "There you are."

"Can't they just mark them?" Thor asked a little sourly. Leave it to Loki to have already figured out how the windows worked.

"I suppose they consider which button does which obvious," Loki said. The darker son of Odin turned to look around the room Thor had been given and hummed as if thinking about something.

"What?" Thor asked, as he too looked around his room. Was there something wrong with these chambers that he'd missed? He really had no idea, but Loki's thoughtful hum worried him. "What is it?"

Loki shrugged. "Just noticing that your room is reversed of mine."

Thor relaxed instantly, "Is that it?"

"Well, what did you think I'd notice?" Loki asked. "That your room has a mirror while mine is distinctly absent?"

"You don't have a mirror?" Thor echoed questioningly.

Loki sighed and went to sit on the wooden ledge around Thor's bed. "No. I can see the faint outline where it's supposed to be, but it's been taken down..."

"Why would they take away your mirror?" Thor asked in confusion. That seemed a very odd thing to do. Especially since they had left Thor with his and he barely ever used a mirror. Loki was always the one to be more concerned with his appearance than Thor was.

"I suppose Mother told them it would be a good idea..." Loki grumbled.

That statement only made Thor even more confused. "Mother told them that?"

"... she stopped replacing the ones in my room back home."
"Why would she need to replace them?"

Loki looked far to the side and not at Thor. "You know when you are angry at something, and so you throw something at it?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Thor agreed. He still had a problem with that impulse, and he'd lost a fair number of trinkets and practice weapons due to tossing them as if they were Mjolnir and therefore never being able to find them again. Remembering that what he threw would not magically be returning was incredibly hard for Thor, especially frustrated or angry.

"Well... I suppose my magic does something similar," Loki said as he held up his hands to stare at. "I just... I hate looking at myself and before I know it the glass shatters. I can't seem to control it. It is frustrating. I haven't broken anything by accident in decades, and now it just keeps happening. So much so that they don't even trust me with a mirror in the room anymore..."

The young Thunderer frowned and sat down beside Loki. "Why do you hate it so much? I mean... you refuse to look Jotunn so why does seeing your guise upset you? I don't understand..."

Loki shook his head. "I don't know..." He sighed and dropped his hands to look up at Thor. "I guess... it doesn't feel like me anymore." Thor couldn't quite help but laugh, causing Loki to glare at him. "It is hardly funny, Thor!"

"I'm sorry, Brother. Truly," Thor said though he couldn't wipe the smile fully from his face. "It's just that I never thought you, the one who can shapeshift into whatever he wants, would ever say something like that. Loki, it doesn't matter what you look like because nothing will ever change who you are. My little brother."

Loki gave Thor a sidelong look. "You know sometimes you say things that I swear should never come out of your mouth. You sound more like... like Mother sometimes," he said before letting himself lean over, and his head landed on Thor's shoulder. "... Thank you. It doesn't help me hate myself any less, though..."

"I think you're worrying about it too much," Thor said. "You get all worked up about this when it probably will never even matter."

"Spoken like someone who's never had to worry about what he looks like," Loki drawled.

Thor snorted. "More like I don't care," he said. "You're the one who always wants to look nice. And it's not like you need a mirror to make sure that happens. You just do."

Loki finally chuckled at that. "Oh, do I now?"

Thor nudged Loki in the side. "Don't go fishing for compliments."

"But I like them so much."

Thor rolled his eyes. "You're such a brat."

"Oh, but you love me anyway," Loki said with a wide grin.

"Somehow, yes."

Loki's grin widened and he leaned a bit closer. "Come on then, give us a kiss, brother." Thor pushed Loki away with just enough force to send Loki listing to the other side, but Loki's sour mood had already dissolved into laughter. Thor couldn't help but grin back. Seeing Loki brighten
again, even for a few moments, was something Thor had desperately wanted after how depressing their talks had been of late.

"Go to bed and stop bugging me, Loki. It's late," Thor said though he couldn't make it sound as firm as he would have liked. Loki just laughed but got up. "Surely you have something better to do than annoy me."

"Nothing comes to mind," Loki replied. "But I will leave you to your sleep, old man," he added as he headed back towards the door.

"I am not old!"

"You sound old," Loki shot back before hurrying out so that he would have the last word. Thor sighed and shook his head before getting up and going to get ready to sleep. He was glad that they had come to Vanaheim. Loki already seemed to be cheering up a little. Of course, Thor had no idea how he would fall asleep when he felt wide awake but directly disobeying their mother was just a terrible idea from start to finish so he would try.

The next morning, Thor was a bit faster than normal to get up and out of bed. He quickly washed and dressed before darting down the hallway. Thor arrived at the dining room and instantly spotted his little nephew sitting on his mother's lap gnawing on a toasted bread roll. Baldr was sitting beside them with a huge smile on his face. "Thor!" Baldr greeted. "Aren't you up early? Come meet my Nanna and Forseti."

Thor moved closer with a toothy smile. Forseti turned huge blue eyes up to Thor without stopping his gnawing on the bread. Nanna gave her own beautiful smile. "Hello, Thor," Nanna greeted. "It's good to finally meet you."

"You as well, Sister. Baldr has told me a lot about you," Thor greeted.

"I'm sure he has," Nanna said with a glance at her husband.

Baldr grinned and leaned over to give her a kiss. "You cannot blame me. You are the finest woman I have ever met," he declared. "I am a lucky man to have you."

Nanna laughed and gave Baldr a slight shove. Nanna's dark Chesnutt hair was pulled back into an intricate braid that was bound with a few small golden chains. Her lovely grey eyes were warm and kind, and Thor liked her immediately much like he had the first time they'd met in Thor's other life. Forseti was still staring at Thor, but then suddenly dropped his bread to try and reach out for the young Thunder god, nearly squirming out of Nanna's lap as he did so. Nanna laughed again and helped Forseti reach Thor who automatically picked his nephew up out of his mother's arms. "He seems to like you, Thor," Nanna said.

"Oh good. Thor can babysit for us," Baldr said with a grin of his own.

"I would be glad to," Thor said as Forseti tried to climb up higher. Thor had to bend a bit awkwardly in order to not drop the boy but didn't protest. He did enjoy playing with children even if he'd never had any of his own.

Once Forseti got to sitting on Thor's shoulders he clapped and squealed with laughter. "Daddy! High up!" he said loudly. Thor caught hold of Forseti's legs as the boy nearly bounced himself off his perch.

Baldr laughed. "I see that, son."
Thor caught sight of Loki come in out of the corner of his eye and grinned. "Loki is taller," Thor said innocently, looking up at Forseti. "You should climb on him next."

"Don't volunteer other people," Loki said as he came closer.

"Ah, Loki! There you are. Come meet Nanna," Baldr shouted despite the fact that the youngest Odinson had already crossed half the room.

Nanna turned and gave Loki a smile. "Hello, little brother. It is good to meet you finally as well."

Loki gave a slight bow. "Sister Nanna. You're just as lovely as Baldr said. Perhaps even more so," said the Silver-Tounged Godling.

"My what a compliment," Nanna said, her smile growing.

"Loki always has had excellent taste, my dear," Baldr commented. Thor felt his nephew tilt way too far to the side and had to move so that Forseti didn't fall off his shoulders. Forseti grabbed hold of Loki's hair, and the darker son of Odin gave a yelp as the young boy tugged. "Oh, sorry, Loki. He does that to Hodr too. I think it's the black hair... he seems to have an affinity for it."

"Wonderful," Loki muttered as he reached up and tried to gently pry Forseti's little fists out of his hair. Forseti just laughed as he was pried off and then wrapped his arms around Thor's head instead. "Now he's definitely not climbing on my shoulders..."

Forseti bounced some more, and Thor was a bit worried the boy's energy would send him tumbling to the ground. "Careful, Seti Darling, don't make Thor drop you by accident," Nanna said, observing her son as he squirmed and moved.

“Oh, he’s fine,” Baldr said. “You know how he is in the mornings. Besides, Thor won’t drop him. Will you, Brother?”

Thor moved to better be under the squirming toddler even as he gave his brother and his wife a smile. “I will definitely try not to,” he said. He wasn’t entirely sure how successful he’d be even with a gentle but firm grip on the boy’s legs.

Loki chuckled a bit and went to go sit down at one of the spots at the table. “Is he always this full of energy this early in the morning?” he asked.

"He is this full of energy all the time," Baldr replied. “By all means, wear him out for us.”

“Ah, now isn’t this a lovely sight to be greeted with in the morning,” Fjorgynn said as he came into the room with Frigga. “My dear grandchildren and great-grandson all getting along.”

“Did you think we would not?” Thor asked, slightly confused.

“Of course not dear,” Frigga said. “But it is still very nice to see.”

Nanna smiled widely and looked back up at Thor. “After breakfast, we usually go out to play in the gardens. You are very welcome to join us, Thor. And you as well, Loki. I am sure Forseti will not pull your hair too much.”

“That sounds fantastic, Nanna,” Frigga said before Thor or Loki could give an answer. “It is a lovely day after all. Why don’t we all go out and enjoy it?” Thor glanced at Loki, who just shrugged in response. They both knew when their mother wasn’t really asking a question.
The Royal Family of Vanaheim- Now, this was a slightly tricky thing to plan out. Mostly because in the comics Freyr is already King of Vanaheim and in mythology... he is ruler of Alfheim. Ya know, the Light Elves' home. Also he lives with his father and stepmother still. To add to the complication when making a peace treaty with an invading force it really doesn't make a whole lot of sense that you would arrange a marriage between the crown prince and anyone other than the princess so Frigga had to be daughter of the Vanaheim King but she is not Freyr's sister in myth. Therefore I did a little digging and discovered that Frigg is noted in one source as being the daughter of Fjorgynn. Now who Fjorgynn is causes a few other problems because basically Fjorgynn is the male version of the Earth which if you know mythology causes some other problems in Thor's family tree. So, I have moved Fjorgynn to being brother of Njord and making Frigga the cousin through the father of Freya and Freyr. Also if you're interested in the comics Freyr is brother to Idunn and father to Freya, who married Odin... weird right?

So, the Royal Line of Vanaheim looks like this:

```
Fjorgynn--------Njord = Skadi  Gymir  Auboda
   /                             /    /
Frigga               Freya+=Freyr = Gerd----Beli
```

--- sibling
+- Twins
= married
\ child of

Gerdr- The keen eyed will notice that I changed Gerdr to Gerd here. I will be going back and adjusting the name in the relevant parts of the other chapters. This was because I wanted to make Gerd's name feel like it was from a slightly different culture than Freyr. Best way I figured to do that was make it so that their names didn't rhyme so nicely. Also you'll catch a glimpse of Gerd's family in there. We'll get more into that later don't worry.

Elves- Okay so Elves are yet another slight problem here, specifically the dark elves. Mostly because the version that you see in the movie are a bit different from the comic version which is closer in complexion and appearance to the Drow from the Forgotten Realm if you know those books. The Second Thor movie made them all look kinda albino-y which makes sense evolution wise but would make it harder to distinguish from the light elves. So I'm going to be tweaking the appearance of both races so that they are similar but also clearly subraces of elves. Also, also, in the original myth the 'dark elves' pretty much were Dwarves. I suppose I don't have to go too deep into why that's a problem with our current understanding of what Dwarves vs Elves are. So Dwarves are going to be different than Elves.... because this story isn't complicated enough yet.

Vanaheim- The more I'm writing Vanaheim the more I'm trying to channel both Asian influences and a few more European ones. This fusion is not necessarily easy so I would appreciate it if you'd tell me if something just doesn't make sense or isn't clear
enough.

**Pegasus**- Pegasus are, of course, winged horses. The Valkyrie in myth (as well as in the Thor Ragnarok trailer) ride flying horses. Although to my knowledge they were never given any sort of species name other than... winged horses. So I just made them all one thing and have used them to connect Asgard to Olympus. Also, how would you pluralize that... Pegasi? Pegasies? I just went with it being one of those it can also be plural words.
King Loki

Chapter Summary

A new complication in the effort to save Loki arises.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so this wasn't even supposed to be a chapter but I got mad inspired and whipped this out... hence why it's also a bit shorter than my normal chapters. It's almost like an interlude but it isn't.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This… is far from what I was expecting…”

Thor looked around in confusion. Everything around him was utterly dark, and though he could smell the very familiar and usually comforting scents of wood burning in a hearth and thick furs, he found himself uneasy. There was a biting cold, and nowhere Thor looked did he see anything beyond darkness. “Who is there?” he demanded as he spun in a circle. Thor realized voice sounded deeper. Older. With a quick hand to his own chin, he determined that his beard was full. This was not the first time he’d dreamed of being grown again, but this seemed… Different somehow. He couldn’t put his finger on why exactly but it definitely was.

Thor could hear the wind and the creaking of tree branches moving. He took a few steps in a random direction and heard the snow crunching beneath his feet. The wind blew past him, and Thor felt a tug against his cape. He looked down at himself to see that he was in his armor although Mjolnir was absent. Thor frowned in confusion. Though he was older, it seemed even stranger somehow that he would be in his armor.

The sound of a fire whooshing to greater heights attracted Thor’s attention away from pondering his appearance. The Thunder God turned again, slower this time, and spotted the flickering light of a fire in the distance. Still uneasy, but unable to help himself from wanting to know what was going on, Thor moved through the dark. His footsteps crunched a few more times across snow before they began to echo as if in a large room that was entirely empty.

As Thor neared the fire the room slowly came into view around him. The cold did not disappear despite what should have been a source of warmth. Tarnished golden pillars were cracked on the edges of the firelight and Thor noted a thick layer of dust on the ground. Holes were punched through the walls, showing a desolate landscape covered in snow beyond.

Abruptly what he saw made sense and Thor froze in horror. The destroyed throne room of Asgard was littered with skeletons still donning their golden armor and reaching for broken weapons. Some of the bones were pulled apart and scattered, and the dark brown of ancient blood was splattered across the golden floor tiles. “You look upset…”

Thor managed to pull his wide-eyed gaze from a skeleton holding a very unique double ended
sword to what was in front of him. On the other side of a bonfire that was ringed with a pile of skulls, was Hlidskjalf. The gold plating of the throne was bent back in several spots, and giant claw marks ripped into the seat itself. Curled around the ruined throne was a massive skeleton of a wolf with its lower jaw lying far away from the rest of his skull. And there, sitting among the rubble and death, was Loki.

This was not a young Loki or the grinning maniacal Loki that haunted Thor’s dreams and memories. This Loki was older and tired looking. He sat slumped on the broken Hlidskjalf with a spear loosely held in one hand. After a moment, Thor recognized the half-broken off head of the spear and realized it was Gungnir. Loki’s robes were tattered, and ill looked after, the embroidery fraying, large tears that hadn’t been repaired, and a fur collar that was matted from lack of care. Loki’s long black hair was streaked with silver around his face, and his emerald eyes had lost all of their sparkle. Deep furrows were etched into Loki’s face almost unnaturally. The horned helm that Loki wore was more elaborate than any that Thor had ever seen his brother don before with the graceful golden curves looking more like splintered and stained tree branches. “Loki?” This elderly God was his brother and yet nothing like his brother at the same time.

Loki shrugged but didn’t move from his seat. Judging by the one dust free area around his brother, Thor couldn’t help but wonder how long the worn looking trickster had actually been sitting there. “What… what happened here?” Thor asked, looking around at the ruins of his home. “How did this happen?”

“I won. Every once and a while I have to win, Thor…” Loki said. “Basic math really… Welcome to my Kingdom… Such as it is.”

Thor looked around again, still as horrified as he was when he first recognized the place. He had never thought that such a thing could befall Asgard. What had led to such a disaster? Surely, Loki did not hate them this much…

“You look upset, Thor…” Loki said. Thor turned back, but the sharp words never made it past his lips. Loki didn’t look in the least pleased or triumphant. The Trickster’s words were mild to the point of emotionless. “I suppose I can’t blame you for that. I really have let the place go…”

“What is this?” Thor asked again. This didn’t feel like his usual dreams. This felt too real to be a dream. He could smell the old blood and dust mingling and feel the cold from the broken walls. Outside he could see snow drifts and dead trees. Every detail felt so incredibly real.

Loki tilted his head to the side and then sighed. “Something I hope you don’t repeat, brother. But then… I suppose you’re already working on that. What is this strange magic wrapped around you, Thor? It seems quite dangerous.”

Thor recoiled slightly. “Why should I tell you anything?”

“What harm could it possibly do you, Thor?” Loki asked. “You are not really here, and I am not really there. My magic is strong but crossing such barriers in dimensions is somewhat beyond me. Especially now.”

“So what? This is just some vision?” Thor demanded.

“It is not something manufactured from your own mind if that is what you are asking. This is the culmination of my path in my reality. Your Loki could pick a very different one… If he wants. Honestly, Thor, I was just peering through time, and space like Odin used to do when I noticed such a strange aura around you. I have watched the same stories played out over and over again, but you are the first Thor I have come across to have this magic around you. So, I brought you
here,” Loki explained. “I suppose some of my old curiosity has finally been roused again. It’s been a few hundred years…”

Thor wished he had Mjolnir. He didn’t trust this strange aged Loki in the least. There was something very off about him, and Thor couldn’t help but think he was incredibly dangerous. “Come now, Thor…” Loki said after several minutes of silence. “I cannot affect whatever it is you’re doing. I can only reach your unconscious mind and bring it here in front of me. What harm could there be in telling me what dangerous magics you’ve somehow gotten your hands on?”

“I do not know, but I am sure that you would find a way to bring harm,” Thor replied as he carefully stepped around the bones of one of the defeated Aesir on the ground. The fact that they were left to rot where they lay was disgraceful, but Thor didn’t think he could argue about that right now. “You have clearly destroyed Asgard once… Why should I believe you won’t do it again? To my Asgard?”

Loki sighed. “Because there would be no satisfaction in that for me,” he said. “I am no longer interested in your suffering, Thor… And especially not the suffering of myself. Whatever you are doing, it could backfire immensely. The spell you’ve used is dark and powerful… Two things that should never be mixed carelessly. And you don’t have the best track record with magic.”

“You don’t know what I’m doing,” Thor snapped.

“Then tell me. For once in your life, trust me.”

“You, sitting on a broken Hlidskjalf with the bones of our people scattered around you, doesn’t exactly inspire trust, Loki!” Thor yelled with an angry gesture at the room around them. How could Loki even think to speak of trust in such a setting? It was utterly ridiculous. Loki was drenched in the proof of his own ill intentions and Thor was not so dense to not believe his own eyes.

There was another very long span of silence, and then Loki sighed heavily. “No, I imagine that it doesn’t… But, Thor, if nothing else trust that sitting on this throne surrounded by nothing but death and decay is far from my ideal… I did not want to be the last. To be sitting here alone for all eternity… Defeating you and winning the throne was quite a bit more hollow than I expected it to be.”

“I will not allow it to happen this time,” Thor said firmly.

Loki’s dull eyes sparked with just a hint of his old self. “Then you are trying to interfere with time. I thought I recognized those rune combinations. Where did you get such a spell, Thor?”

“… Angrboda,” Thor admitted reluctantly. He didn’t think that bit of information could possibly be used against him now that he had already taken the potion and sent himself into his younger body.

Loki leaned forward to rest his elbow on his knee. “Be careful, Thor. Angrboda is not to be trusted. Even less so than me. She does nothing if she does not think it will benefit her as well. Or that she can turn it to her advantage,” King Loki warned grimly.

“I knew she would not do anything for nothing,” Thor said. He wasn’t as stupid as Loki always claimed. “But I will deal with whatever I must to save you.”

King Loki straightened on Hlidskjalf and stared at Thor with wide eyes. “What?” he breathed as if what Thor had said was utterly impossible.

“You think I would send myself back to my childhood for anything else?” Thor demanded. “In my life, I held you as you died. I will not allow it to happen! Never again, Loki! I have watched you
die in front of me twice I cannot permit it to continue!”

For the first time in Thor’s memory, Loki seemed entirely speechless. But it wasn’t for long. “After everything I’ve done… You would perform such dangerous magic for me? Why? I do not deserve this.”

“You are my brother! I am sick of having to remind you of this!”

Loki’s eyes shimmered wetly, but he took a steadying breath and then held out a hand. Green Seidr swirled in his palm and then Loki was holding a golden amulet with a stylized black shape upon it that was reminiscent of Loki’s horned helm. Loki ran his thumb over the surface before tossing it across the distances between them. Thor caught it automatically despite the possible danger.

The amulet was heavy but strangely warm in Thor’s palm. “What is this?” he asked with suspicion.

“A way to reach me when you wish it,” Loki said. “It only exists in your dreams so don’t bother looking for it on your person… but think of this place as you fall asleep and you will be brought here… should you need me.”

“Why would I need to come back to this place?” Thor asked. He didn’t want to be here in the first place, and he had no idea why he’d deliberately subject himself to the ruins of Asgard that this Loki had caused.

King Loki smiled, but it didn’t seem as cruel as the smiles from the Loki that haunted Thor’s dreams. “Because, you dolt, if I know you, and I do, you barely thought about this before doing it. How will you save him if you don’t know what you’re saving him from?” Loki asked. “I have lived it… and if I haven’t I can use Hlidskjalf to see what it is that threatens his life. Can you say the same?”

Thor scowled. “I still can’t trust you.”

“Perhaps not,” Loki said mildly. “But you can at the very least trust my self-preservation instinct can you not? I’ll do nothing to hurt myself. So, if something does happen that will endanger his life… I will tell you about it.”

The God of Thunder still didn’t trust this King Loki in the least. He hated that this Loki had a point, however. Thor truly didn’t know everything that had happened to his brother. Loki wasn’t one for sharing. This might be the only possible way that Thor would be able to find out any of what Loki had kept hidden. “I do not promise to use this,” Thor said.

King Loki shrugged. “I do not ask for your promise. It is yours to use or not… But keep it anyway. Just in case.”

“Do I have a choice on if I keep it or not?” Thor asked darkly.

Loki smiled. “Not really. But the illusion of choice is almost as important as actually having a choice.”

“I don’t think I agree,” Thor said in annoyance. “An actual choice would be much nicer.”

“Well, it would hardly be the only thing we disagree on,” Loki said flippantly. What little humor he seemed to have gained faded quickly as he looked dead in Thor’s eyes. “Perhaps in time, you will come to believe I mean no harm. If nothing else… Believe me about Angrboda. The two of us were far too similar to ever work together, and that should scare you far more than I do.”
“You don’t scare me,” Thor denied.

Loki hummed and leaned forward on his elbow again. “If I did not scare you, brother, you would not have so many reservations about trusting me,” he said.

“It couldn’t just be that you lie as easily as breathing,” the Thunder God replied sarcastically.

“I lied to my Thor, true enough… but I haven’t lied to you,” Loki said. “And you’ll come to find that such a distinction truly does matter. Nothing that you do can save this Asgard, or me, from the fate I made for us. But perhaps I can earn a sliver of redemption through this fool plan of yours.”

Thor couldn’t quite stop the scoff. “And now you care about redemption?” he asked.

Loki leaned back in his throne, and his clothing shifted just enough for Thor to make out a dark stain along his side. Thor frowned but before he could bring it up, Loki tugged his cloak closed more fully. “Let us just say that I’ve had a very long time to sit and think about what I’ve done,” Loki said with a hint of sarcasm but perhaps a bit more sincerity than Thor thought he was meant to catch.

“How long have you been sitting here?” Thor asked, looking yet again at the lack of dust in the small area around Loki.

Loki smiled crookedly. “Long enough that you have caught my interest,” he said.

Thor huffed at that answer although why, after everything he knew, he had expected any better of an answer he didn’t know. He always seemed to leave himself open for foolish things like that. “Goodbye, Thor. Don’t forget to come visit… I’m sure I can help if you’d let me.”

Thor opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say even the first syllable, he was waking up in his bed in his Grandfather’s Palace. He sat up and looked around for a moment before lying back with a groan. The once again young Thunderer wasn’t sure what had happened or if what he’d just experienced was actually real, but Thor wished that it hadn’t happened. The last thing he wanted was trying to save Loki while also trying to figure out if a different Loki was up to something sinister. None of this seemed fair. Thor just wanted to save his brother. Why must it be so complicated?

Thor heard birds outside his window and groaned before rolling over. Though he’d apparently slept through the night, he didn’t feel like he had. The day should still be early enough for him to get a few more hours of rest in. Thor resolved to forget about the other Loki immediately and to never try out the strange medallion that he’d been given. Or whatever it was. Thor didn’t really understand it, but he knew that he didn’t want to walk right into King Loki’s trap.

**Chapter End Notes**

**King Loki**- Oooooohhh boy. Everyone ready for this? King Loki is in the comics the result of when Loki actually does win the throne of Asgard. He is the one that Kid Loki turns into his familiar Ikol and...stuff happens that I’m still not over yet (sniff sniff). The version in *this* story is a combination of a couple different Loki’s actually. King Loki, of course, the Loki Triumphant Loki, and the Loki you very very briefly see in the in Young Avengers Comic which is known as the Deceased Asgardian Timeline.
Loki and Thor get gifts... and also find something that is sure to agitate their mother.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something small but hard hit Thor right in the temple and he couldn’t help but flinch. Only a moment later another hard something hit him on the cheek followed by a third that skimed the bridge of his nose. Thor finally opened his eyes and glared to the left. Loki, who was sitting on the other side of the boat that they were on, just grinned widely. “Stop it,” Thor growled.

Loki’s grin, if possible, grew even larger. “Why, Brother, I’m just making sure you don’t miss all the lovely scenery,” he said innocently.

“I will push you overboard,” Thor threatened.

Loki rolled his eyes and didn’t seem worried. “You look tired, brother.”

“That’s why I was sleeping,” Thor grumbled as he looked around him to see little pebbles and twigs around where he had been slumped over the table. “Just how long were you hitting me with things?” he asked as he brushed some debris from his hair.

“Not long,” his brother answered mostly convincingly. Too bad that the pure number of little projectile around Thor’s head proved Loki wasn’t exactly truthful. “Besides we’re getting close to wherever we’re going so I figured I should wake you up.”

Thor looked at the table around him again. “And how long have we been ‘getting close’?”

“Oh, as if that matters,” Loki said. “Point is, you’re awake now.”

“Whether I want to be or not,” Thor agreed as he straightened fully and then stretched his arms high over his head. “Any clue as to where we’re going?” he asked after he had slumped back into his seat again.

Loki shook his head. “Not really. Grandfather does seem excited about it whatever we’re doing.”

“I’m sure it’ll be very much worth this entire morning spent travelling up a river,” Thor groused as he laid his head on the table again. Even after the attempt to get more rest that morning after his dream of the other Loki, he had not managed much more sleep. He was definitely regretting it now.

“My goodness, such sarcasm, Thor,” Loki said. “One would think you weren’t enjoying yourself.”

Thor shot Loki another glare. “What are you so cheerful about anyway? I wouldn’t believe that you’d be one to enjoy river trips.”

“Oh, I don’t usually,” Loki agreed. “Nothing really to do during them. But I did overhear
“What’s that?” Thor asked, lifting his head off the table to more directly look at his brother.

Loki hummed as if thinking. “Oh, I don’t know if you’ll be interested,” he said. “After all, you are so tired you barely noticed my very kind attempts to wake you up.” Thor scowled and kicked his brother under the table. Loki yelped and lifted his leg up onto the chair to rub his shin. “Such a bear in the mornings, my goodness. Fine, I’ll tell you, you big lummox.”

Thor waited, but Loki still didn’t say anything after almost a full minute. “Loki,” Thor warned. “You and the river are about to meet.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “No patience. Well, if you really must know… Grandfather said something about a present to commemorate our first visit to Vanagheim. He made it sound like it was going to be something awe-inspiring. Maybe it’s a weapon you won’t break like the last ten.”

“It is hardly my fault all the weapons are so flimsy,” Thor said. He’d always had a problem breaking weapons that weren’t Mjolnir and this time around it was even worse because he knew what it was like to have an unbreakable weapon in his hand. Restraint was hard to remember when he hadn’t had to practice it for several hundred years.

“Thor, after this many weapons… I think the problem is you and not them,” Loki said.

Thor shook his head and decided against arguing with Loki. Thor looked around at the river that was passing by instead, which seemed a smarter choice. One side of the river was dominated by fields upon fields of Sky Lilies; streaks of different colors that had been grown right to the edge of the water. Thor wondered briefly how the farmers had maintained the colors considering the flowers would change. On the other bank were tidy rows of houses and at the end a windmill with distinctly curved blades. A small red bridge crossed over the river just beyond the windmill and Thor worried they’d run into it with their boat. As they got closer to the bridge, the structure split into two sections and swung back like a gate to allow their boat through.

Thor hummed thoughtfully and turned back to Loki. “How long have we been travelling upriver anyway?” he asked curiously. Judging by how far the sun had moved across the sky, Thor could assume at least a couple hours.

“Oh, I’d say two and a half maybe three hours,” Loki supplied. “Like I said, we have to be getting close by now.”

Thor grunted in agreement and got up from his seat to stretch his arms over his head. “I hope you’re right. This trip is boring.”

As it turned out, it took nearly forty more minutes for them to reach wherever it was that Fjorgynn was taking them. Thor was getting very hungry by the time they were pulling up to a long dock. Other than the simple wooden platform, Thor could see no evidence of people around at all. There was just a field. Admittedly, it was a very picturesque field full of wildflowers and fluttering butterflies, but it was still just a field. There was a mostly destroyed fence off in the distance that looked like it had once separated the forest from the field but was now just a place for vines to climb over.

Thor and Loki went wandering through what Thor assumed was an old pasture while their mother and Grandfather brought things out of the boat. “So there’s nothing out here,” Thor said as he climbed on top of a few rocks that barely reached his waist.
“I’m sure there’s a reason that they dragged us up here, Thor,” Loki replied as he crouched down beside a flower that had long almost pocket-like yellow flowers on a thick stem with very spiky leaves. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this flower before…” he mused. “I wonder if it’s useful at all.”

“I guess you’ll have to ask,” Thor said as he decided to try and make the jump from the rocks he was on to the fence post nearby. He jumped and missed by several feet. Thor frowned and climbed up onto the post this time. He had sworn that the distance was shorter than that.

Thor tried to jump the distance again and at least got closer to his target this time, probably because of the higher start point. “Thor! Loki! Come here. We brought lunch!” their mother called. Thor immediately abandoned his attempts to jump from one perch to the other and hurried to where their Mother and Grandfather were waiting.

A large blanket had been laid out on the ground beside a wide tree stump, and on the stump, there was a grand array of food just waiting to be devoured. Frigga laughed at the expression on Thor’s face. “You didn’t think I would expect you to skip a meal, did you, Thor?” she asked with amusement.

“Thank you, Mother,” Thor said before grabbing a plate and filling it with as much food as he could balance in a pile.

Loki was only just wandering over, still peering down at the flower from before. “Mother, what is this?” he asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen one before…”

“Ah, that’s a plant called Yellow Rattle, dear,” Frigga answered. “It’s grown in fields to help make hay for animals. Now come and eat.”

Loki looked down at the flowering stem again thoughtfully before dropping it to the side. He grabbed a plate and piled it high with his own food and took a seat beside Thor. Loki, despite starting later than Thor on his lunch, finished first and then reached for a book that he’d brought with him.

Thor went back for seconds and then thirds on his lunch before he finally finished and stretched. “So why did we take this trip, Mother?” Thor asked once he was full and content again. “Seems a long way to go for a picnic.”

Frigga smiled. “You’ll both find out soon enough,” she said.

“Surprises,” Loki muttered without looking up from his book. Thor struggled to not smile. His brother wasn’t fond of surprises. At least, not ones that he was not behind. Loki was more than happy usually to surprise other people.

They sat there in the field for nearly an hour before anything happened. Thor was very bored of waiting by that point so when he saw the cloaked figure at the edge of the clearing he noticed almost immediately. “Who’s that?” he asked.

“Ah! There he is!” Fjorgynn said as he got up and went over to where the figure was waiting.

Thor frowned, and Loki too looked up to see what was going on. “That’s a suspicious looking character…” Loki muttered. “Why won’t he come closer?”

“He is a very reclusive craftsman, dear,” Frigga said. “He doesn’t like to be the center of attention. He rarely even leaves his home, and he never comes to the city. We’re lucky that he came here to meet with Father at all.”
Loki didn’t seem satisfied with that answer, and if Thor were honest, he wasn’t all that happy with it either. “And the cloak?”

“Reclusive, darlings,” Frigga repeated. “He likes to remain anonymous.”

Thor and Loki watched as their Grandfather spoke with whatever mysterious craftsman that was by the edge of the clearing. After a few minutes, Fjorgynn handed over a small pouch and took a larger package in return. The cloaked figure bowed and then disappeared into the woods. “Very suspicious indeed,” Loki muttered as the King of Vanaheim came back across the field.

“Here we are,” Fjorgynn said when he finally came back to the blanket they were sitting on. “I had these commissioned for you two when I heard you were coming. Well, I had them commissioned to be presents for your next name days, but I asked for my friend to finish them early when Frigga told me that you were coming.”

Thor and Loki exchanged a look, and Loki shrugged. “And what did you have him make for us, Grandfather?” Thor asked after a few minutes.

“Ah, this is for you, Thor,” Fjorgynn said as he pulled a thick belt from the bag he was carrying. “And this for you, Loki.” A sword came out next and was handed over to Loki. After only a brief glance, Thor could already place the two items that their grandfather had produced.

Thor was surprised to see Megingjord handed over to him, as his grandfather had said, he’d expected it as a present for his next significant name day not for simply visiting Vanaheim. The leather belt in his hands was familiar even though it was new and the gold embellishments were shining in the sunlight in a way they hadn’t for centuries. Two lines of strengthening runes went down the length of the leather, and the golden clasp was decorated with a fresh carving of Yggdrasil. “Its name is Megingjord, and it’s enchanted,” their grandfather began, "to increase your strength even more than you already have. It'll be very handy, I think."

"It is wonderful, Grandfather. Thank you," Thor said sincerely. "I will wear it frequently, I promise."

Loki was eyeing the long sword he’d been handed with a skeptical eye. "And that, Loki, is Laevateinn. Your mother said you had been having trouble with the swords found in Asgard. This one will suit you better. It is much lighter than the swords you’d find made by the Aesir."

Loki studied the rune engraved length of shining golden metal carefully before his eyes widened. "Who made this?" he asked. "It's wonderful!" Loki moved a hand wreathed in green and gold tendrils of seidr along the dangerously sharpened blade. The young Trickster's seidr was quickly absorbed by the blade and made the emeralds embedded into the pommel glow. Loki usually had trouble with full-length swords, but the one he was holding currently was barely heavier than a stick that he used to play with Thor back before they began weapons training. He might actually be able to swing this sword around.

"When your mother told me you were studying seidr so avidly, I thought you might need a weapon that was geared towards such a thing. Asgardians never seem to bother creating such weapons," the King of Vanaheim said with a very disapproving frown.

"Oh, Father, don't start," Frigga said. "You know that we have plenty of enchanted weapons in Asgard."

Their Grandfather grunted. "None of which the Asgardians made, and most are locked away in that weapon's vault. An absolute waste."
"Father," Frigga sighed in exasperation.

"Alright, alright, I'll stop... still a waste though. I mean, look at Mjolnir. Hasn't been used in ages!"

"Nobody can use Mjolnir. That is hardly our fault."

Loki managed to tear his attention away from his sword. "Why can nobody use Mjolnir?" he asked curiously. Thor was a little curious as well. In his first life, nobody could use Mjolnir that was not worthy, but that was only after he had been exiled.

"Simply put, it is too powerful a weapon," their Grandfather explained. "The last few who tried, I believe, lost those arms when they did. Even Bor couldn't use it. He kept dropping it mid-swing. He was very annoyed, I hear."

“Father,” Frigga said in a warning tone. Though it was well known and documented that Bor had made exceptionally few friends in his time as King of Asgard, Frigga thought it best to keep such obviously bitter talk away from her sons. They would never meet Bor, but they didn’t need to hear their own relatives bad talking the dead.

Fjorgynn sighed but nodded. “We will be here for another few hours yet. Why don’t you boys go have fun?” he suggested to Thor and Loki.

Thor glanced over at Loki and then nodded down at the sword he was still staring at with awe. “You want to test it out?” Thor asked.

Loki looked up and blinked. “What do you mean? Spar?”

“Of course. Come on,” Thor said as he got up and put his belt on.

“But you don’t have a weapon. We can’t spar with only one of us armed,” Loki protested.

Thor frowned but before Thor could say that he was fairly sure he could handle Loki or at least disarm him since he’d never even wielded Laevateinn before, his Grandfather got to his feet. “Here, Thor, use mine. Just be careful with it. I’d like to still have a sword before the day ends,” he said as he pulled a sword free from his belt and handed it over.

“Thank you, Grandfather,” Thor said as he tested the feeling of swinging the blade. The longsword definitely wasn’t what he was used to. The blade was lighter, like Loki’s apparently was. Thor would have to be very careful to not smash it to bits. “I’ll be gentle with it. I promise. Come on, Loki.”

“Don’t hurt each other,” Frigga called as the two brothers ran a little ways off so that they would have plenty of room.

Loki looked uncomfortable as he brought his new sword up. “I haven’t trained much with swords…”

“Are you not up to the challenge?” Thor asked as he settled into a familiar battle stance. Though in his adult life he always used Mjolnir he wasn’t unfamiliar with bladed weapons by any means. Young Asgardians were expected to be well-versed in at least three or four different weapons even if they had a preferred one.

“I’m just saying I’m not exactly well practiced so try not to slice my hand off or something. I need both,” Loki said as he finally took his own stance.
Thor frowned and nodded down to Loki’s feet. “You’re off a bit.”

Loki sighed in exasperation and shifted so that he was better positioned. “I wasn’t asking for a lesson, Thor.”

“You’re the one that doesn’t want a hand cut off,” Thor replied.

“Who would want a limb chopped off?” Loki muttered. Thor didn’t bother to answer and instead made his first move. He could tell Loki was a little startled, but his brother managed to bring Laevatein up to block just in time. The clang of metal on metal rang out across the clearing. “We really shouldn’t be doing this with real swords,” Loki said. “It’s not exactly good for them.”

“I’m sure an enchanted sword can take a little metal on metal,” Thor replied before bringing his sword around again to make another attack. This time Loki just sidestepped and thrust with an attack of his own. Thor quickly abandoned any thought of talking as he focused instead on the action of fighting his brother also without breaking anything.

After only a few minutes, Thor felt sweat start to coat his skin, and Loki’s face was flushed from exertion. The brothers had sparred many times in the past with swords, but Thor had always easily bested Loki. Now with a sword that wasn’t as heavy, Loki was holding his own much better. Not well enough though.

“You’re rusty,” Thor told Loki as he finally managed to knock Laevatein out of the Trickster’s hands. The blade had gone flying into the woods somewhere, and Loki looked particularly peeved. “You’ll have to practice more often if you want to get any good at using that.”

“Shut up, Thor,” Loki said sourly as he started for the woods. “It’s hardly my fault none of the swords of Asgard suit me. Besides I can fillet you with my knives…”

“You’d have to get close enough,” Thor pointed out as he followed along a step behind Loki. “And you don’t like getting close to your opponent.”

Loki cast Thor a sour look. “You’re so very irritating. Help me look for my sword.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Thor asked as they wandered into the forest.

Loki shook his head. “I don’t think you actually want me to answer that,” he said as he peered into a bush to see if his sword had landed within it. “Why did you have to fling it so far, Thor?”

“I didn’t mean to,” Thor muttered. “You should have held onto it better.”

“My arm is tired,” Loki shot back. “We’ve been sparring for almost an hour already.” Thor blinked in surprise. Had it really been that long already? He could have sworn they’d only just started. “Don’t give me that blank look, it’s true,” Loki said as he stepped over a protruding root.

Thor frowned. “It didn’t feel that long…”

“Yes, well, you’re much more used to such sparring matches,” Loki grumbled.

“You’ll get better,” Thor said as he looked around for any hint of where Loki’s sword might have gotten off to. “Your sword could not have gone this far,” Thor said. “I didn’t fling it that hard…”

“Your 'not that hard' is a lot harder than you always seem to think it,” Loki pointed out.

“Ah!” Thor said as he saw the sword handle poking out from a bush just a few feet ahead and to the
left. “There it is. I knew it couldn’t be much further.”

Loki shook his head and went to go grab the sword from the bush. “You are lucky. If you had lost my brand new sword I would have been very vexed with you,” he said as he turned Laevateinn over this way and that to see if it was damaged at all. Once he was satisfied with his inspection, he turned. “And you’re lucky it’s not damaged.”

“It’s an enchanted sword, Loki. I think it will take more than that to damage it,” Thor replied as he rested his own borrowed sword on his shoulder.

“No reason not to be careful,” Loki grumbled.

“Let’s just head back,” Thor said as he turned back to the edge of the forest. They had only just started to move when it Loki suddenly stopped. Thor paused as well and turned to look at his brother. “What is it?”

Loki didn’t answer at first and instead looked around at the forest. “Do you hear that, Thor?”

Thor listened for a few moments but then shook his head. “I hear nothing.” Without another word, Loki started off towards whatever it was he was hearing. “Loki!” Thor called before hurrying after his brother. “Loki, we should not wander!”

“It sounds like something’s hurt…” Loki murmured distractedly as he continued to wander through the forest.

“That is unfortunate but we know nothing about these woods,” Thor pointed out. “And I really should not be the voice of reason here!”

Loki did pause and look over at Thor. “Is it very uncomfortable for you?” he asked. “You could always go back to Mother and Grandfather.” Thor did not find that particularly amusing, but before he could do more than open his mouth, Loki shushed him. “There it is again. Are you telling me you honestly can’t hear that?”

“No, Loki. I don’t hear anything,” Thor said.

The darker son of Odin gave Thor an exasperated look before starting to walk off again. Thor really didn’t think he had any choice but to follow his brother. They continued walking for several minutes and as they walked Thor began to hear the noises that had attracted his brother’s attention. It sounded like some wounded animal. Little cries of pain and distress that Thor couldn’t quite place.

As they got closer, Thor was also able to make out the sound of running water. A small stream nearby most likely. Loki didn’t seem in the least concerned that injured animals could be dangerous and just kept walking. When they finally found the source of the noise tucked under a large fallen log, Thor had to struggle to not rip his brother backwards.

“Calm down, Thor,” Loki said as he crouched down to peer into the dark.

“That’s a wyvern, Loki!” Thor hissed. “You know they’re venomous!”

Loki just gave Thor a bland look. “I’m surprised that you do,” Loki said before turning back to the small scaly creature. “It’s not very big… it must be close to a newborn.”

“Can still make your flesh turn black and fall off the bones with its bite,” Thor grumbled as he watched the creature for any sign it was about to jump out and try to attack them.
Loki didn’t seem to share Thor’s worry. “Calm down, would you? The poor thing is terrified. It shouldn’t even be here. They aren’t native to Vanaheim. They live in colder climates…”

“Then how did it get here?” Thor asked despite himself. He still thought they should leave it, but he couldn’t just let his brother get bitten by the thing either.

“Not sure… perhaps it fell into a portal or was smuggled in for some reason,” Loki said absently as he tilted his head to better see the reptile. The wyvern hissed at them and stayed curled up in a tight ball. The pearlescent blue scales were rimmed with black, and its eyes were so bright a blue they almost seemed to glow. The wings of the wyvern were much too small for it, and the boney claws at the top joint seemed undersized and weak. Clearly, not yet the wings that would actually be able to hold the creature up in the air. A long tail covered in dangerous spikes was wrapped around it, and already the tiny thing had a mouth full of sharp teeth.

Thor put a hand to Loki’s bicep. “We really should leave it, Loki.”

“Thor. It’s fine, calm down,” Loki replied. “It probably can’t even see straight the poor thing.”

Thor sighed in exasperation. “Would you stop calling it that? It’s far from a ‘poor thing.’ It’s a wyvern, Loki.”

“And it’s suffering heat exhaustion,” Loki shot back. “Do you know what it’s like to have heat exhaustion, Thor? I can tell you, it’s not fun. Not in the least. It’s miserable from start to finish. So, yes, it is a wyvern, and it is a poor thing.”

Thor wanted to argue further but couldn’t come up with a response to what Loki had said. After a few minutes, he sighed. “Well, it isn’t as if we can do anything for it, Loki,” Thor pointed out.

“Oh, can’t we?” Loki asked before slowly extending a hand towards the hollow that the unhappy wyvern was curled up under. Thor went to grab Loki’s wrist, but his brother stopped him from doing so with his new sword. As Thor watched, Loki’s hand turned first a pale blue and then darker. Soon his whole hand was a rich sapphire color, and Thor could feel the cold air wafting from his brother’s hand.

Thor couldn’t help but be very surprised and stared at Loki. Loki, for his part, seemed to be ignoring Thor entirely. His full attention was on the wyvern. The reptile was still hissing, but after a moment the hiss stopped. At first, nothing happened, and then, ever so slowly, the two-legged serpent crawled forward towards Loki’s hand. Thor couldn’t help but stiffen and grab Loki’s shoulders tightly. He was ready to pull his brother back at a second’s notice. “It’s alright. He likes the cold,” Loki said without taking his eyes off the baby wyvern.

The lizard didn’t come entirely out from under its log and instead extended its long neck out as far as it could to sniff at Loki’s fingers. Loki just waited and kept his hand Jotunn blue. Thor thought he might go mad from the tension.

Finally, the wyvern let out a strange noise somewhere between a chirp and a purr before rubbing against Loki’s cold hand. Loki smiled and let the little creature nuzzle him. Thor watched with no small amount of awe as the lizard slowly moved out from under the log and right into Loki’s lap. “He really is too warm,” Loki murmured as he brushed his cold hand over the wyvern’s back. The lizard chirruped again and wrapped its long tail around Loki’s waist while clinging to his shoulders with the clawed fingers of its wings.

“Mother is never going to let you keep that,” Thor warned.
Loki didn’t seem concerned. “I think I’ll name him… Ofnir.”

“Loki… it’s venomous,” Thor tried yet again.

“He’s really a lovely creature isn’t he?” Loki asked, entirely unconcerned as he continued to use his icy hand to cool the newly named wyvern down. “Quite elegantly shaped.”

Thor groaned and let his head fall back. Why must it always be something dangerous that got Loki’s attention? Why not a cute fluffy bunny for once? No, it had to be a venomous cousin to dragons. “Mother will kill you.”

“Let’s go back, Thor,” Loki said as he carefully got to his feet with the wyvern still curled around him.

Chapter End Notes

**Yellow Rattle (Loki’s Purse)**  - A real plant named after Loki. It’s used to help with biodiversity of fields in traditional hay-making practices. It restricts grass growth by pulling some nutrients from neighboring plants and allowing other species to thrive. When the capsule is dried the seed rattle around, which is what gives Yellow Rattle its name. Why it also has a name of Loki’s Purse I can’t seem to find a reason for honestly. But I thought it was nifty.

**Megingjord**  - Megingjord is Thor’s magical belt that increases his already ridiculous strength even more. He has it in both Marvel (it was the belt Happy couldn’t pronounce the name of in Spiderman: Homecoming) and in Mythology. In Myth Megingjord is one of three gifts that Thor is given by the giantess Gridr, who sounds a lot like the name of Freyr’s wife but is a different character. Here I’m tweaking things so that Thor gets the belt from his grandfather instead.

**Laevateinn**  - Laevateinn is a sword that Loki has in the comics. Contrary to popular fanon Loki is actually a very accomplished swordsman. Although he also often has a staff that he uses and of course daggers. Loki is also mentioned on using a spear in a couple myths. In Mythology the word Laevateinn is mentioned very briefly and does seem to be related to Loki although just what beyond that there is is rather questionable. There is even a theory that the reference is talking about a staff rather than a sword. I’m going with sword although Loki will get a staff too later. I promise. I was tempted to give Loki his staff now but I wanted to hold off on that. Also, his staff is never named in the comics or MCU… except by Tony who of course calls it the Glowstick of Destiny. I really wanted Loki’s first real weapon to be given a name though so I settled for the sword.

**Mjolnir’s Worthiness**  - Now this is an interesting little thing. In the Movies, the enchantment letting only the worthy pick up Mjolnir was put on it by Odin right after banishing Thor to Earth. Cut and dry right? Well, not really if you look into the comics. The OG Mjolnir was enchanted with a worthiness thing after Odin got annoyed that he couldn’t wield it because the God Tempest he trapped in it still had a bit of sentience. He went all ‘if I can’t use it nobody can’ on it. Mjolnir is also crazy powerful in the comics. Like pretty much Superman level Deus ex Machina. I mean really… look up the list of things Mjolnir has done over the lifespan of it in comics.
It’s done everything from Time Travel, turning things or people invisible, atomize things, transmuting elements, teleporting, and of course the whole storm thing. I’ve decided it best to tone some (most) of those powers down dramatically although I am merging the worthiness limitation. Basically it’s not easy to use to begin with but it isn’t technically only the ‘worthy’ that can use it yet as Odin hasn’t put that enchantment on it. The origin of the Hammer is also being tweaked but I’ll get into that later.

**Ofnir**- Ofnir is listed as a name of a serpent by Snorri Sturlurson in the Prose Edda but as far as I can find is just one name in a list of several that includes but is not limited to Jormungand, Fafnir, and Nidhogg. There are nine on the list in all and they are all lindworms or seaserpents or wingless dragons however you prefer to think of them. Here I’ve hijacked that into just being of a general serpent-like beast. So Ofnir one of the great nine serpents has become Ofnir the Wyvern.

**Wyvern**- A wyvern is a mythological creature with a dragon’s head and wings, a reptilian body, two legs, and a tail. They tend to be associated with cold weather and generally has a venomous bite and only rarely breathe fire. Because they are traditionally associated with cold weather I decided to make them a native creature to the colder realms such as Jotunheim and Niflheim. Also doesn't Loki just seem the type to have a seriously dangerous pet? But hey, at least he has a pet he has something in common with.
Surprises

Chapter Summary

A few surprises catches Thor off guard.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say that their mother had... reservations about a wyvern would have been an understatement. Thor had never heard her shriek in any life before but when she spotted the dangerous lizard that her son was carrying she came very close to it. Frigga instantly demanded to know 'what he was thinking,' and Loki gave her a perfect image of innocence. As if he didn't realize that the wyvern clinging to him was terribly dangerous.

"I told him you would not like it," Thor volunteered. Being the older of the two, he could just see how he would be blamed for Loki's new pet.

Loki sent Thor a brief glare of annoyance. "Traitor," he grumbled. Loki turned back to their mother with every trace of annoyance disappeared as if it was never there. "We found him in the forest, mother. He's just a baby, he won't survive on his own."

"Wyverns are not native to Vanaheim," Fjorgynn said, eyeing the reptile with mistrust.

"Loki, wyverns are dangerous wild animals, you cannot just pick them up like that. What if it had attacked you?" Frigga asked.

"We wouldn't have had the antidote for the venom," Fjorgynn added. "You'd have lost your life. Painfully."

"Everything needs a name," Loki said innocently.

"Loki," their mother said in warning.

Immediately, she was met with wide green eyes, and Thor was glad he'd never been on the receiving end of that look. His brother had the perfect mix of pleading and wide-eyed innocence. A deadly combination that Thor wasn't at all sure he'd be able to resist. Frigga didn't seem much better. She stared down at Loki and the wyvern clinging to him as if he were a tree for several minutes before giving a heavy sigh. "We must discuss this with your father, Loki."

Instantly, the young trickster made a face. "But Father's not here," he pointed out. Thor supposed Loki had been trying to get their mother to agree before bringing up their father.

"No, he's not," Frigga said. "But I'll contact him tonight and discuss it."
Loki probably wouldn't like to know that Thor judged Loki's next expression as a pout, but there really wasn't any better word for it. Frigga sighed again at the expression, "I promise you, darling, that even if you can't keep him, I'll make sure he's taken care of. There are several rescues and zoos for misplaced animals. One of them is sure to be able to handle a young wyvern."

Loki still looked sullen as he ran his blue hand over Ofnir's head. The wyvern pup pulled itself up higher using Loki's shoulders as leverage. Loki winced as the thick claws of his desired pet dug through his shirt but otherwise made no indication to have noticed. Thor supposed that if Loki complained any chance at keeping Ofnir would be soundly lost.

"Now, Loki," their grandfather began. Thor thought it best to make himself scarce for the next few minutes and went to go help put away the blanket and dishes from their lunch. Fjorgynn had never tried to argue with the Silvertounge before, and though it might be amusing to watch him lose due to underestimating Loki, Thor didn't want to somehow get dragged into the debate.

By the time Thor returned with the packed up basket, Fjorgynn was obviously entirely too exasperated, and Loki was barely concealing his smugness. Whatever argument their grandfather had tried, Loki had clearly dismantled it with little effort. "We should return to the palace," Fjorgynn said grumpily.

Thor went to sit down beside his brother as Ofnir curled up in Loki's lap and apparently went straight to sleep. "What did you tell grandfather to make him look so perturbed?" Thor asked as everything was put back on the ship for their return journey.

"Oh, nothing really," Loki said as he stroked Ofnir's back, brushing down the thick quills that ran along the young wyvern's spine. "I just pointed out that if Ofnir were going to become violent, he would have already done so."

Thor was sure that there had to have been more to the conversation than that, but Loki didn't seem inclined to share. "You know, even if Father allows you to keep him, you won't be able to hold him forever. And soon enough he'll become too big." Wyverns averaged the size of large Midgardian Pachyderms not counting the length of their tail and neck.

"I know, but I've been working on a spell that should help keep him cool," Loki said.

"You have? Why?" Thor asked. There was no way that Loki would have known that he'd find a baby wyvern that would have such a need.

Loki gave Thor an exasperated look. "Well, I haven't been developing it for him," he said as if it were obvious. Loki hesitated for a moment then shrugged as casually as he was able, which didn't seem to be very much at all. "Summer is miserable for me... I thought I could do something about it."

"Summer?" Thor echoed. "It's not that bad is it?"

"When is the last time you've seen me out and about during summer?" Loki asked. Thor thought back but didn't get more than a moment to do so. "Exactly. I pass out from heat exhaustion before midday if we're outside doing anything remotely active."

"They say the summer on Svartalfheim is worse," Thor supplied. "And it's no Muspelheim."

"That is like saying the surface of the sun is worse than a desert... as if either is remotely enjoyable," Loki shot back. "A Jotunn would shrivel up and die within seconds of taking a step on that magma covered volcanic rock they call Muspelheim."
Thor couldn't help but be surprised. That was most certainly the closest he'd ever heard Loki come to admitting to not technically being Aesir. "Well, when we go exploring we'll be sure to leave Muspelheim alone."

"Honestly, you wouldn't be much better off there than me, Thor," Loki said. "Your boots would catch fire within seconds, I'd wager. You need dragonhide boots... or be a fire elemental or giant."

"Dragonhide boots it is then," Thor said.

Loki hummed and continued to pet Ofnir in his lap. The delicate bones of his wings were folded tightly against his back and side while his long tail was curled loosely around himself. The little wyvern let out a low whistle noise every now and again, and slowly Thor realized Ofnir was snoring. "You know, Father is going to have some things to say about you wanting to have a pet wyvern."

Loki's face twisted into a scowl. "Oh, what? Is he going to yell at us again? I tremble."

Thor sighed. "You know he only does that when he's worried," Thor said. "He hates being scared, and you have a tendency to scare him."

Loki rolled his eyes. "He acts as if Jarnsvidr is so very dangerous. It hardly even makes the top ten most dangerous places in the nine realms. Ofnir is from more hostile environments than Jarnsvidr could ever hope to be."

"Yet another reason father will have issue with Ofnir being your pet," Thor pointed out.

Loki just huffed and turned his attention to petting Ofnir's back as if he was a particularly dangerous and overgrown house cat. "Both of you worry too much. I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure," Thor said obligingly. Thor studied the sleeping reptile for a moment before looking up at Loki. "If father lets you keep him... what are you going to do when he gets larger than your room?"

"I'll think of something," Loki replied. "Perhaps some form of stable or a shelter out by the gardens where he won't be stumbled across."

Thor frowned as he tried to imagine that. "It would be an awfully large shelter, I would think..."

"Because the palace is so tiny?" Loki asked sarcastically. "Stop trying to poke holes in things. Ofnir will be a wonderful pet. You'll see." Thor wanted to argue further but then the ship they were on started to move down the river again, and he decided the conversation should probably just be dropped instead. He wouldn't win any argument with Loki if he didn't really think about what he'd say beforehand. Thor had lost enough debates to know that.

By the time they arrived back at the palace, it was nearing dinner, and the sky had turned into a rainbow of reds, yellows, purples, and dark blue. Ofnir had woken up and explored the boat, although he kept very close to Loki. The little reptile only seemed able to wander a few feet before wanting Loki's cold hand.

Fjorgynn wouldn't let Ofnir at the table, so Loki and Thor ate in Loki's room with Ofnir crawling over the bed and rubbing against Loki regularly. After eating their own food, Loki took a scrap of beef and held it out to Ofnir. The wyvern looked interested and crawled back over from where he had been pulling Loki's pillow out of its casing. The baby reptile crawled back up into Loki's lap as he examined the meat still being held out for him.
Loki and Thor both preferred their meat on the rarer side, and by this point, the beef had cooled off entirely so it should be the perfect thing for a hungry little carnivore. However, Ofnir didn’t seem all that interested. Loki frowned and cut a piece closer to the bone and therefore even more rare. "I don't think he likes beef," Thor observed as the wyvern just sniffed at the meat and then turned to curl up under Loki's chin again.

Loki frowned and rubbed Ofnir's head and neck with his cold hand. "That's odd. I would think that he would eat any meat that we gave him. I haven't ever heard of wyverns needing special diets..."

"Well, I don't imagine too many people keep wyverns as pets to ask," Thor replied. "Maybe a different sort of meat he'd like better."

Ofnir nuzzled closer to Loki, and the dark-haired prince thought for a moment. Finally, he got up from his seat, still cradling the baby wyvern in his arms. "Would you like to go to the market, Thor? I'm sure there's something down there Ofnir will eat."

"You want to take a wyvern into a crowded marketplace?" Thor asked incredulously.

"He's harmless," Loki dismissed. "Besides, until I make him a collar and enchant it so that it will keep him cool, he needs to stay near me."

Thor frowned. "I still think it's a bad idea."

"That's because you are a complete killjoy," Loki said as he started walking. Ofnir peered over Loki's shoulder at Thor like a giant cat, and the young Thunderer frowned at how... smug the little creature was. Was it even normal for wyverns to look smug? Thor didn't think so, but then again this was a creature that Loki had adopted so perhaps he should expect such strangeness.

"If you frighten an entire city with that thing I doubt mother and grandfather will be all that impressed with you," Thor said as he hurried a few steps to better keep pace with his brother. Ofnir never took his eyes off of Thor even as he laid his scaly cheek against Loki's shoulder. "And your pet is very creepy with how he stares... I feel like he's eyeing me as a future meal..."

"Don't be ridiculous, Thor," Loki said. "Ofnir doesn't have a stomach big enough to eat you yet."

Thor gave Loki an unimpressed glance. "Why, thank you, brother, that is so very comforting."

"You're quite welcome," Loki replied cheerfully.

Thor reached out to give Loki a slight shove of retaliation but quickly jerked his hand back when Ofnir attempted to bite back. Thor swore and held his hand behind his back. "He tried to bite me!"

"Aww, he was just protecting me, is all," Loki said as he reached up to stroke the wyvern's head indulgently. The little beast nearly purred in happiness, and Loki's grin widened. "He's just a baby, Thor. You can't expect him to know not to bite when you go waving a hand in his face."

"I was hardly waving a hand in his face," Thor protested. "I think you love that thing more than me..." he grumbled.

Loki rolled his eyes. "Oh please, Thor. Don't tell me you're jealous of Ofnir."

"No!" Thor denied instantly. "But I'd really rather you didn't find him trying to bite me amusing given what his bites can do."

"Oh alright, I'm sorry for finding it amusing," Loki said although Thor noted he didn't really sound
all that sorry. "I'll make sure he learns not to bite you when you try to push me around," he added sarcastically.

Thor shook his head and just turned his attention to where they were going. There weren't too many people out and about right then, but those that were couldn't help but stare. Loki seemed oblivious to it as he continued to scratch his new pet behind the jaw. Ofnir's bright eyes slowly closed as Loki lavished attention on him. Thor supposed he should really be used to Loki's desire to be the center of attention by now and in a way it was good to see him not being so reclusive like he had been lately, but perhaps it would have been nice to not take a dangerous creature to draw it out of him.

The two princes wandered around the city for about twenty minutes before Loki found the marketplace. Although quite a few stalls had closed for the day, there were still plenty of food vendors open. Thor noticed all the civilians gave them a very wide berth, but the young Thunderer certainly didn't blame them. "So what do you think he will eat, Loki?" Thor asked as they wandered past a few carts that were selling primarily spices and luxury items like perfume.

"I'm not sure… perhaps fish?" Loki mused. "I read something about fish being a part of dragon diets before… Not sure where."

Thor frowned. "Somewhat late for fresh fish…" Most fishermen brought in their product in early morning and by this late had already sold out.

"Well, who said it had to be fresh? I think Wyverns are known to be scavengers," Loki supplied as he made his way through the streets. Ofnir lifted his head and sniffed at the air a few times before turning his head to the left and letting out a noise that Thor hadn't yet heard before. Loki obviously heard it too as he stopped and turned. "I think he likes whatever is down that alley," Loki said pointing to the narrow and somewhat wet alley that was between two shops.

The brothers made their way down the narrow alley, being sure to avoid any puddles or unsightly piles of mess left by animals. When they were about halfway through the passage, they could make out banging and clanging. Thor and Loki exchanged looks before continuing on. The alley split, and down the right fork they found the source of the noises. A small boy was struggling to push open a large dumpster with one hand while also balancing a trash bin with the other. "Hello there!" Thor greeted.

The boy startled so badly that he dropped the trash he was carrying and slipped from the precarious perch on an old box to fall to the ground with a painful-sounding thud. "Nicely done, Thor," Loki muttered even as Thor hurried over.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you," he said as he stepped around the trash that had spilled to hold out a hand to the young boy. "I was just trying to be frie…" Thor broke off as the boy looked up with a face that was shockingly familiar.

The boy had a truly frightening resemblance to the Captain of America, although he was definitely thinner and had slightly finer features he had the same strong jaw and honest blue eyes. The blonde curls of the boy were pulled back enough that Thor could see the slightest of points on his ears, telling of at least partially Alfr blood probably mixed with Vanir. The boy was blushing a bright pink of embarrassment even as he took Thor's hand. Thor automatically pulled the other blonde up from the ground. "It's alright. I thought you were someone else," the not Rogers-son said while brushing himself off.

Loki chose that time to walk over, which was good as Thor was still reeling from the unexpected reminder of his shield brother. "Sorry about him," Loki said nodding towards Thor. "He's overly
loud. I’m Loki, and he’s my brother Thor.”

“The princes?” the boy asked. Loki nodded. “What are you doing back in an alleyway like this?”

“Well, Ofnir here seemed interested in what you’re throwing out there,” Loki said nodding down at the spilled trash. The wyvern was sniffing again and squirming to be let down. Loki sighed and awkwardly untangled Ofnir’s claws before putting his pet on the ground. Ofnir immediately started rummaging through the trash. He crawled halfway into the can and extended his long neck to poke around inside. After a moment, Ofnir pulled out a large chunk of meat and pinned it to the ground with one foot before starting to tear large pieces off.

The boy with the resemblance to America’s Captain frowned. “Are you sure he should eat that? It’s very old…”

“Wyverns have iron stomachs… what sort of meat is that?” Loki asked. “He wouldn’t eat the beef we offered him in the palace.”

“Um… I think that’s seal,” the boy answered. “I’m not sure though. I just clean up the shop.”

Loki hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose it makes sense he’d prefer water mammals to eat. What store do you work in?” he asked, turning fully to face the scrawny blonde.

The boy pointed behind him at the brick wall. “The owner sells all sorts of imported and exotic foods,” he supplied although he still looked a little bewildered. Ofnir was chomping noisily on a piece of bone he had found and ripped the flesh into smaller pieces for him to swallow whole.

Loki hummed thoughtfully and gave a slight nod. “And you are?”

The blonde looked even more surprised but answered anyway, “Sven Ó Ruairc, but like I said, I’m just an errand boy mostly.”

“Well, Sven. It is your lucky day, would you be so good as to go get your master for us?” Loki asked. Sven nodded and, though he gave the princes a confused look, went back into the shop through a door right beside the dumpster. Loki waited until the door closed again before turning to Thor. “Alright, what is it?”

Thor startled a little. “What’s what?”

“You’re staring at him as if he’s a ghost. Why?” Loki demanded as he bent down to pick up Ofnir again. The wyvern snarled, and Loki rolled his eyes before picking up a bit of meat to give to his pet. Ofnir quieted down and started eating the bits of seal he’d been offered.

“I just… he looks familiar is all,” Thor said. “Don’t know why.”

Loki gave his brother a look that screamed disbelief. “How in the Nine would an Alfr shop boy look familiar to you, Thor?”

“I don’t know. He just… does. Haven’t you ever seen someone that looked familiar even though you know you’ve never seen them before?” Thor asked. His tone was more defensive than he really meant for it to sound but he couldn’t help that.

Before Loki could press any further, the door to the shop opened, and Sven came back out with a rotund Vanir in tow. The shop owner had a thin mustache and goatee and seemed entirely too curious as to what was happening. “I’m Geir, I own this shop. Sven tells me you two are princes?” he didn’t seem entirely convinced of that.
Loki gave a charming smile. “Loki and Thor Odinson of Asgard, yes,” he greeted. “My pet Ofnir seems to like whatever it is you threw out today. What sort of meat was it?”

Geir still looked a little skeptical but also didn’t seem willing to risk being wrong and offending the sons of Odin. “Seal, wolf, shark and some goat,” he answered.

“Ah, well, could we find out which of those he’s eating now?” Loki asked as he hoisted Ofnir up a little higher so that Geir could see. Geir looked uneasy at the sight of Ofnir but supplied that it was indeed seal he was devouring. “And do you have more of it?”

Geir nodded. “A little. Not that big a seller.”

“Well, that looks like it might be changing. Could you send whatever you have left of it to the palace?” Loki asked. “Our grandfather will make sure you’re paid for it. Oh, and you might also want to be sure to get more in. Growing animals need plenty of food and all that.”

Geir still looked bewildered but nodded again. “Sven, go wrap up whatever is left of the seal. You can take it up to the palace. You know the way.”

“Do you now? How convenient,” Loki said with his smile still in place.

Sven nodded. “My mother works in the laundry.”

“Wonderful, thank you,” Loki said before starting back down the alley. “Come on, Thor. We’ve found what he’ll eat. We should head back before mother begins to worry.”

Thor looked back and forth between the two bewildered citizens and Loki a few times before offering Sven and Geir a smile. “Nice to meet you,” he said before hurrying after Loki. “What’s the big rush?” Thor asked as he finally caught up with his brother.

“No rush,” Loki said casually.

“Loki, tell the truth,” Thor said. “You’re in a hurry for some reason.”

Loki sighed and shifted Ofnir in his arms. He held up his blue hand. “It’s so warm out here my hand is starting to hurt.”

Thor frowned. “Is that normal?”

“How should I know?” Loki asked in annoyance. “It isn’t like I’ve ever walked around without a glamour on before.”

Thor held up his hands defensively. “Alright alright. Sorry, I asked,” he said. Ofnir swallowed the rest of his meal whole before starting to lick his chops. “Is that going to be enough for him?” Thor wondered aloud. “He ate it all very fast.”

Loki shrugged. “Who knows when the last time he ate anything was. We have no idea how long he was out in the forest on his own like that. It could have been days to weeks.”

“I’d think he would have starved to death if he was out there for weeks,” Thor said. “Don’t most babies need to be fed regularly?”

“Well, he is in the serpent family, and a lot of them have very slow digestion,” Loki pointed out as they walked. “It could be that he can go a while between meals. Or maybe you’re right, and he wasn’t out there that long. I would love to know how Ofnir ended up in those woods in the first
place…”

“We’ll probably never know for sure,” Thor said, and Loki nodded in agreement.

With Loki in a hurry, it didn’t take very long for the brothers to reach the palace again but when they got there, their mother was waiting for them. “Where were you boys?” she asked.

“Out looking for something that Ofnir would eat,” Loki said, hefting Ofnir higher in his arms. “We found a shop that sells seal, and he seemed to very much like that.”

“That does make sense,” Frigga agreed. There was silence between the three of them for a few minutes. “I spoke with your father.” Loki visibly winced. “He says that you may keep the wyvern… if precautions are taken.” Judging by Frigga’s expression, Thor could tell that she was not pleased by the decision and Thor was incredibly surprised to realize that their father had agreed to this without prodding from her.

Loki was clearly surprised as well. “R-really? I mean, of course, yes! I’ll be very careful, I promise!”

Frigga pointed at Loki warningly. “You be sure to be because the second he becomes aggressive I will send him to somewhere better equipped to handle such a dangerous animal, Loki. I’ll not have you or your brother endangered. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Mother,” Loki answered solemnly. “The utmost caution at all times.”

Their mother still did not seem entirely happy but nodded. “Go on then. And be careful.” The brothers immediately said they would before hurrying off. Ofnir crawled back up to half drape himself over Loki’s shoulder again, and now Thor was very sure that the little reptile was being smug.

“I can’t believe that Father said yes,” Loki said as he opened the door to his room. “I was sure he’d say no the second he heard wyvern.”

“Me too,” Thor agreed. “I wonder why he didn’t…”

Loki frowned and pet his wyvern’s neck. “Perhaps he’s trying to earn my favor for something later…”

Thor rolled his eyes. “Or, maybe, as crazy as this sounds, he’s just trying to make you happy.”

“You’re right… that does sound crazy,” Loki said as he fell back on the bed with Ofnir. The little wyvern crawled off of Loki’s chest to investigate the pillow he had been playing with earlier. “Still, I was expecting to have to convince him when we got back home that it wasn’t a bad idea.”

Thor sat down heavily beside his brother. “Looks as if Mother has more reservations than Father does. You might want to work on her instead. Figure out a way to make your pet seem less dangerous or something.”

“He’s a poisonous reptile… there’s only so much I can do,” Loki said as he pushed himself up to rest on his elbows. “I’ll need to make a collar for him soon though. My hand really is not comfortable,” he added holding up his blue hand. His skin slowly shifted back to his pale complexion, and then Loki shook it off to one side. “Feels like I’ve been holding it in boiling water for hours.”

“How close are you to figuring out the cooling spell or whatever it is?” Thor asked.
Loki shrugged. “Nearly there. I should only need another day, or so, I would think. I’ll work on it tomorrow.”

“What am I supposed to do all day then?” Thor asked.

“I don’t know… go entertain yourself by hitting things,” Loki said flippantly. “I’m sure you can come up with something.”

Thor thought hard for several minutes before he realized he had the perfect thing to do while Loki was working on his spell. He wanted to find out more about Sven and figure out if he was just freakishly similar looking to the Captain or if there was something more there. “You’re right. I’m sure I’ll be fine. You just do whatever you need to, Loki,” Thor said confidently. Loki looked a little concerned but nodded and didn’t question his brother further.

Chapter End Notes

**Sven**- I don't want to say too much here for fear of spoiling things but I've noticed a few things in my research that turned me towards the idea of having a set of not-Avengers showing up. Whether they are the Avengers before the Avengers are born or just freakishly similar to them I'll reveal at some point but not right now.

**Odin on Pets**- I imagine that Odin (being the man's man that he is) wouldn't have as much of a problem with Loki's desired pet as Frigga would. Oh, I'm sure he's not the most thrilled ever but I doubt he sees it as the worst option. After all, Loki could have picked a fire-breathing dragon instead. It's all about perspective.
Finding Sven the next morning was not so difficult. Thor made sure to get up as soon as he could make himself to go around the back of the palace where the servant entrance to the kitchens was. Thor tossed a stone in the air and then caught it again as he contemplated Sven's presence. Either it was mere coincidence that he had found someone in Vanaheim so similar in appearance to the good Captain, or the fates had always planned to bring Thor and his shield brothers together.

Thor didn't think that his presence in the past could have possibly changed whether or not Sven had existed. Especially since he had never left Asgard until the current trip. Thor caught the pebble in his hand again before tossing it even higher into the sky. Had he merely missed Sven the first time? That didn't seem all that far-fetched considering there was no reason to think that Sven was anything more than a regular shop boy if not for his striking appearance.

As Thor caught the stone again, he noticed the familiar yet not shop boy coming near. Sven hadn't seemed to have seen Thor was there yet, which was exceedingly good for Thor since, despite having been waiting, he hadn't put much thought into what he would say.

Of course, Sven noticed Thor sitting there as he got closer. Thor was expecting Sven to say something about his presence there, but the shop boy just kept walking towards the door with a heavy looking package of meat in his arms. Thor frowned but then jumped off the rock he was sitting on to hurry the few paces that separated the two of them. "Ho there, Ó Ruairc!"

"Prince Thor," Sven murmured in greeting with the slightest ducking of his head.

Thor frowned. "Come now, no need for titles. I would like to be your friend."

Sven looked up at that with a slight frown. "Why?"

"Why not?" Thor shot back. "Is there some reason why I shouldn't wish to be your friend? My brother and I will be in Vanaheim for the foreseeable future, but all of our friends are back in Asgard."

Sven still looked confused. "You know I'm just a shop boy... right?"

"So?" Thor asked. "Some of my best friends are nothing more than merchant's sons. I don't see how
"you're all that different. Or do you have so many friends already that you do not desire any more?"

"Well, no..."

"Then it's settled!" Thor announced. "We're friends now."

Sven looked at Thor with bewilderment. "... right. Well, I have to deliver this package for your brother."

"I will go with you," Thor said.

"It's just to the kitchens."

Thor sighed. "And? I'll walk with you. I haven't been to the kitchens here yet."

"They're only kitchens. Not that special," Sven muttered as he shifted his bundle in his arms with some difficulty and then started walking again.

"This palace is much different than the one back home," Thor pointed out as he walked. "I find it easier to simply assume everything is different and go from there."

"How is it different?" Sven asked as Thor opened the door to the kitchens for Sven.

"It is taller. And golden. Without these tiers that Grandfather's Palace has," Thor explained. "Loki would be better at describing it... I haven't his gift for words," he admitted.

Sven shrugged awkwardly as he carried his load into the kitchen, "It's alright. I have a good imagination." The young half-Alfr lifted the meat he was carrying up as best he could before dropping the paper wrapped package on one counter. "It's a good skill to have since I doubt I'll ever leave Vanaheim to see any of the sights of the realm myself."

"Who says you won't?" Thor asked. "If you join the army you could see any untold number of worlds throughout the realms."

"I'm no fighter," Sven said with a laugh. "I'm a scrawny half-Alfr who didn't even get magic to supplement it."

Thor frowned. "I wouldn't call you scrawny..."

Sven raised an eyebrow. "... compact?" Thor offered. Sven didn't look all that convinced, and Thor tried to sound more confident than he really was. Alfr, even half-blooded ones, did tend towards more slender frames and lithe muscles but Sven's frame really was more waifish than most. Not helping matter was the fact that he wasn't terribly tall for an elf. If Thor was right in his guess to Sven's age, the blonde was right about the same as Sif, and yet he was shorter than her by several inches. Thor gave an awkward smile, and Sven just shook his head and turned back to the door.

"Sven, dear," a sweet voice called, bringing up the shop boy short.

Sven turned back around and smiled. "Hello, Mother."

Sven's mother was the Alfr of his parents. Her long ears and golden tinted skin gave her away in an instant. Her pale platinum hair was twisted back into an intricate knot to keep it away from her face. "Are you working hard?" she asked.
"Yes, mother," Sven said as he straightened his posture automatically.

She smiled and reached over to brush her fingers along Sven's chin. "You're such a good boy," she murmured. "But don't work too hard. You need to be careful to not over exert yourself."

"I won't," Sven said with the same exasperation as Thor used when told to focus on his studies. Suddenly, Sven seemed to remember Thor was standing there. "Oh, um, Mother... this is Prince Thor. Prince Thor, may I present my mother Sorcha Bean Mhic Ruairc," he introduced formally.

"It's good to meet you, Prince Thor," Sorcha said. "I had heard of your visit."

Thor bowed to her. "It's good to meet you as well."

There was a call for Sorcha off in the distant corner of the kitchen beside where a large pig was rotating over an open flame without any spit. Thor stared for a moment and wondered if that was really a good use of magic. "If you'll excuse me... I have to get back to work. It was good to meet you, Prince Thor."

"Oh, you as well," Thor said as he tore his eyes away from the floating boar.

Sorcha smiled at them before going back to help with whatever it was they were making to drip over the boar as it turned. Thor shook his head. "In Asgard, we'd be using a spit," he murmured as he turned away.

"Yes, well, I had best be going back to work as well," Sven said. "It was nice talking to you, Prince Thor."

"I told you that you needn't be so formal, Ó Ruairc," Thor replied teasingly.

Sven made a face. "If you call me by Sven and not Ó Ruairc then I will not call you Prince," he said.

"Then a deal we have," Thor agreed as he followed Sven out of the kitchen and back outside. "So, what do you do when not working?" Thor asked, ignoring the fact that Sven had tried to end the conversation.

"There... isn't much," Sven muttered. "I... I draw mostly," he added though he sounded very embarrassed to be admitting it.

Thor was hard pressed to contain his excitement. Steven had also been an artist before he became the America Captain. Thor had seen his shield brother still drawing from time to time and thought his friend quite good at it. "I can barely draw a line figure," Thor chirped. "There is little time for such pursuits, but no epic would be complete without illustrations beside them."

Sven looked bewildered by that statement. "Er, yes, I suppose that's true," he said. "You know, you're not much like what I was expecting..."

"What were you expecting?" Thor asked curiously as they followed the path through the gardens to the back gate that servants used.

"Someone more like your brother, I guess. Self-important and... dismissive," Sven explained with some distaste.

Thor blinked several times. "Which brother is that?"
"The one you were with yesterday," Sven clarified. "The one that came flouncing in and ordered things before walking off like he had a million more important things to do."

"Loki wasn't feeling well yesterday," Thor said. "So he was a bit shorter of temper than normal. Please, do not take it personally." Sven didn't look convinced but nodded anyway. "How often do you work in the shop, anyway?"

"Every day nearly," Sven answered. "Mostly in the mornings. Yesterday was rare as we were cleaning and throwing out meat we couldn't sell."

Thor smiled widely. "Fantastic. Then after you are done your chores at the butcher you can return and have fun here at the palace," Thor said. "There aren't nearly as many our own age here in the palace as there are back home."

"There's plenty of kids in the city though," Sven pointed out. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather them be around instead? They... seem more your type, if you'll forgive me saying so."

"I am seeking to expand my type," Thor replied although he couldn't help but get defensive.

Sven held up his hands quickly. "I meant no offense. It's just... I'm not used to guys your size... being nice to guys my size. And I am half-Alfr..."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, it shouldn't have anything to do with anything at all, but a lot of people seem to think that it does," Sven said. "Bunch of bullies, really. But I promised my mother I wouldn't get into any more fights."

Thor frowned at that. "So what are you going to do if you aren't going to fight them?" he asked.

Sven hesitated. "I... hadn't thought of an answer to that yet. Maybe I'll just get good enough to avoid getting hurt so she won't be able to tell," he murmured thoughtfully.

"I'm sure that if you ask, Loki will help. He's used to fighting those larger than him," Thor offered.

"But he has seidr doesn't he? Doesn't that mean he'd fight with that more?" Sven asked.

"How did you know that?" Thor asked. There was no reason for a shop boy in Vanaheim to know that Loki preferred his magic to physical fighting. They weren't well known in other realms yet.

"His hand was blue and cold yesterday... wasn't that a spell of some sort?" Sven asked back in confusion.

"Oh, yes! Of course! Well, Loki is still a Prince of Asgard, so we've been training with hand to hand for all our lives," Thor pointed out. "I'm sure he could show you something." He was glad that seidr was so much more accepted here. Mainly since it led to show of Loki's true skin to appear as a simple spell to those that live here. That should put his brother more at ease. He'd have to remember to tell Loki about it later.

Sven didn't look as if he was happy with Thor's suggestion. "I... don't think that would be the best idea, Thor. Surely, both you and your brother have better things to do with your time?"

"We will be helping a friend, and that is a very noble and most worthwhile cause. Hardly a waste of our time," Thor declared. "And as I said before, you are my friend." Sven still looked bewildered but seemed to come to a decision not to question Thor further. Thor was glad for that as the more
he heard, the more the young Thunderer became convinced that Sven truly needed a friend. That was a role which Thor was more than happy to fulfill.

Meili knelt down beside a trampled path and hovered his hand over the different footprints. Luckily, it had rained in Asgard the night before, and that made excellent conditions for tracking the most recent batch of raiders. Odin had sent several guards to the outlying farms to try and prevent any more slaughters but he couldn't force the farmers to take the extra protection. The Aesir family that had been killed the night before had been one that had rejected the offer. The rain had saved more evidence than normal, so when Hermod had arrived early that morning, they'd been able to trail the raiders all the way into Jarnsvidr. The squadron of soldiers that they had been assigned were trailing a bit behind, and Hermod was rushing forward to try and scout the area.

Meili carefully traced the ridges in the mud where the different footprints slammed down over older ones. He was still mentally picking the different layers apart when Hermod came jogging back to where he was kneeling. "Any new clues?"

"It's odd..." Meili murmured. "I think they doubled back."

"Doubled back?" Hermod echoed. "Why in Asgaedia's name would they double back?" Meili didn't answer. He just kept studying the prints in the mud. Hermod looked around uneasily at the wet woods around them.

Though Hermod had been within the Jarnsvidr, the wood was far from his favorite place. They had tracked the raiders deeper into Jarnsvidr than most went and the woods had gotten darker and more dangerous. There was just an unpleasantness over the whole area, he thought. Especially when it was too quiet like it was currently. Hermod rested his hand on the hilt of his sword as he kept an uneasy watch on the trees around them. "How much further do you think they went?"

Meili shook his head and stood up fully. "With them running over their own tracks like this, it's hard to say," Meili said.

"They've never doubled back over their own tracks before," Hermod muttered.

Meili looked at the tracks and then in the direction that the majority of the footprints led. "Perhaps we're close to wherever they are hiding... or they knew they would be easier to track due to mud."

Hermod frowned. "If we were close to their hideout I would think that we would see smoke rising or some other evidence of it."

"We can still follow the tracks right, Meili?"

Meili nodded. "They are disguising their numbers... not the trail itself."

"Good," Hermod said before starting to hurry down the path again. Meili waited for a moment for the squad behind them to catch up a little more before starting to follow his friend. He didn't want the fighting force that they were with to lose track of them.

They tracked the group of raiders another half mile before they abruptly lost the trail at a river. Hermod scowled at the slightly swollen and fast-moving river that was in their way. "Fantastic..." he grumbled as the quieter God took a running leap to clear the water. He landed hard on the other side and nearly slipped back into the river on the mud that was there.

"Careful," Meili said as he looked up and down the river. He didn't see any obvious signs of the raiders having gotten out anywhere nearby. Though, it seemed likely to Meili that they had used the river to keep their tracks from being followed.
Hermod went a little further into the forest to try and find any sign of where the tracks might pick up again. By the time the squad following them caught up to where Meili was waiting, Hermod had returned with a displeased look on his face. "We lost them. I can't find any tracks up or down the river in over a mile."

"The All-Father will not be happy," Meili muttered.

"No. But there isn't much we can do about it," Hermod said. "We can't follow tracks that aren't here. At least we now know for certain they are hiding somewhere in Jarnsviradr."

Meili nodded in agreement. He would have preferred better news to give to Odin, but these raiders were crafty and knew how to hide. "It is definitely no band of trolls," he murmured. Trolls wouldn't have thought to double back or use rivers to cover their tracks.

"Even more news he will not like," Hermod sighed. "We should head back. There is little else we can do here without a trail to follow. Perhaps we should ask Odin to send Geri and Freki out with us to try and find these raiders."

"Going into rivers will confound the wolves just as badly as us," Meili commented.

"This feels bigger than just random raiders," Hermod said as he turned and started back the way they came. Meili looked around one last time before following. "They have shrouded the border in magic, they hide their numbers, they manage to elude all the forms of tracking we've tried... whoever is behind this, knows our defenses better than they should."

Meili was quiet although he nodded in agreement. King Odin and Heimdall were working together to try and disperse the magical fog over the outlying reaches of Asgard that was blocking Heimdall's sight. The block had to have appeared slowly to escape notice, which was unlike any other shielding spell that the King had knowledge of. That, of course, meant that the method to break sorcery was also yet unknown. The Queen may be of more use in removing the barrier, but she was not in Asgard.

"I dislike failing King Odin..." Hermod said as they trudged back through Jarnsvitr. "I hope he will not be too disappointed with us."

"He may want to assign other scouts to the job," Meili replied.

Hermod looked over at his friend with a stricken expression on his face. "Meili! Don't say such things! I don't want to be removed from my duties!" he exclaimed. He hadn't thought that would be an option but now that Meili had brought it up, Hermod couldn't help but worry.

"The All-Father will do what is best for Asgard, and we cannot seem to find the culprits," Meili pointed out.

"Well, we'll just have to try harder!" Hermod declared. "There must be something that we have missed. There just must be!"

Meili shrugged. "If you say so, Hermod."

"You are no help whatsoever."

Chapter End Notes
Sorcha Bean Mhic Ruairc- If anyone knows the tradition way of naming in the Gaelic culture please tell me if that married name is right or not. I have been trying to find out how to use traditional Gaelic last names as the Alfr culture is going to be heavily based off that culture opposed to the Vikings of Asgard. But it's been driving me crazy. I am pretty sure that her last name translates to 'wife of the son of Ruairc' but though my own name in real life is pretty dang Gaelic, I myself do not speak it nor live in a place where it is widespread to just ask someone.

Thoughts on Ragnarok Movie: *THAR BE SPOILERS AHEAD* I wasn't so fond of Loki's new armor, but then I hadn't liked it in the previews either. I guess they were trying to separate him from his crazy take over the world role, but I didn't find the outfit he wore in Ragnarok very distinctive. It was bland and... blue(?) for some reason. It looked blue to me. But that was cosmetic and easy to ignore. While I appreciate them adding in a bit of Odin's warmongering type backstory to the MCU they did make some truly... odd choices with the storyline. While I wasn't expecting Hela to be Loki's daughter in this version and I was glad she was still somehow related to the rest of the family... I was baffled by the idea to make her Odin's daughter and older than Thor at that. Like Thor really needed another sibling trying to kill him here? Also turning Fenrir into Hela's... mount? Pet? Whatever he was... seemed a disservice to having such a badass wolf at your disposal.

I did really adore Hela's powers though. Generating weapons en mass like that? Yeah... badass and something that seemed unique and fitting to a death goddess. Probably going to take that from the movie for my Hela. Although the rest of her backstory will obviously not work in my story as I had her slated to being Loki's daughter like she was in myth. Also, the idea of Odin having some weird change of heart about how to rule and turning more benevolent was interesting though they didn't get into the reason behind it. Skurge, in particular, was nicely done. Then again I just like Karl Urban... Surtur was pretty awesome too despite only seeing him for two scenes. So overall, I enjoyed the movie quite a lot, but I'm not sure how much of it I'm going to be able to include in my story. I'll try my best to get what I can of the movie into my story without jumping the shark or anything. Promise. Also who else adored the story about Loki's trick when the princes were young? And all of his reactions during the ThorV.Hulk fight? Oh my gosh... so great... I bust out laughing pretty loud at his cheer at Thor being slammed ala Avengers. He looked like it was so cathartic, lol.
Thor was playing with Forseti in the gardens situated in the middle of the castle. Their mothers were both sitting at a nearby table as Forseti played in some sand that had been previously sculpted into a wavy area around a large perfectly spherical stone placed dead center in the garden. Thor was allowing Forseti to bury his feet in a giant mound of white sand. "Loki, darling," Thor heard his mother say and turned his head. "Did you eat the breakfast I sent to you?" Ofnir was still not welcomed at the table and though Loki had been working on a way to allow Ofnir to be without him all of yesterday he hadn’t deemed to come to breakfast that morning.

"Yes, Mother," Loki said as he stepped down into the garden. He put Ofnir on the sandy ground and Thor noticed the Wyvern was sporting a new collar. Primarily it was made of thick braided leather, but there was a metal plate full of inscriptions sitting at the base of Ofnir's long neck. Ofnir sniffed over the sand before wandering over to some bushes as Loki sat down beside Thor and Forseti.

"Dear, are you sure you should let the Wyvern wander?" Frigga asked. Nanna looked mildly nervous as well as Ofnir continued to investigate the bush.

"He doesn't stray far from me, Mother," Loki answered without worry. "Hello, little nephew, I see you're making progress hiding Thor... usually you should wait until he's laying down though. It would be easier to bury him."

Thor rolled his eyes. "We've been waiting for you," Thor told him.

"Oh?"

"Woki! Pretty wights!" Forseti said grabbing Loki's wrist and tugging lightly.

Loki smiled some and glanced at Thor who just shrugged. "Pretty lights, Loki," he said. "Who can say no to such a request?"
Loki's smile widened, and he used his free hand to summon his seidr. Forseti nearly squealed with delight as the air around them was suddenly filled with transparent green animals running and flying and practically dancing for the toddler's amusement. Forseti let go of Loki's hand to try and catch hold of a dragonfly that buzzed past.

"Perhaps I should study the art of illusions," Nanna said thoughtfully. "Forseti tires of traditional toys so quickly."

"These sorts aren't that hard," Loki offered without looking away from the illusions he was manipulating. A green and gold rabbit poked its head out at Forseti from behind the rock, and the toddler quickly went to chase it in a circle. "Since I'm not bothering to make them all full-sized or realistic."

Thor waited until Forseti scampered past after the rabbit before scooping his nephew up and attacking his soft stomach with one hand. Forseti shrieked with laughter and squirmed. "Thor! Nooo!"

"I'm afraid so, Nephew!" Thor said as he continued to tickle the boy mercilessly. "You cannot sneak by me without paying your due!"

"Woki! Hewp!" Forseti cried even as he broke into more laughter and kicked uselessly to try and get loose.

With a few quick motions of his hands, Loki brought all of his illusions to swarm over Thor. Thor made a show of shouting and fighting off the light animals even as he fell over and let Forseti go so that he tumbled safely onto the ground. Loki quickly swept the boy up as Forseti laughed in delight. Loki tossed the boy up into the air a short distance before catching him again. "There. Saved from the terrible Thor," he said with a grin.

"Terrible?" Thor echoed from where he was laying on his back in the sand. He didn't bother rolling over, so he was still looking at them upside down. He would no doubt still have sand in his hair later on that night, but he didn't care. "That seems a little harsh, Brother."

Loki's smile went wider as he bent over to look at Thor. "Perhaps you should not terrorize our nephew then," he suggested sweetly as Forseti climbed up onto Loki's shoulders and wrapped his arms around Loki's head. "Isn't that right, Forseti?"

"Yes!" Forseti agreed loudly. "Terbell Thor!"

Loki's lips twitched. "Hear that? You're terbell."

"I'll show you 'terbell,' Brother," Thor said as he rolled back to his feet and lunged halfheartedly at Loki. Forseti laughed again as Loki quickly backed away. "I will catch you both and make you pay for such slander!"

"Run, Woki!" Forseti ordered as Thor lunged again.

Loki obligingly ran to the other side of the courtyard, forcing Thor to chase after them. Their mothers just shook their heads at their antics as Loki allowed Thor to hunt them for almost five minutes. Finally, Loki paused at a small tree on the edge of the garden and held Forseti up. "Climb up, Nephew. I will teach Thor a lesson."

Thor deliberately slowed to allow Forseti to pull himself up and get firmly in place. Once Forseti was settled, Thor lunged and plowed into his brother. Loki was, however, no longer there. Thor ended up head first into a bush. Forseti laughed wildly as Thor fought to get free of the branches.
"You shouldn't underestimate me, Brother," Loki said lightly from somewhere behind him.

Thor managed to get untangled and turned to face an amused looking Loki. "You're getting too good at that," Thor said. Loki just grinned. Loki was advancing quickly with his skill at illusions. Thor had expected to be able to go another few years before falling for that trick again. Thor pushed himself up and lunged at Loki, not even considering that it might be another illusion. This time Loki danced backwards, so Thor figured that this Loki was real.

Forseti was laughing and clapping from his perch on the tree and Thor risked a glance to make sure his nephew wasn't getting too exuberant. The last thing anyone wanted was the toddler falling from a tree. When Thor looked over, however, Forseti started laughing even harder. Thor was bewildered and a little alarmed. The boy's face was turning quite red from how hysterical he apparently thought something was. Thor paused and looked over at a much too innocent looking Loki. "What did you do?"

Loki put a hand on his chest with mock surprise. "Why, Thor, I did nothing!" he claimed entirely unconvincingly.

Thor glanced between Loki and Forseti before turning to his mother. "Mother! Loki has done something, but I don't know what!"

Frigga smiled, and Nanna hid her own smile behind her hand, neither reaction made Thor feel any better. "Loki, it is not nice to tease your brother so," Frigga said.

"I'm not teasing him," Loki denied. "I'm entertaining my nephew."

"Loki."

Loki sighed but then waved his hand, and Thor noticed a green glimmer disappear from around his head. Thor raised a hand and touched his skull even though there wouldn't be anything left. He didn't know what Loki made appear around him, but he was sure it was something embarrassing.

Ofnir crawled out from where he had been in the bushes to where Loki was standing. He pawed at Loki's foot and let out a plaintive chirp. Loki automatically bent down to pick the young lizard up. "Thor! Catch me!" Forseti said from the tree. Thor barely had time to swing around with his arms open before the toddler leapt. Forseti laughed as Thor managed to hold on to the boy.

"Well, isn't this a sight!"

Thor turned to see Baldr and Hodr stepping out into the courtyard. "Daddy!" Forseti squealed before squirming until Thor was forced to put the boy down. Baldr laughed and ducked down to pick up his charging son. "Woki made Thor a bunny!"

Thor frowned and glared at his brother who was determinedly not looking back. "A bunny?" Hodr echoed, sounding amused.

"Yes, Unca Hodr! He had big floppity ears an' e'erything!" Forseti explained with huge arm motions that Hodr, of course, couldn't see.

Finally, Loki looked over to see Thor's unamused glare. "It was only an illusion, Thor. Lighten up," he said as he scratched Ofnir under the chin to make the wyvern purr. Thor sighed and figured that at least he hadn't been actually turned into a rabbit. Or any other small creature. Hopefully, Loki wouldn't be doing that so much this time around.

“Did your meetings go well, dear?” Frigga asked as she tugged her needle through a piece of linen.
“Hm? Oh, well enough, I suppose, Mother,” Baldr said as he carried his son over to the table and picked up a few small pastries that had been set out for the two noble ladies. “Although some of the Alfr are being absolutely ridiculous. They don’t want to come to an agreement no matter how much we try to accommodate them.”

“An agreement about what, brother?” Thor asked as he and Loki also wandered over.

Baldr shrugged. “Well, the Alfr have never been fond of their position under Vanaheim’s rule. What with Vanaheim now come under Asgardian rule they seek their complete independence again,” he explained as he sat down at one of the chairs. Hodr took the seat across from him. “Unfortunately, they’ve been under Vanaheim’s jurisdiction for centuries upon centuries at this point, and their governments and cultures are so interwoven at this point there really isn’t such a thing as a clean break. They don’t seem to care.”

“They argue that without Asgardian interference they would never have lost the war to the Vanir in the first place so they shouldn’t be forced to endure Vanir rule,” Hodr added. “Which, they might have a point about.”

Thor frowned and pulled up his own chair. “How so?” History was far from Thor’s strongest subject and even less studied were any wars not directly involving Asgard.

“We lent the Vanir a large number of troops,” Loki supplied as he offered a cracker to Ofnir. The wyvern sniffed it with interest but turned his nose up at it.

“Well, not quite,” Hodr said. “We gave them troops to turn the tide but ‘lent’ implies something a bit different. Grandfather Fjorgynn paid Grandfather Bor quite handsomely for the strength needed to win that war. Of course, that all turned sour just five centuries later when Grandfather Bor decided that he didn’t want Vanaheim to have access to Idunn’s apples at all anymore.”

“Vanaheim nobles are still a bit sour about that,” Baldr said even as he shook his head to deny the tea that Nanna offered him. Thor also turned the offered drink down, but Loki accepted a cup from their mother.

“The Alfr have been arguing to be allowed to separate for the past two thousand years,” Nanna added. “Things are looking to turn violent again, unfortunately. Baldr and Hodr have been working closely with King Fjorgynn, King Njord, and Freyr to try and keep blood from being spilt.”

“Speaking of,” Baldr said suddenly. “Since we’re all here, Freyr sent word that he and Gerd will actually stop by in the next week to speak to us about the situation face to face for once rather than through messengers and speaking spells.”

Nanna looked surprised. “Gerd is coming too? They almost never leave their home even when Freyr just comes by for a friendly visit.”

“Perhaps because this is for official business they are deciding to join their husband,” Frigga said as she poured some more tea into her cup. Thor cast as subtle a look at Loki as he could manage but his brother seemed to have suddenly found petting Ofnir an entirely attention consuming activity. Thor glanced back at his mother and saw she too was looking to Loki but then noticed Thor looking at her. Frigga gave a slight shake of her head before turning to Baldr. “Did they say when specifically they’d be arriving?”

“No. Only that it would probably be late one evening within a week,” Baldr answered. “Considering they’ve spent the past several months trying to quell the unrest they probably have several things to tie up still.”
Frigga nodded and put her cup back down in its saucer. “Well, do let us know if they give you any more of a hint than that, Baldr, dear.”

“Of course.”

After that, the chatter moved on to less politically charged topics. Frigga asked Loki how he had made Ofnir’s collar and near instantly Thor was lost with the discussion. He was proud he managed to follow the first few sentences his brother uttered, but the second he started getting into ‘deep runes’ Thor had been entirely lost. Thor had absolutely no idea what deep runes were or how they were different from other not-deep runes. Thor wasn’t the only one lost. Forseti was squirming with boredom on his father’s lap.

“Come, Nephew,” Thor said quietly as he got up. “Let us go find something else to do,” he suggested. Forseti smoothly went from Baldr’s lap to Thor’s arms with a grin wide enough to rival one of Thor’s own. Thor returned the smile and carted his nephew off to where conversations that he couldn’t understand weren’t being held. Nanna gave Thor a beautiful smile of thanks as well.

Thor carried Forseti off to explore somewhat aimlessly. Forseti barely waited for ten minutes before climbing his way up to sit on Thor’s shoulders like he had with Loki previously. “You like being on people’s shoulders, I see, Nephew.”

“I wike being high up!” Forseti chirped. “When I’m big an’ strong wike Daddy Imma make a huuuge tower an’ wive in da top!”

Thor chuckled. “Your mother won’t like that,” he commented.

“Momma can wive in da bottom wiv Daddy,” Forseti continued.

“Ah, of course,” Thor agreed.

Forseti seemed to decide that being the one on Thor’s shoulders meant that he should dictate where they were going and began giving Thor directions. Not having anything better to do, Thor followed them without fuss. The two young Gods ended up travelling in several large circles and ending up in rooms that were obviously not often used.

Eventually, although it probably took four times as long as it should have, Thor and Forseti ended up in the room that had been assigned to be Forseti’s temporary nursery. Thor put his young nephew down, and Forseti barreled across the room to throw himself into the stomach of a very large stuffed animal of some sort. Thor thought it looked rather ugly, but he had to admit it was large enough to be a pseudo bed for a toddler of Forseti’s size, especially with how oversized its stomach was. Thor thought it might have been a bear… or possibly a cow. “And who is this?” Thor asked as he came closer. Maybe it was a dog, now that he was looking at it.

“Dis is Afrid!” Forseti said as he hugged the stuffed animal tightly and made it’s oversized head fall to one side. “He’s my bests friend!”

“Ah, well then it is good to meet you, Afrid,” Thor said as he hunkered down beside his nephew and his giant stuffed animal.

“Unca Hodr gave him to me,” Forseti said with the same huge grin that he had before. “He keeps monsters away!”

“Monsters?” Thor echoed, unable to help but be worried about just what Forseti though he had to be afraid of.
Forseti nodded earnestly. “Yes, wike dwagons an’ dwagr.”

“Draugr?” Thor guessed. Forseti nodded, tightening his grip on Afrid. “How do you even know what draugr are?” He hadn’t been told about the undead creatures until he was much older than Forseti.

“Da cook back home towd me… Momma was reawy mad,” Forseti muttered.

“I’m sure she was,” Thor muttered. “Well, you have a fine guard here in Afrid. I can tell,” he said confidently. “No draugr or dragon could possibly get past him. I’m sure of it.”

Forseti beamed. “Dat’s what Daddy said!”

Thor smiled down at his young nephew. “Well, your father is very smart. Now, how about you show me what else you have here in your room?” Forseti was springing across to a box full to the brim with toys in half a heartbeat. Already the youngster was chattering on, and Thor sat fully down as the first few toys were dragged over to him.

Chapter End Notes

_Asgard-Vanaheim-Alfheim Conflict-_ This is complicated really. For real world equivalent Alfheim and Scotland have a thing or two in common. They are their own entity but not fully autonomous because Vanaheim has some control and Asgard has control over both. Alfheim really doesn't like this set up but at this point there isn't about to be a vote or anything about it seeing how all three are still governed by monarchies and not democratic governments. This conflict has been building pretty much from the start but really picked up speed when the Vanir lost to the Asgardians in 7903 AT (Asgardian Time). So now that it's 10,711 AT things are coming pretty close to the boiling point. The Asgardians are only now paying any real attention to it as they've had other wars going on and such to distract from what they considered, until recently, internal disputes between two of their territories.
Odin Alone

Chapter Summary

While Odin is home alone, he cannot help but worry about his people and his family.

Chapter Notes

Odin wasn't going to originally get a chapter while the family was away, but he decided he wanted fleshing out.

Odin frowned as he stared down at the burned out village. "This is the third one," Vili murmured on Odin's left side.

"There's probably not going to be any survivors for this one either," Ve added with a heavy sigh. "This is so senseless."

Odin didn't say anything at all. Even from the distance they were at, on top of a ridge, he could see several bodies hacked to pieces and slaughtered animals in the fields. Odin was glad they hadn't brought Loptr with them like they had originally intended. Loptr might be old enough to go to battle by their father's decree, but their giant baby brother didn't seem to deal very well with the sight of it. And to call this a 'battle' would have been inappropriately generous, anyway. "Come on," Odin said as he guided his horse down a small goat path that leads to the village. Vili and Ve followed behind him on their own specially bred warhorses with identical looks of apprehension on their faces.

The smell of death and rot was thick and cloying on the air, made all the worse by the heat of the summer sun. The brothers gagged on the stench that got exponentially worse the closer to the village that they travelled. Flies buzzed loudly over the corpses, and various carrion birds were starting to peck and rip into the victims. Odin tried his best to not look too closely at any of the bodies sprawled carelessly on the ground. There were women and children among the dead and, though Odin had been raised to expect every citizen of Asgard to defend themselves when necessary, to senselessly and pointlessly attack a village for no reason but to kill was the exact opposite of honorable.

A house creaked and groaned before collapsing onto itself. A plume of sparks and smoke escaped into the air as the wreckage continued to burn away. Putting out the fire would be pointless. Nobody was around to want to save the village, and there was no risk of the fire spreading very far. This particular community had centered itself around fishing for the most part and what fields it had were mostly for livestock. The few crops they had were further out and weren't in danger of catching fire by chance. Still, the scene of the quaint houses turning black and falling in on themselves was far more morose than Odin had been prepared for. This trip had been intended to be a vacation of sorts away from their father and his increasingly aggressive moods.

A marketplace in the center of the village looked as if a storm had erupted right in the middle. All
the stalls were tossed about, and most were on fire. Even more bodies of helpless villagers were strewn across the ground, and a few were also nailed to a tree and hanging from what few buildings were still standing. "I think 'senseless' falls short of this," Vili said as the brothers allowed their horses to pick their way daintily through the devastation. One unfortunate woman had been chopped in half, and her lower portion was a good ten feet from her top.

"Yes, it does fall short," Ve agreed.

Vili looked like he might be about to grow physically ill. "None of them have weapons," he said. "They were entirely defenseless. Some are even still in bed clothes."

"Probably attacked early this morning or late last night," Odin muttered. "When they would have no way of being prepared for an attack." This area was not even known as being particularly dangerous. Not until very recently, that is. All three of the villages the brothers had come across had been similarly caught off guard within the last few weeks. Odin frowned at the craters that were scattered throughout the town. More than a few had the pulverized remains of people within them or had destroyed the majority of a building.

The craters were becoming more and more numerous, and Odin felt a sense of dread as he looked at them. Such impacts could not have been made from mortal weapons. Or even very many weapons of the Gods. He knew of a few, but those they had been promised were worthy were wielding them all. Such slaughter cast doubt on that decision. Not that it had been Odin's decision, to begin with, but that was not the point.

Past the market and upon a slight hill they found the burned out remains of the longhouse. The dried thatch roof had ignited far too quickly, and in the dry heat that had surrounded this area for the last few days, the rest of the wood had caught almost as immediately. The flags that had flown from the front of the longhouse had been torn to shreds, and now those tattered remains fluttered in the wind.

Sitting in front of the longhouse were nine figures looking far too pleased with themselves. Judging from the dozens of empty barrels and roasted animal remains that were spread out along the several tables they had most likely pulled from the longhouse, the group had enjoyed quite the celebration. "Brothers!" the one in the center cheered, his red eyes inherited from Queen Bestla glinting like fresh blood in the sunlight. His grin was full of teeth and welcoming, but was so unusual to see on his face that it made them uneasy. "I was not expecting to see you for several months yet."

Cul Borson raised one dark eyebrow and looked honestly confused. "What do you mean?"

"This slaughter!" Odin near yelled while gesturing to the ruined village around them.

Cul snorted. "Come now, Odin, even you must recognize warfare when you see it."

"We are not at war with Midgard!" Vili protested. Midgardians were practically infants compared to Asgardians. Just a handful of Asgardian warriors could decimate the entire globe that the
Midgardians lived on and these nine seemed to be making an effort to prove that.

"And this will keep it that way," Cul said with an absent-minded gesture with his cup. "You should have seen these mortals flee. They never even thought to fight back."

"That makes it worse, Cul!" Odin snapped.

"If they cannot find the courage to fight then they don't deserve to live anyway," Cul dismissed.

Ve shifted where he was standing just behind Odin's right shoulder. "You attack them relentlessly. It is not honorable," he said.

Cul rolled his eyes and got to his feet. As most of the brothers Borson were, Cul was a towering muscled figure although with harsher features than Odin, Vili or Ve. Cul stepped closer to where his three younger brothers were, and the silence grew suddenly tense and uncomfortable. "War is not always honorable, Ve. You're going to have to realize that. You three leave Midgard to me, and Father will need not worry about it rising up like the other realms threaten to do."

"Ruling by fear is not ruling at all," Odin argued, doing his best to keep as even-tempered as possible. Getting emotional around Cul never helped anything. He only ever got worse when tempers were involved.

"Seems to be working well enough for me," Cul said with an unhinged smile. "Do not blame me for you being too soft to remove the weak from the herd."

"They aren't animals," Ve said.

"No, they are worse," Cul replied casually. "They are insects on the dung of animals." The eight figures behind Cul chuckled at that, and a few fingered the hammers that they had all been gifted. Unlike the one hanging from Cul's belt, they all had hammers with proper length handles. "It was so easy. All we need do is attack a few of their outlying settlements, and by the time we turn our attention to their big ones they're far too scared to bother fighting back."


Cul shrugged. "What does it matter so long as it works? I would think you three would approve of this. The more wars we avoid, the fewer nightmares for poor little Loptr baby," Cul said mockingly. "You shouldn't coddle him so. He's old enough to grow up."

"And you should stop picking on him," Ve snapped. Cul had never seemed to like their adopted younger brother. Odin supposed that the eldest had even become less and less favorable to their mother over the years, but he at least tried to be polite to her. Cul never bothered to be kind to Loptr.

Cul rolled his eyes. "You three should leave. Father will get other realms for you to busy yourself with and then you'll see the benefit of making sure these weaklings show you the proper reverence." Odin decided that arguing again that fear was in no way reverence would be pointless. Cul couldn't seem to conceive of any way to maintain order without forcing it upon others. Cul was no King. He was a tyrant. Odin hoped beyond hope that when their father heard of these latest actions, Bor would finally put his foot down in regards to Cul's behavior.

Odin woke up still tired. He had deliberately not thought about Cul in years. Not since their father had died and could no longer bring Cul up seemingly every other day. Bor never forgave Odin for what happened with Cul even though Odin had explained over and over that Cul hadn't been in the least bit stable. Bor hadn't cared though. Cul had always been Bor's favorite.
Odin sighed and got to his feet. The day was still early enough that the sun hadn't risen, but Odin doubted that he would be able to get back to sleep with such unpleasantness on his mind. The King stood on his balcony and let the crisp morning breeze take away the memory of death baking in the summer heat and the sound of thousands of flies buzzing in his ears. Though there was a period of time where Odin had eagerly gone to battle and been almost as ruthless as Cul that had been a long time ago, and he'd never been a fan of the aftermath. That was why instead of killing the Jotnar he'd settled for taking their power from them. But now it seemed as if that decision was coming back to bite him.

Laufey probably didn't have any control of the bandits attacking their borders, Odin realized, but Laufey also didn't have much incentive to try and stop it either. Odin had known that essentially jailing all of the Frost Giants within their realm would be difficult and controversial but he was sick and tired of killing by that point. He was sure that they would survive for as long as Odin had decreed they would be without the Casket but they seemed to be growing desperate far sooner than he anticipated. Desperate enough to try and attack Asgard. The only thing they could conceivably do were these quick terrorizing attacks; the fact that they echoed Cul's tactics from so long ago was a cruel coincidence. One that he wished his mind had been so kind as to not point out.

Odin stared out at the horizon for another few moments before turning to wash and dress. He didn't even entertain the idea of eating. Odin never ate well after dreams of slaughters. Or war for that matter. Frigga was always telling him to eat more.

After dressing, Odin started wandering the palace. He had nothing, in particular, he felt like he could devote his attention to with his dream still on his mind. Odin wandered aimlessly and silently for nearly a half hour before growing annoyed with himself. Moping about the palace wasn't going to fix anything about the situation at their borders. He needed some way to stop the bandits from attacking his people, but there was little to no way to tell which one of the hundreds of portals, both big and small, that they would use.

Even if Odin spread his entire army across the border, he knew that would only reduce the number of attacks and leave his other borders dangerously unprotected. Muspelheim was still a hostile force that, despite the defeat of Surtur, very much worried Odin. Sindr, Surtur's daughter, seemed to be possibly worse than her father had been, and only Asgard's massive army and possession of the Casket of Ancient Winters kept them at bay.

Odin had managed to keep the attacks on their borders between just his people and Laufey, but he had to stop them before any of the other realms found out and took that as a sign that Asgard could be openly attacked. Odin was thrilled that he'd not had to bring Thor or Loki into war so young. They were currently of age to do so, but there had never been any cause. Odin would do whatever he could to keep it that way. His own childhood had been filled with nightmares of battle and war, which, upon reflection, probably had not resulted in the most benevolent decisions he'd ever made. Odin hadn't realized the full extent of the consequences of such things until his parents had adopted Loptr and he'd had to see the younger prince suffer. Only then had he realized that cruelty was not the way to win wars but Bor hadn't been of the same mind, and Bor had been the one waging those wars at the time. Odin and his people had thankfully enjoyed seven hundred years or so of relative peace.

"My King," someone called.

Odin paused and turned halfway to see a familiar God coming closer. Kvasir's eyes were like two glinting stars, pale and piercing, and somehow they seemed to hold knowledge not even Odin could fully comprehend. The Norns were similarly impossible to fathom, but Kvasir was a kind soul, so Odin was less hesitant dealing with him than he was with his 'aunts.' Odin found the Norns far too
meddlesome and cruel to enjoy dealing with on a regular basis. "Kvasir, it is unusual seeing you here rather than in Nornheim." Odin gestured for Kvasir to follow him before starting to walk again.

"I have had a thought that I felt I needed to share with you," he said as he fell into step beside Odin. "I have been thinking on the situation with the raiders at our borders."

"Have you now?" That wasn't so very surprising to Odin. Kvasir often took it upon himself to try and solve problems that didn't directly involve him. He found it stimulating, he said.

Kvasir nodded. "The problem, as it seems to me, is that there are too many entrances to Asgard."

"As always, correct, Kvasir. But there isn't much to be done about that," Odin pointed out. "Pathways through Yggdrasil cannot be closed." Well, more precisely, not without far too much power used and wreaking havoc over the realms. Closing so many entrances would be too much even for the power of the Odin Force and most likely destroy the entire realm of Asgard or possibly more.

Kvasir seemed to look off into the distance as if peering through the wall and beyond. Kvasir could not see what existed through an incredible range and the various realms like Heimdall could, but Odin often wondered if the wise God saw something far more difficult: the weavings of fate itself. Such a thing would make sense, but Kvasir had never bothered to confirm it one way or the other. Wise did not necessarily translate into being forthcoming with information. "I am not saying we close the pathways. Not in the conventional sense," Kvasir said, turning his silver eyes to Odin.

Odin wasn’t sure he knew or liked where this conversation was going. “So what are you suggesting, Kvasir?” he asked.

“There is a method, is there not, to block an entrance to those pathways? That would not destroy them but render them unusable for others to attack us with,” Kvasir said with a few hand gestures off towards some indiscriminate direction.

“Yes, there is such a method,” Odin confirmed. “But it is temporary, and by the time the last of the portals were blocked the first would be in need of being blocked again. I cannot spend all my time running back and forth to the portals and sealing them.” He had a Kingdom to run after all, and he would eventually have to fall into his Odin Sleep and then what would happen?

Kvasir put a finger to his bearded chin and teased the reddish blonde stubble there. “Perhaps there is some way to anchor the spell then?” he suggested thoughtfully. “It would undoubtedly take time to construct, but I see it as the only method of stopping these attacks that would not increase tensions between Asgard and Jotunheim. I believe you do still want to avoid that, yes?” Odin frowned but nodded in agreement anyway.

If Odin and Laufey were forced into open war again no doubt it would end with the death of one, or both, of them. That would result in the never good outcome of children on thrones. Neither Thor nor Helblindi, Laufey’s heir, were in any way ready to take over their respective dominions. Helblindi was closer to an acceptable age and learning to take over the act of ruling, but Thor hadn’t even reached his First Majority yet.

“If we wish to avoid that,” Kvasir began, “then we must find a way to wall off these portals as we would any other entrance to Asgard.”

“A wall it would have to be,” Odin said absently. “The spells to block off an entrance to a realm made by the roots of Yggdrasil is not easy to cast and would undoubtedly take much space if it
were to be inscribed.”

“If it is a wall we need then we should put out a call to all that have such skills,” Kvasir said. “I have many contacts throughout the realms due to my travels. I am sure I could find some willing candidates to assist Asgard in the construction.”

Odin thought for a moment and then sighed. “Very well,” he agreed. He didn’t have any better ideas anyhow. And at the very least, even if the wall failed to be suitable for the basis of the blocking spell it would be *doing something*, and that would reassure the people that he wasn’t simply ignoring the issue. Perhaps an expensive and possibly pointless gesture but that was all Odin had right then. “But be sure to tell them that no agreement will be reached with any of them until the Queen has returned to Asgard.”

Kvasir put his fist over his heart and bowed. “As you wish, my King,” he agreed before turning and leaving. Odin watched until the younger God’s pale grey cape disappeared around a corner before moving himself. Perhaps he should call Frigga and get her opinions on this idea. He wouldn’t make such a decision without her at least there to give some sort of feedback, but Odin would instead talk to someone now. Unfortunately, a speaking spell across realms was a problematic and ultimately wasteful bit of magic that he tried to not do unless the situation was dire.

Odin supposed that this wasn’t truly an emergency and so would hold back his urge to call his better half. Odin was still buried in his thoughts as he walked a familiar path through the palace until he reached the stables. He hadn’t actively thought to go there, but neither was he all that surprised to see where he had ended up.

Odin looked around at all the best warhorses in Asgard standing proudly in their stalls with their coats gleaming and braids in their manes. Perfectly oiled and cleaned sets of tack that were individualized to each horse and their rider were on display along one wall except for those of the royal family. Those sets of gear were on a different partition closer to the back where the largest of horse stalls held their horses. “My King!” A stable boy rushed over, looking very flustered. “Shall I prepare one of your horses?”

“Yes. Audun, if you please,” Odin said. He didn’t particularly feel like taking out any of his more spirited mounts at the moment. The dignified stallion would suit his mood much better. The stable hand nodded and rushed down the aisle to where the large buckskin colored warhorse was already peering out from hearing his name.

The boy quickly had Audun saddled and led out for Odin to mount. The King thanked the boy and then took the road down from the palace grounds and out to the North. Odin was quiet as he let his thoughts wander and barely bothered to direct his mount at all. Occasionally Audun would look back at the King with one huge brown eye, but Odin didn’t notice.

They had only just passed the furthest outlying farms of Asgard when Audun took it upon himself to decide upon a little-used fork in the road to take them slightly West. Odin did notice the turn and couldn’t quite help the wry smile that bent his lips. “I didn’t say to go that way,” Odin stated.

*But that is where you want to go, yes?* Audun replied entirely unrepentantly.

“I hadn’t decided,” Odin answered. Though Allspeak allowed all the members of the royal family to speak with animals very few animals had much to say. Most didn’t think the way humanoids did, if they were intelligent enough to pick up languages in the first place, they tended to have only vague ideas about things that were closer to instinct than any real complex thoughts. But Audun was a horse that came from a long line of noble steeds bred specially for the house of Odin and as such was much smarter than the average animal.
Adun snorted and tossed his head. *You decided when you asked for me,* he said with complete confidence. *You never bring the others out here.*

“You are very arrogant for a horse,” Odin said dryly although he was amused despite himself.

*Of course I am. I am a horse of Odin.*

Odin smiled at that and thought that perhaps Audun was right and he really had intended to travel the way they were headed. The pair continued on in silence until Odin came to a large perfectly round hill surrounded by a ring of rocks chosen to be as close in size to one another as was possible. At each of the cardinal directions, there was a pillar stone that had been carved intricately from tip to base.

Audun stopped well before the large stone door to the tumulus and quietly waited. Odin patted the stallion’s neck in thanks before getting off and approaching. The door hadn’t been opened for many centuries but the grass was still well maintained and the stones clear of moss. Odin didn’t have to read the carvings on the door to know what was inside the hillock.

The door was reluctant to open, having not moved in so long. As soon as Odin stepped into the dark of the hill the smell of cold exposed earth and age filled his nose. He had not caught such a scent in as many centuries as he had last visited this place, but it would forever be associated with peaceful yet somber places in his mind. Odin took a moment to light an oil lamp that was sitting in a small alcove by the entrance so that he could see and then went further into the mound.

The small flame of the dragon-shaped lamp was not much but allowed Odin to not trip over the pieces of a burned ship that he passed by or the chests filled with beautiful treasures. Odin didn’t so much as glance at the gold that had spilled out across the floor when one casket had apparently rotted away in a corner. He did not need gold, and even if he did, he would not take it from here.

Odin passed through the main room and into a smaller chamber that held surprisingly little. Odin put the oil lamp down on a large stone table and rested Gungnir against the wall before kneeling down. The two golden urns sitting in front of him barely glinted at all due to the dust and dirt that covered them. Odin pulled a piece of cloth from one of his pockets and began to carefully clean the surface of the urns. “Do you think it possible for just one generation of our people to be without war?” Odin asked softly as he cleaned.

There was, of course, no reply. “Father obviously didn’t think so, and I am beginning to wonder myself,” Odin continued. Asgardians did live for a very long time. To avoid war for that long seemed almost daunting. “But even if it is hopeless to try for I would like to at least give my boys more than the paltry time without nightmares that we had.”

Loki had only been old enough to go to war for eight years, and Thor was not much better. Odin did not want to see them grow surrounded by death and blood. He’d had to force his twin sons into battle before they had even stopped growing due to his father’s decrees and he would be damned if he didn’t do everything he could to avoid doing it again. “I suppose you would be laughing at me now,” Odin mused as he carefully dug the grit out of the carvings that spelled out Vili’s name. “But then maybe not…” They knew Odin well enough to know how he felt about his children’s safety. They had still been there when tragedy had befallen their family during yet another war.

“I do miss you,” Odin said so softly even if he had not been alone nobody would have heard it. “And I regret that Thor and Loki will not know you at all.” Odin’s throat tightened and burned, but he pushed the sensation back with ruthless efficiency. His brothers’ urns were now clean and gleaming in the faint firelight. Odin took a deep breath, which seemed to help with the knot in his throat. He wished desperately his brothers were still alive to give him advice or even just to listen
to his worries. But they were not. They had died for him, and now he was the last Borson. He had not wanted that very dubious honor. He had spent ages scouring Valhalla for his brothers, but they were nowhere to be found. Perhaps it was merely the Norns being their usual cruel selves, but even Odin could not see and speak with his loved ones that had died.

“If you have any sway where you are, brothers,” Odin murmured. “I ask that you help me protect our people from this threat.” Odin closed his one eye tightly. “Keep our family from losing more than it already has, and I shall do likewise.” Even if he had to build a wall by himself with his bare hands.

Chapter End Notes

**Cul Borson**- Oh, btdubs, Cul's in this story too. Cul Borson, also known as The Serpent and The God of Fear, is the first son of Bor in several Marvel tellings. His actual backstory has fluctuated a bit depending on the telling but basically he was a tyrant that ruled Midgard (although it wasn't called Midgard back then) and fed off the fear of those around him. The more people were terrified of him the stronger he was. Odin eventually 'took care of him' the ol' Parallax way, which ya know... always works so well. There has been some speculation that Cul due to his nickname of the Serpent was supposed to be either some very loose interpretation of Nidhogg or a different interpretation of Jormungdr, but there isn't much beyond his name and his connection to Midgard to support this. Oh, and I might be implying he was the original owner of a certain super strong hammer in this. Also, there is a slight wordplay that I just barely resisted including in the real text up there about 'cul'ing the herd.... lol... I'm so lame...

**The Worthy**- The Worthy are the ones standing behind Cul in Odin's dream. They were such pleasant people... They each had a hammer of their own and were Cul's murderous band of lapdogs. If someone picks up one of their hammers they become the new wielder of that hammer and essentially become possessed by that hammer's associated Worthy. This connection to hammers a lot like Mjolnir is why I decided to give Cul his own in this even though there's not really anything in the comics to say he had it.

**Sindr**- Daughter of Surtr, with as much horn and flame as that would suggest. To become Surtr's heir she was starved for like 1000 days then told to choose between food and a cauldron of fire and screaming souls. She picked the cauldron. The only one of something like 1000s of siblings to do so.

**Kvasir**- I mentioned Kvasir earlier and here he is in the story! He's the God of Wisdom and he loves answering questions and solving problems. I made him here to be somehow related to the Norns, the Goddesses of Fate, but I see it more as they took him in and sort of raised him up after he was born more than he is blood related to them.

**Nornheim**- Where the Norns and Karnilla, Queen of the Norns, lives. It is a small separate city state from Asgard and Karnilla does not consider herself Asgardian. Kvasir does still consider himself Asgardian, hence calling Odin his King.

**The Wall**- If you know your mythology... this idea should scare you. If you don't know your mythology... lets just say this wall idea doesn't end well for Loki.
**Allspeak and Animals** - The rules on Allspeak is kind of fast and loose in the comics. When it comes to sentient species it's pretty straightforward but when it isn't the rules sort of change to whatever the author of that comic wants. I've decided to set it in stone here. Yes, Loki and Thor and all *can* talk to animals just most aren't worth talking to either from lack of intelligence or the animals not giving a damn about whatever is going on outside of their little bubble. Audun here is one of the few exceptions to the most animals aren't worth talking to rule.

**Tumulus** - Also called barrows, kurgans or burial mounds. They are found all over the world and come in all kinds of ways. The Ynglinga saga claims it was Odin himself who decided men should be burned and then either sunk in the ocean with all they owned or buried with all they owned and that this wealth would pass with them into Valhalla.

**Valhalla** - This is tricky because Odin can go to Valhalla and yet Vili and Ve are dead and never show up. But they should because they died in battle and that's a Valhalla worthy feat. So why are they never seen anywhere?!? I decided that for some reason, either the Norns or just cosmic chance or because I'm mean to people, Odin was in fact not special enough to talk with his loved ones after death either.

I would include another family tree here but now these notes aren't liking how I put them in and just list everything in a straight line. Bummer. I'll see if I can fix it and if not I'll start dropping it into the end of chapters where more family stuff is revealed.
Prelude to Pranks

Chapter Summary

To distract Loki, Thor takes his brother out to the town and run into Sven...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thor woke up to something heavy on his chest and four sharp points digging into his shoulders. The blonde God groaned and blinked more towards full wakefulness. Whatever was sitting on his chest made it harder to breathe and made it impossible to shift into any other positions, as was Thor's habit throughout the night. After rubbing his eyes for a moment, Thor realized that what was on his chest was a baby wyvern staring at him in a very unsettling way with unblinking blue eyes. "Ofnir... get off," Thor grumbled as he tried to roll and dump the wyvern off of him.

Ofnir just dug his claws into Thor's shoulders to keep in place and let out a low rumbling trill of what sounded like a protest. Thor stopped trying to dislodge the reptile so as to save his shoulders from any deep scratches. He didn't know how badly a wyvern's claws could split his skin and he wasn't terribly interested in finding out. Especially not while only half awake and at some horrible time of night. "What are you even doing in my room?" Thor asked unhappily. Typically, it took food to pry Ofnir from Loki's side. The small reptile seemed to, amusingly enough, think of Loki as his mother and stay clinging to the young Jotunn as often as Loki would allow him to, which was most of the time.

Ofnir let out another noise and continued to stare. Thor scowled and pushed himself up. He had to use one arm to support the reptile's bottom so that he wouldn't slide and cut up Thor's shoulders. Ofnir chirruped and shifted his grip so that the four long claws at the top of his wings were hooked over Thor's shoulder rather than digging in. "You're heavy," Thor complained as he carried the wyvern across the hall. Loki's door was pushed partially open from when Ofnir must have escaped. "Loki," he called softly as he entered his brother's room, he wanted his brother to wake up but not to startle him too severely.

Thor paused just inside the bedroom and realized that Loki was tossing and turning under his covers. Whimpers were coming from Loki as he kicked his bedding off of him. Ofnir let out another trill, but Thor ignored it and crossed the rest of the room much faster. "Loki," he called again. This time he called his brother louder to try and wake him.

Loki whined and kicked again while his head thrashed back and forth. Thor carefully put Ofnir on the bed and sat down on the edge to grasp his brother's shoulders. Ofnir chirped and crawled across Loki's legs even as the younger Prince woke up with a gasp and a few blind swings with his arm. Thor managed to dodge his brother's half awake blow. "Loki!"

Loki stared up as he tried to both wake up and calm his breathing. "T-thor?"

"We seem to have switched positions, brother," Thor said as Ofnir pushed closer to rub his head over Loki's hand. "Are you alright?"

Loki let out a loud gusty breath and closed his eyes. "Yes... yes, I'm alright," he murmured while
automatically petting Ofnir. "... nightmare."

Thor eyed his brother uneasily. "... do you want to talk about it?" Loki shook his head and, though Thor wanted to press, he doubted that he'd change Loki's mind. Especially considering that Thor himself wasn't very forthcoming with his own nightmares. He gave Loki a nudge. "Move over then."

A testament to how badly Loki had been shaken was that he didn't even protest and quickly moved to the side to make room for Thor. Thor got under the covers and wrapped his arms around his still trembling brother. "I've got you, Brother," Thor murmured as he pulled the covers back closer to their proper place. Loki didn't say anything and just clung to Thor. Ofnir decided the best place to sleep was wedged half between, and half sprawled over the two brothers and proceeded to worm his way into the small gap as best he could. Neither Odinson bothered to try and dissuade him.

The brothers stayed curled together for nearly half an hour before Thor started drifting back towards sleep. "They hate me..." Loki murmured so softly that Thor wasn't entirely sure he'd actually heard it.

He blinked closer to wakefulness. "Who hates you?" he asked in concern.

Loki didn't answer right away, and Thor almost thought that perhaps he had imagined Loki speaking in the first place. "Loki?" Thor asked. "Please... who do you think hates you?"

"... they left me to die, Thor." Thor felt a pang of sympathy for his brother, but before he could say anything, Loki continued, "And everyone in Asgard hates Jotnar..."

"That's not true," Thor said quickly.

"It is," Loki insisted. "Or have you forgotten Jotunn hunt?"

Thor winced. They hadn't played that 'game' in many years. He had never actually considered how the elaborate game that combined chase and sparring matches would seem after the fact. The whole thing was casually mean-spirited in a way only children could manage to be but what was worse was how entirely typical it was. Not even the adults had batted an eye at the implications of a game where they hunted and attacked each other due to being called a Jotunn. "I haven't forgotten," Thor murmured. "But they don't know any Jotnar... not really. And you can't hate things you don't know."

"I beg to differ," Loki murmured into Thor's shoulder.

"Then we'll change how they think," Thor said instantly.

"You can't just change how they think, Thor," Loki protested. "It's not that simple."

Thor huffed and tightened his hold on his brother's shoulders. Ofnir groaned as he was squeezed between them but didn't seem to wake up. "With both of us together, we can do it," Thor said. "So, don't worry about that sort of thing anymore."

"You're so confident..."

"Because I know what we can do together."

Loki went silent again for so long that Thor started to doze off again. He truly wanted to be there to comfort his little brother, but Loki still seemed to be not entirely accepting of himself and there was little Thor could do to help with that. Reassurance was the only thing Thor could offer, and he had
already done that so much that Loki had to know it by now.

"Thor?"

"Hmm?" Thor had to drag himself back from sleep yet again.

"... Do you think I should ask Father... who abandoned me?" Instantly, Thor was fully awake again. Before he could do more than just let out a long hesitant 'uh' to the question, Loki looked up. "He said he knew but that I didn't really want to know..."

This topic was a minefield if ever Thor had encountered one. He had never had more than that one very bad interaction with Laufey in his other life and had absolutely no idea what would happen if Loki and Laufey were made aware of each other so early. Thor instantly wanted to shield Loki from that truth. Laufey was painted even worse than most Jotnar in the minds of Asgardians. The Jotun King was portrayed as a humorless, cruel, warmongerer and conqueror of defenseless realms. "... does it truly matter to you?" Thor asked carefully.

"I-I don't know," Loki muttered unhappily. "I don't want to think about Mother and Father not really being my parents, but I don't like not knowing the truth either."

"They are really your parents," Thor assured him. "Just like I am really your brother."

Loki was silent after that and just stared at nothing in particular. Thor wasn't certain how well he'd gotten through to his younger brother but was glad that this time around Loki wasn't immediately rejecting the very word. After a while with no response, Thor drifted off to sleep only to be pushed to the very edge of the bed by a shifting Ofnir. When he woke, Thor was in the unpleasant situation of being very precariously perched with a large wyvern foot planted solidly in his back. He just about fell out of the bed but managed not to with the help of the bed frame. Ofnir stirred enough to open one eye as Thor untangled himself and got up. Loki was still fast asleep, which was unusual as Loki was almost always up before Thor. Ofnir had shifted onto his back and was laying splayed out with his head resting in the crook of Loki's knees. Ofnir studied Thor with one big blue eye but then groaned and went seemingly right back to sleep. Thor sighed and shook his head but left Loki and Ofnir in bed. He found it rather amazing how entirely comfortable Ofnir had made himself so quickly. The little wyvern seemed to think he instantly belonged, which was amusing if Thor were altogether honest.

Loki ended up being late for breakfast but not so late that he missed the news that Nanna gave them. The report that they had been told that morning was that Freyr and Gerd would be arriving that evening. Thor quickly decided that it would be best to distract his brother. The elder Odinson was certain that the short time between first hearing about the royal couple's visit and the news at breakfast -a whopping three days- had not been enough for his brother to properly adjust to the idea. His nightmare was very telling evidence that he hadn't, at least. Loki had definitely gone quiet and sullen-looking that morning, not that he'd been all that lively, to begin with having woken up late. Thor had tried to distract Loki after breakfast by practicing with Laevateinn, but that hadn't lasted as long as he'd been hoping since Loki had been paying almost no attention to the fight. So, he resorted to tempting Loki out of the castle grounds to find trouble in the city. Of course, he hadn't called it trouble, but both brothers knew they'd likely get into some. They always seemed to get into some.

Loki didn't seem all that interested as he wandered along behind Thor through the streets. Ofnir was clinging to Loki's back with his long head resting on the curve of Loki's neck and his tail curled around Loki's waist. Thor still wasn't sure he was comfortable with how Loki carried Ofnir all over, but at this point, he knew that it would be a losing battle to try and fight. Besides, he knew
that eventually Ofnir simply wouldn't be able to be carried and Thor would win by default, which was sadly the way he tended to win arguments with Loki.

The brothers got quite a few looks as they wandered the city, probably because of Ofnir. "Are we looking for anything in particular, Thor?" Loki asked after perhaps an hour of walking around looking into all the shop windows that they passed by.

"No, not really," Thor admitted. "I just thought it would be nice to get out of the palace for a little while."

"Distract me, you mean," Loki said dryly.

Thor shrugged, "That too." Thor wasn't particularly surprised or bothered to be caught out in his true intentions. "You barely ate anything after Sister Nanna told us that Freyr and Gerd will be getting here today." A fact that had not escaped Thor's-or anyone else's- noticing, but they hadn't been able to coax Loki to eat anything else.

"Well, would you, if you were me?" Loki asked as he reached up to scratch behind Ofnir's jaw with one hand.

"I don't know," Thor admitted. "I suppose not, though you know that you're not in any danger right?"

Loki made a face. "I'm not an idiot," he grumbled. "I know that they won't do anything against me physically. But that doesn't mean I want to meet them either."

"I didn't mean to imply that. I just don't want to assume anything," Thor explained. "And I don't think that anyone would be upset if you avoided meeting them if you wanted to." Thor certainly wouldn't anyway, even if he thought that Loki probably should meet with others of his own species.

"I don't see how I would be able to avoid Gerd for a week," Loki pointed out. "I'm not going to lock myself in my room for the whole trip."

Thor thought about that for a second before nodding in agreement. "You're right. I can't imagine you being holed up for that long. You'd go up the walls."

"If the walls were lucky," Loki muttered.

"We should probably endeavour not to destroy grandfather's castle while we're here," Thor stated. "It would probably get us grounded for a very long time."

"Probably." Suddenly, Loki stopped walking and crinkled his nose. "Do you smell that?"

Thor paused as well and tried to figure out what Loki was talking about without just sniffing around like some sort of animal. After a moment, Thor caught a whiff of whatever it was and made a face of disgust. "Ugh, yes. What is that?" he asked. Whatever the horrible odor was, it made Thor's stomach churn.

"It smells rancid," Loki said as he brought a hand up to cover his nose and mouth. Ofnir made a noise that Thor couldn't help but think sounded very interested. "Worse than your room that time you lost that glass of milk for almost two weeks..."

Thor shot Loki a glare. "I was barely two centuries old," he pointed out in annoyance. Besides, both of them had been banned from having food or drink in their room ever since, unless they were
physically ill. "You can't blame me for doing something stupid as a child."

"I couldn't walk in your room for a month... I've no idea how you could sleep in there," Loki continued as if Thor hadn't said anything at all. Thor rolled his eyes and looked around for any obvious source of the nauseating smell. "It's getting stronger," Loki observed. Loki looked like he was just a shade off from being ill when Thor spotted what he thought was a good bet to the source of the smell.

Sven was trudging up the street with a lot of something all over him. Whatever had splattered over him was somehow both oozy and stringy, in a vast variety of colors, and clung to everything from his hair to his shoes. Sven looked utterly miserable. Thor hurried forward, and the smell did indeed get so much worse. He almost gagged but managed not to if only through pure will. Loki still had a hand over his mouth and nose, but then he always complained twice as much about bad smells than anyone else.

"Sven, my friend! What happened?" Thor asked. Now that he was right beside the other boy, Thor could tell that it was bits of food and other garbage that was covering Sven. Streaks of something red—possibly tomato—was clinging to Sven's hair right by his dirty face while something in a very unappealing greyish brown color coated one entire elbow and had soaked into his shirt. Flecks of something moldy was smeared down Sven's front, and the mess just continued down.

"I'd really rather not talk about it," Sven muttered.

"Did you fall into a garbage bin?" Loki asked with his hand still over his face, not in the least caring that it might be considered rude to do.

Sven scowled. "I wouldn't call it 'falling,' per say."

"Ah," Loki said. "One of those."

Thor frowned and looked between the two thinner boys. "One of what?"

"Assisted falls," Loki supplied. "Hold still, Sven. I cannot stand the smell of you." Loki brought forth his seidr, and a wave of green and gold swirled around the young half-Alfr. The smell abated instantly although wasn't gone entirely. Loki's magic could do much, but even it wasn't a real replacement for a thorough bath.

"Thank you," Sven said.

"Couldn't get it all off but at least I won't add to the mess by vomiting any longer," Loki replied as he folded his arms over his chest. "Which I was very near doing. They found a very... fragrant bin to throw you into."

Thor stepped forward and laid a hand on Sven's shoulder, albeit carefully to not touch any mess that might have been left behind. "Sven, who did such a thing to you?"

"It doesn't matter," Sven said. "Especially now that I don't reek. You needn't bother yourself with it, Thor. I can deal with this."

"You needn't 'deal with this' alone," Thor argued. "And just because you are less pungent does not mean that it no longer matters. Someone put you in a garbage bin, that is entirely unacceptable."

"It is entirely typical," Loki replied before Sven could do more than open his mouth. "Still, Thor has a point. You should tell us who did this."
"What are you going to do? Fight them?" Sven asked with more than a little incredulity.

"Of course not," Loki denied.

Thor looked over sharply. "We're not?"

"No, Thor. Because then, once we leave, they'll just get worse," Loki said as if it were obvious. "But we're not going to let them get away with it either. However," Loki wrinkled his nose, "you still smell, Sven. So, let's get you fully clean before we seek a form of recompense more appropriate to the crime done." Ofnir trilled almost as if agreeing and Loki rubbed along the lizard's chin with a slightly off-putting smile.

"Brother... we should try to not cause any problems with the local boys," Thor said. "Mother would be vexed with us."

"We will not be causing trouble," Loki promised almost too innocently. "They won't even know we were around. I promise. Now come on."

Sven looked ready to protest further, but Thor grabbed his shoulder. "Come on," he encouraged. "It is usually best to just do what my brother says when he is like this," he added in a whisper. Sven allowed himself to be led back through the town towards the stairs to the palace although he still looked like he was somewhat confused.

"Where are we going?" Sven asked.

"To a bath," Loki said.

Sven frowned. "I could just go home..."

"Why bother when we're just going to go looking for your attackers afterwards?" Loki asked.

"We would have to go looking for you after you cleaned up," Thor said as a sort of agreement. "It is easier to just stay together."

"But we're going to the palace..." Sven said while shrinking back. Thor disallowed him to get away and continued to guide the smaller boy up the stairs to the palace grounds. "I should go home. I can get a change of clothes there too."

Loki glanced over his shoulder. "You're smaller than me," Loki said. "But my clothes should still fit you. Don't get used to it though. I'm not fond of others using my things."

"But..."

"I told you, it is best to simply allow him to do what he wants," Thor whispered as they reached the top of the stairs. Loki did not often feel like being spontaneously kind, and Thor wasn't entirely sure why he was doing so now. Perhaps something about Sven's plight twinged some sympathy out of Loki. What with his instant understanding of 'assisted falls,' which Thor was definitely going to get to the bottom of later, Thor thought a common understanding might be the cause. Either way, Thor was loathe to discourage kindness from his brother.

Loki led the way to a side door and then down several halls. Many servants seemed taken aback by the sight of the three boys, one of which was still very much in need of a bath. They reached the bath without interruption, however, and Loki gestured for Sven to go in first. "Go ahead. I'll get you something to change into and put Ofnir in my room. Probably not a good idea to bring a baby wyvern along with us after you get cleaned up."
"Really, I don't need you two to show me any sort of special treatment," Sven protested with his hands up in front of him.

Loki rolled his eyes and gestured to Thor with his head. "Brother?"

Thor nodded and gently but forcefully pushed Sven into the bathroom. "Come, Sven. I could use a bath as well," Thor lied. Thor didn't remove his hand from Sven's shoulder until they were in the middle of the male's side of the large bathing chamber. The floor was covered in slabs of grey marble only interrupted by a mosaic of the Vanheim royal crest in the middle of the room. Two feet from either wall was a simple but elegant wooden bench made of pale slats. The faucets were rearing winged horses with their mouths wide open for the water to pour out from. Sven looked pleadingly at Thor, who ignored the smaller boy and pushed him to the side to stand by the first faucet. "Unless you would rather remain covered in garbage, I would simply accept the offer."

After a minute, Sven sighed and pulled off his shirt. "This still feels weird... This whole bathroom is fancier than my entire house..." he muttered.

"My brother will not stay near you if you smell bad," Thor offered.

Sven continued to mutter to himself but finished stripping out of his filthy clothes and turned on the water. Steaming hot water gushed from the horse's maw, and Sven started to hurriedly clean himself. The water drained away through nearly hidden gaps between the marble slabs.

Thor decided he might as well bathe as well, if only because he felt a little awkward just standing there while Sven cleaned himself up. When Thor turned his own faucet on with the buttons on the horse bridal, tension in Sven's shoulders eased.

Sven had just started trying to get the rotted food from where it was tangled in his hair when Loki came into the bathing room with a basket in his arms. "I thought you might need some clothes too, Thor. I'm glad I was right," Loki said as he put the basket on one of the benches. He pulled something out of the side of the bin. "Here, Sven. Use this to get rid of that smell." Sven turned just in time to catch the bottle he was tossed.

"Um, thanks," Sven said.

Loki nodded and undid his own belt. "You're washing too?" Thor asked.

"Well, might as well. Either way, I'd have to wait for you two to get done," Loki pointed out. "Besides, I woke up late this morning remember?" Thor shrugged and went back to his own business. The three boys didn't waste any time in cleaning up and then getting redressed. Today wasn't a day to go linger in the large bath in the next room and even if it was, Loki was never too fond of spending extended amounts of time in hot areas.

Sven certainly looked odd in Loki's clothing. Thor thought he didn't look half bad since Loki had given him some of the few light colored shirts he owned and relatively plain trousers. Sven wouldn't look out of place at all with their usual group of friends in Asgard if it weren't for the undeniable fact that he seemed painfully uncomfortable in clothes made of higher quality material. "So, what are we going to do about these bullies?" Thor asked as he rubbed his hair dry.

"Oh, I thought perhaps they would like a taste of their own medicine," Loki said as he finished lacing the leather vest he had put on over a long-sleeved emerald shirt.

Thor frowned. "Are we going to get in trouble?"

"My mother will skin me if I get in trouble," Sven said worriedly.
Loki sighed. "I have a plan," he said in exasperation.

"Is it a good plan?" Thor asked.

Loki grabbed up the basket now full of their dirty clothes. "No."

"Will we get caught?" Sven asked, sounding more alarmed.

"Yes."

"Loki..." Thor said in warning.

"Oh, lighten up, both of you," Loki ordered. "I know what I'm doing."

Chapter End Notes

**Jotunn hunt** - One of those horrible games kids play sort of like cops and robbers only the 'bad guys' are Jotnar. Once the Aesir catch the Jotunn, they spar with the intention of 'killing' the jotunn. Because children are casually cruel and raised, in this case, around casual racism.

**Laufey** - Being the leader of the most recent enemies of the Aesir, you can imagine they'd have some choice things to say about him. Some aren't entirely untrue.... he's not likely to go around cracking jokes, but he's not given anything close to resembling a fair rap here.

**Ofnir** - Ofnir's behaviour is modeled off of my cat. Little brat takes up most of the bed like it's his or something...

**The baths** - Vanaheim has public baths/saunas. You wash up in one room and then can go soak in another large swimming pool like area. There is also a separate wet sauna room that Loki, as you can imagine, doesn't frequent. I imagine Asgard has a few as well but they are more novelty/day spa type things rather than a common place for lots of people to go regularly.
Loki's plan was really quite simple. Sven was able to lead them to the homes of his tormentors and Loki was able to get them inside without being seen. Thor was a little nervous that Loki's burgeoning powers wouldn't manage to cloak all three of them, but that worry didn't seem to be founded in anything as they got into the house and the first boy's room with ease. "Alright, Thor, you keep watch," Loki said as he went over to the dresser against one wall and pulled the first drawer out.

"What are you doing?" Sven asked in confusion as Loki took the drawer full of clothes over to the bed and sat down.

"It's a simple spell I've modified. Bring me the other drawers," Loki commanded as he pulled a piece of chalk from his pocket that was wrapped with some sort of golden wire and green ribbons. Thor tried to keep his attention on his job of keeping watch, but he couldn't help but be curious about what his brother was doing.

Loki carefully turned the drawer in his lap so that the back was facing him and then started drawing on the wood where nobody would see it without an exhaustive search. "Are you sure this won't get me in trouble?" Sven asked nervously as he brought another drawer over.

Loki sighed in exasperation. "You said you don't have seidr, yes?" Sven nodded. "Well then how in Asgaedia's name could you possibly be blamed for a spell being put on someone's dresser?" Sven still didn't seem convinced but couldn't think of a protest, so Loki went back to his work.

"What does that even do?" Sven asked as Loki finished the first drawing and moved onto another.

"It's supposed to be an anti-theft spell that the Dwarves came up with some centuries ago," Loki said. "If someone takes something from the container with the spell and does not return it within a certain time it is meant to turn that person bright purple or some other telling color to identify thieves. I'm just... tweaking it slightly."

Thor glanced over his shoulder. "Tweaking how, brother?" He could see the first drawer's inscription from his angle. Loki had drawn a surprisingly perfect circle on the wood with several lines, geometric shapes, and symbols carefully placed within it.

"This version I've made will have their clothes smelling worse and worse the longer they go without being in the drawers. And since the drawers themselves won't stink it should take them a while to figure out what's happening," Loki supplied as he finished with the second and moved on. "Hopefully a good long while. And it should take so long that, combined with Sven not being able to cast such spells, will clear him of being involved. The biggest downside being, each drawer needs to be inscribed in order for this to work."
Thor nodded and went back to his watch. He was glad that this revenge wouldn't actually harm anyone. The bullies were still kids after all and could hopefully learn a lesson from all this.

Loki worked steadily, and when he had finally made the circle on each of the drawer backs, he snapped his fingers. Green sparks seemed to ignite the chalk lines for just a moment, and then they were etched ever so slightly into the wood. The glow of the lines faded as the magic settled and Loki nodded in satisfaction. "Alright, now we put them back and move onto the next house," Loki said as he picked up the first and slid it back into its track.

The longest part of Loki's plan, as it turned out, was going to each of the bullies houses to set up the spells. "Are you sure this isn't too much for you?" Thor asked as they waited for Loki to cloak them so that they could get into the last boy's house. Loki had been using more magic than usual to enchant all of the drawers and also get them in and out of the homes without being seen. He looked a little paler than usual, and Thor couldn't help but worry.

"I'm fine. And we're almost done, anyway," Loki pointed out.

"You don't have to do so much for me," Sven said, also sounding worried. "You do look tired."

Loki waved away the concern. "I am fine. I promise," he said. "Now, hold onto my shoulders, and we'll go finish the job."

Thor still wasn't entirely convinced but did as Loki said and grasped his brother's shoulder. The three boys carefully made their way into the last house on the list and then up the stairs to where their target was. They had to pause a few times to avoid servants, but they got to the boy's room without any real problems. Loki sat down on the edge of the bed as Sven started getting the drawers from the dresser. Thor frowned, not at all happy at how tired his brother seemed to be.

Thor abandoned the door for just a moment to go stand beside Loki. "I've got seidr don't I? That's why I can control storms?"

Loki looked up in puzzlement. "Yes, but it isn't as if you've ever tried to cast a spell before. Are you suddenly interested in it? Because if so, it would take some time to teach it to you that we don't really have."

"I meant more... can you use mine to fuel the spell instead of just yours?"

Loki studied Thor thoughtfully for a moment. "I... suppose I could. Mother used to guide my magic when I was first learning. The concept should be essentially the same."

"Then use mine, because you look far too tired," Thor said. "Plus I feel like I haven't done hardly anything in this."

Loki quirked an eyebrow up at that. Sven glanced between the two of them curiously as he put the drawers down on the bed. "Alright," Loki said finally. "Give me your hand." Thor did so immediately. Loki put the chalk in Thor's hand and carefully guided his brother in drawing the last set of circles on the drawers. Guiding Thor meant that the process too much longer than the earlier sets but this time Sven kept watch.

Once the Odinsons finished the drawings, Loki held up one hand while still grabbing Thor's wrist. He nodded down at Thor's other hand, and the young Thunder god held up his free hand just like Loki. "Alright, on the count of three we trigger the spell. The snap serves as a useful trigger tool. Most spells I don't have to use it, but since we're triggering all the circles at once, it's helpful. So... one, two... three."
Both brothers snapped, and sparks of green and almost white blue set the chalk on fire. The circles glowed a little longer than they had when Loki himself was enchanting the drawers but they did fade until they were barely visible. "Not bad," Loki said as he let go of Thor's wrist. "You know... you have a lot more seidr than I thought you would. Its a shame you're not more interested in learning it. You might actually make a decent war mage if you wanted."

Thor was surprised at that but couldn't think of a reply before Loki was up and putting the drawers away. Thor hadn't ever put any thought into learning spells since he had never really understood how they worked. Even when Loki had tried in the past to explain things, Thor hadn't been able to follow. Thor might have had some seidr and some minimal potential, but he thought Loki might be giving Thor a little too much credit. Thor couldn't see himself being a mage in any sense. Not even a war mage which notoriously only ever used simple destructive spells. Loki, Thor knew, was familiar with dozens of spells used by war mages but rarely used them because he thought them 'inelegant' and his own power made using the spells unpredictable.

"Alright, let's go," Loki said as he put the last drawer back in place within the dresser. "We've just got one last thing to do."

"What's that?" Thor asked curiously. Loki smiled, and Thor wasn't entirely sure he liked how it looked.

The five boys laughed and joked as they made their way down the street. Several store owners gave the group a sour look but otherwise didn't say anything. The boys were notorious around town for causing trouble, but their leader was the son of the Vanaheim merchants guild leader. Nobody who worked for a living wanted to risk the boy pointing them out to his father, so the boys were free to disrupt things, for the most part, to their heart's content.

They tended to find weaker kids to entertain themselves by tormenting. Sven was a favorite target because -not only was he smaller and often alone, but didn't have any ties to anyone important. Every time that they caught the half-Alfr boy by himself, it was a good day. They had been exceptionally pleased with themselves that day for managing to keep Sven in a restaurant's dumpster for almost an hour before they got bored.

Though the boy had shouted and tried to get out, he was much too small to actually do so, especially with the others sitting on top of it like they had been. The leader, Rolf, was somewhat disappointed that they hadn't been able to make Sven cry, as he found that hilarious, but it did sound like the other boy might have gotten sick at some point. "What should we do now?" one of them asked.

Rolf shrugged. "I'm getting hungry." There were various agreements with him as the gang swaggered down the street with so much bravado it was cartoonish. The boys continued through the town, looking for whichever restaurant or food cart caught their fancy. They were taking up almost all of the street and being very loud as they joked about their usual victims.

None of them spotted the oil on the ground when they reached the top of one hill. Rolf was in the lead and so slipped first. He let out a shout and flailed for balance. His friends tried to steady their leader, but they were instead dragged down along with him. Like some perfect storm of chain reactions all five of the boys were pulled along and tumbled down the hill. Though it hadn't seemed that steep when they were climbing it, none of them could manage to stop as they cartwheeled and rolled over each other with more than a few curses and yells. Citizens quickly got out of the way as the boys tumbled. Finally, they came to a stop although it wasn't gently.

The boys slammed into a cart hard enough to topple the barrels and boxes that it had been
transporting.The smallest bit of green light that nobody noticed hit the base of one barrel that had been swaying dangerously. The jolt was enough to send it crashing over the top of the boys. Black sticky molasses splashed across all of them from head to toe, causing each to sputter and cry out.

From the entrance to a nearby alley, Loki chuckled and leaned against one wall. "That looked painful," Thor observed, although with how each of the boys was yelling at each other and trying to get up he could assume none were seriously hurt.

"No worse than getting tossed around," Sven said. "How easy is it to get molasses out of clothing?"

"I can't imagine very," Loki said. "Which works just perfectly with what we've already done. They'll get cleaned up, put on fresh clothes, and then start to stink worse than a bilgesnipe." Thor snorted in amusement and Sven had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing too loudly.

"You are a mad genius, Loki," Sven said. "Even if I had magic I wouldn't have thought to curse their clothes."

"Their clothes aren't cursed," Loki denied innocently as he watched Rolf fall to the ground and land on his arse in the puddle of molasses again. His grin widened. "Although I had no idea how long it will take them to figure that out."

They watched the five boys slip and fall down and curse each other for another few minutes before walking off down the alley. They didn't want to be spotted in the area and somehow drawn into anything. Much better to just leave the bullies to their fiasco all on their own. "That was very satisfying," Sven said as they wandered through the streets in the general direction of the palace.

"It was," Thor agreed. "Surprisingly so." He had never really put any thought into the tricks and little acts of vengeance Loki used, but knowing that the bullies would have to deal with a lingering stench until they found the sigils on their drawers seemed far more fitting than just beating them.

"Surprisingly so?" Loki echoed. "You doubted me?"

Thor rolled his eyes. "It isn't like I tend to trick people in vengeance, Loki. That's your thing."

Loki narrowed his eyes for a moment before shrugging. "Yes, I suppose so. But I wouldn't do it if it weren't satisfying."

Sven stopped walking with them suddenly. "What's going on at the Palace?"

Both brothers stopped as well and looked up to where the Palace was in front of them. A large group of people was just visible where they were heading inside the main gates, and several of them were carrying trunks and other baggage. Loki's grin fell immediately, and Thor sighed. So much for the good mood that they'd managed to foster while they were out. "That would be Lord Freyr and Gerd arriving," Thor muttered. "I thought they'd be getting to the palace much later."

"Oh..." Sven said although he still seemed confused. "Why do you look upset? Mother says that Lord Freyr and his partner are very nice. Even to servants."

"I'm sure they are," Thor said quickly. "I guess it's just because we've never met them before."

Sven studied them for a moment before shrugging. "Well, I'm sure it'll go just fine. I take it you two have to go now?"

Thor nodded. "I'm afraid so. Come on, Loki." Loki didn't look like he was going to follow, so Thor took his brother's wrist and led the way down the street. He waved goodbye to Sven as they parted
Loki exhaled a long breath. "I hope you're right..."

"I am," Thor said confidently. Freyr always spoke so highly of his partner that Thor couldn't imagine the Jotunn being unpleasant to Loki. There might be some initial awkwardness, Thor didn't deny that, but he was sure that it would all work itself out. Still, Thor made a point to take a slightly longer way back to the palace than he would have initially gone. He wanted to give Loki as much time to gather himself as he could.

As they climbed the stairs to the palace, Loki's grip on Thor's hand tightened almost to the point where it was painful, but Thor said nothing. They reached the front of the palace after everyone had already gone inside, but Loki hesitated at the entrance. "Maybe we should just go to our rooms. We can meet them in the morning that way?"

Thor didn't think putting it off would actually help Loki be less nervous, but he would be willing to do it. He didn't get a chance to agree however as Baldr spotted them through the open door. "Thor! Loki! There you are! We were wondering where you'd gotten off to!"

Baldr came out with a huge grin on his face and clasped both of his brothers on the shoulder. "Freyr and Gerd are here. They're taking tea in the garden. You should come say hello before dinner where things are so formal," he said as he guided both boys inside.

"We were just thinking, maybe it would be better to let them get settled first," Thor tried. "Nonsense," Baldr chirped. "Besides, putting it off will only make it seem worse. Best get what you're nervous about over and done with early." Loki shot their older brother a glare, which Baldr wholly ignored. Thor sighed but, since Baldr seemed to have made the decision for them, just went along without further protest.

Loki squirmed, but Baldr again ignored it. "I can walk on my own, you know!" he snapped. "Yes, but chances are you'd walk to your room and not to the garden," Baldr said. "Trust me, Loki. Drawing out something you don't want to do will only make it worse in the long run. And you can't avoid them forever."

"I'm sure I could if I tried," Loki grumbled. "Now, Loki, none of that," Baldr said as they reached the hall leading to one of the smaller gardens near the guest wing. "Try and be open-minded."

"We will," Thor promised.

Baldr gave them both a smile. "Very good." He pushed them forward to the entrance to the garden. "Look who I finally found!" he crowed in place of a typical greeting. Instantly, those sitting at the outdoor table looked up. Their mother and Nanna were there, and sitting beside Freyr was a being who could only possibly be Gerd.

Gerd was not at all like what Thor was expecting. Freyr's partner was tall, as could be expected of a giant, but was a different blue than most Jotnar. Gerd's skin was an almost blue-grey slate tone rather than the usual sapphires and cornflower blues that Thor thought of when the word Jotnar was said, and the thick ancestral lines seemed an almost silver color causing less contrast. The deep red eyes, however, were very much in evidence, and Thor couldn't help but still find the blood-colored gaze to be unsettling.
Gerd was the first Jotnar that Thor could remember ever meeting without traditional armor on. Instead, Gerd was wearing a sleeveless, one-shouldered, vest in a light tan color and a midcalf length skirt that was shorter in the front than the back to expose soft-looking black pants underneath. Warrior Jotnar that Thor was familiar with always had bald heads and, despite the fact that Loki was both Jotnar and not hairless in the least, the Thunderer had sort of assumed that Jotnar didn't have hair for some reason. Gerd did have hair though - long blonde locks that were braided close to their skull and clasped with black beads before being allowed to flow freely down their back in thick waves.

Though Gerd was married to the heir to the Vanir Throne, they didn't wear much in the way of jewelry. All Gerd sported to depict station was a golden armband and a simple circlet with a black stone set in the middle. Gerd looked over at where Thor and Loki were standing and gave a half smile. "And these must be your other brothers, Baldr?"

"Yes, these are my baby brothers, Thor and Loki!" Baldr introduced with a hand still on either of their shoulders. Thor was afraid that Loki would bolt, but the young trickster seemed transfixed by the sight of the Jotnar sitting at a table with Nanna and Freyr. Thor had to admit it was an unusual sight, especially with Forseti on the ground nearby playing with his shimmering stacking blocks entirely oblivious, but Loki seemed caught somewhere between horror and shock.

Baldr didn't wait for his younger brothers to respond at all and just physically directed them closer to the table. "It's good to finally meet you both. I've heard a lot about you," Freyr greeted. "This is my lovely Gerd."

Loki shifted his weight uneasily, and Thor felt equally uncomfortable but cleared his throat and attempted a smile. "Hello..."

Freyr looked less than impressed by their reaction, but before he could even open his mouth, Gerd leaned over to put a hand on his arm. Then Gerd looked back at Thor and Loki. "I take it I'm the first Jotunn you've ever met?" they asked. The boys nodded silently. "I see. Well, I'm not going to eat you if that's your fear."

"We don't think that," Thor blurted out quickly. Gerd's almost invisibly pale eyebrow went up. "You just... aren't what we were expecting either..." Thor added uneasily.

"No, I imagine I'm not. My husband seems to give people a mistaken impression of me," Gerd said, giving Freyr a fond but exasperated look.

Freyr just smiled. "You're every bit as lovely as I claim. It isn't my fault most are too blind to see it."

Gerd smiled wider and looked back at the still uneasy boys. "He is impossible, truly. But he does mean well, I assure you."

Freyr seemed to melt when Gerd smiled at him and squeezed his partner's hand before turning his honey brown eyes to the boys. "Well, come sit with us, boys. We can get better acquainted."

Loki hesitated again, but Thor decided to take the initiative this time and forced his brother forward. Although, he did make sure to take the seat closer to the newest arrivals. "Your mother tells us that you'll be staying with Baldr and Nanna for a bit," Freyr prompted. "Something about raids in Asgard."

"Yes, Father thought it would be best if we weren't around that," Thor said as he tried his absolute best to not stare at Gerd. He'd seen Jotnar before so it shouldn't draw so much of his awareness, but
Gerd was easily the largest person at the table and not at all what Thor had been imagining. Before he could stop himself he found himself blurting out part of his thoughts, "You're not as blue as I thought you'd be."

Loki buried his face in his hand and Frigga scolded him, but Thor had already said it. "It's alright, Queen Frigga," Gerd said with a hand raised to keep her from giving Thor a complete tongue lashing. "I am half Fjallverr." Thor stared uncomprehendingly.

"Mountain Giant, Thor," Loki muttered.

Thor's eyes widened as it clicked in his head. "Oh! Um, sorry," he said quickly. Although he wasn't sure if he needed to apologize, it was probably best to cover all of his bases.

"Quite alright. It's not something that really matters other than it makes living in milder climates more possible," Gerd explained.

There was a slightly awkward pause at the table. "Is this your first visit to Vanaheim, then?" Freyr asked.

"Yes," Thor confirmed. "Our first trip anywhere away from home."

"Ah, well, I do hope that you're enjoying yourselves so far. What with all the trouble in Alfheim, we haven't been able to be here as much as we'd like," Freyr explained. "Though I am the one set to inherit both thrones I really feel as if Vanaheim is my real home."

"How are things going in Alfheim? Any improvement?" Nanna asked curiously as she put a thick layer of preserves across a piece of bread. Forseti had wandered over at some point, and she handed the treat to him.

"Some," Gerd said. "But not as much as we would like. Certainly not enough to afford us a very long trip back home, but there really were things that we simply had to handle here."

"I, for one, would like to talk about something other than politics for once," Baldr said. He had produced a chair from somewhere and managed to wedge it between Gerd and Nanna to sit beside his wife. "Father says that you're to pick your weapon specializations soon, Thor, Loki. Any thoughts as to what that would be?"

Loki seemed horrified to be put on the spot, so Thor deliberately leaned forward. "A hammer," Thor said instantly. "I just like how they feel in my hand better than swords or pikes." Loki didn't answer the question at all.

"Well, warhammers are very imposing weapons," Freyr offered. "I do hope that you find a good one to use, Thor. There is a long tradition of using such weapons in Asgard's history. You'll be in very good company."

Thor nodded. "Although I haven't found one I like the best just yet. I'm sure that I will, though."

"Maybe your Father could commission one for you," Nanna offered.

"Please, do not give Odin any ideas," Frigga said with a laugh. "I'm sure that Thor can find one somewhere in the armory to suit his needs."

Loki still decidedly did not answer the question even though he had been directly asked as well. An awkward silence settled on the table as Loki studied the empty place setting in front of him. It could not have been any more obvious that Loki did not want to be there, but Thor had no idea how
to fix that. They hadn't really been given an option on if they should attend this tea or not.

"What were you two up to all day, dears?" Frigga asked after a moment. The tension broke thankfully, and Thor let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Playing," Loki offered, finally proving that he could still speak. Frigga fixed her son with a piercing gaze. "We were! Sven was with us," Loki added.

Frigga still didn't look entirely convinced. "And the story I heard about the three of you traipsing through the palace in need of a bath?"

"That was only Sven," Thor said. "He fell into some trash and needed to clean up is all."

"I see," Frigga said as she stirred her tea.

"Really, we were being very good," Thor said. Frigga stared at Thor, and the young Thunderer felt the need to squirm and blurt out everything that they had done that afternoon. Loki stepped hard on his foot. "Mother, I should probably go check on Ofnir. He's never been left in my room for very long before and certainly not alone. I wouldn't want him to get into anything."

"Er, yes, we should do that," Thor agreed.

Frigga was clearly not buying their excuse. She turned to Freyr and Gerd. "Ofnir is Loki's new pet," she explained. The couple nodded in understanding even as Frigga dismissed them with a wave of her hand. "Go on then. But you will be attending dinner so be sure to wash up for it."

"Yes, Mother," they both echoed before fleeing the garden. Loki glared at Thor as they got out of hearing range of the garden. "You are an absolutely terrible liar. You might as well have just blurted out that we were up to something."

"I panicked," Thor said.

Loki rolled his eyes. "At least it got us out of there. I can't believe you asked Gerd why they weren't bluer," he grumbled as he stalked off towards their rooms.

"Can you blame me? It was odd!"

"That would be like asking why Sif isn't the same color as Heimdall," Loki said. "Honestly, Thor, you just stick your foot in it every second you can, don't you?"

"I don't try to," Thor said as he followed his brother. "It just came out before I could stop it."

Loki shook his head again. "Dinner is going to be so awkward," he muttered. "I hope Mother isn't going to try and make me talk to them." He opened the door to his room, and Ofnir came rushing forward. Loki bent down and picked the little Wyvern up.

"I doubt that she'd make you do anything that would make you uncomfortable," Thor said as Loki carried Ofnir over to his bed and flopped down on it. "She knows you better than anyone."

Loki was quiet at first as he pet Ofnir. He let his hand turn blue again, and Ofnir rubbed against Loki's palm. "I hope that she didn't go and tell Gerd anything about me." Thor would like to assure his brother that their mother wouldn't do that but he honestly couldn't. If Frigga thought that it was best for Loki, she probably would have.
"Even if she did, she can't make you talk to Gerd," Thor offered.

Loki frowned and continued to pet Ofnir. "... true. I still hope she didn't though..."

"I guess until it comes up there's no way to know. Unless you want to just ask mother," Thor said. Loki snorted at that suggestion. "Yes, I thought that's what you would say. But you had best not try and get out of dinner, Loki. Mother wouldn't stand for it, and that would only draw more attention to you not wanting to be around Gerd."

"I know that," Loki said in annoyance. "Still don't want to go, though..."

"I'll be right beside you," Thor said as he sat down beside Loki. "The whole time."

Loki sighed. "I know, Thor. And I appreciate it. Also... thank you for getting us out of there so quickly, even if it was by flubbing something. I didn't think I could take sitting there for very much longer."

Thor smiled, "Anything for you, brother."

Chapter End Notes

**Magic Circles** - I needed to bring Doctor Strange's Magic and Loki's Seidr into the same universe. Basically, the circles are one way to go about it, but not the only way. Loki, being highly trained as he is, can use them or use other methods depending on what his ultimate goal is. And yes, some spells work better with different methods than others and a few can only be used with whatever method they were invented with. Think of it sort of like Math. A lot of times there's multiple ways to get an answer but sometimes the higher levels really need to use specific formulas and processes. Magic aka Reality Math!

**Thor's Magic** - As was established briefly in the first chapter and in Thor:Rangarok, Mjolnir is a focusing tool for Thor. He does have seidr of his own, he just has never trained to use it like Loki has. That's not to say he's as strong a mage as Loki but he does have some umph behind him if he wanted to. Also, if you notice, Thor's seidr colors are bright blue and the royal family's gold.

**Fjallverr** - There are many different kinds of giants out there. As I previously mentioned Marvel uses the term Jotnar specifically for Ice/Frost giants but there are many more than that. Some are extinct now and some are sub species of a larger branch but I do have names and evolution charts planned for all of them. There will be a lesson on them later, I promise.

Also, a note. If you notice I'm not using any typical Gender-Neutral pronouns like ze/zir or any others that sometimes get used. This is deliberate as I personally find they take me out of a story when I'm reading. I always end up translating it in my mind as I read. So I opted to use plural nouns of they and them for multigendered characters that do not specify a preference themselves. My logic behind this being that they have multiple genders so can be referred to in the multiple. If this bothers you, sorry, but it's not changing.

Loki will continue to be referred to as 'he' as that is what he is comfortable with. This
may change in the future as he grows more comfortable with himself in female form, but that’s later.
Heimdall was standing on the edge of his observatory looking out across the stars when he heard footsteps coming up behind him. He wasn't startled, but he was curious as to what she wanted. "Hello, cousin," she greeted as she reached where he was standing and clapped a hand on his armored shoulder with more force than was strictly necessary.

"Auntie Brunnhilde," Heimdall replied.

She made a face at the name, just like he knew she would. "Don't call me that. Makes me feel old," she complained as she looked out beside him. "What's got your attention today, Heimdall?"

"Nothing, in particular, just the usual. To what do I owe this visit?"

Brunnhilde sat down on the edge of the observatory and rested her arm on her raised knee. "I heard your little sister's managed to get into Tyr's training class," she said. "All us in the Hall are wondering if she's going to try and join us afterwards."

"You would have to ask her," Heimdall said without looking down at her. "She hasn't mentioned anything about becoming a Valkyrie, but that doesn't mean she hasn't thought anything about it either."

"It would be nice. We haven't had a new recruit in ages," Brunnhilde said as she swung her leg that was dangling over the edge carelessly. "It's like they completely forget about us..."

"It is easy to forget about things that you do not see every day," Heimdall pointed out. "I'm sure most people forget about me as well."

Brunnhilde snorted. "I doubt anyone forgets about you, Heimdall. You can peek in their windows from here on the observatory."

"I would never do such a thing."

"Nah, but you could," she said lightly. "Just having the ability is unsettling enough for most people. Whether you'd do it or not is completely beside the point. I bet Dellingr is so happy about his Princess taking up a sword."

Heimdall's smile twisted the edge of his mouth upwards just a fraction. "He is ecstatic. I only hear about it fifty times a day."

Brunnhilde laughed and leaned back on her arms. "I suppose if I go see him he'll have something to say about my 'bad influence' or something?" Heimdall shrugged, but they both knew it was likely. Dellingr had never been entirely happy that Sif had idolized Brunnhilde despite not often having
contact with one another. The councilman had thought it hard enough to keep Sif from running off and being wild without the example of Brunnhilde around. Not that Brunnhilde particularly cared. In the Valkyrie's opinion, he really should have thought about such things before he had married a Valkyrie and become part of their rather odd family unit in the first place.

Though not usually biologically related, the Valkyries lived, trained, fought, and died in close quarters with each other for most of their lives. They rarely had relationships among the general populace, so it had been somewhat odd that Dellingr had married one in the first place. When his wife, Ulfrun, died in battle shortly after Heimdall was born, the Valkyries did what they always did and banded together to help the frankly out of his depth Dellingr to raise the boy. Dellingr should have realized that even after he remarried that he wouldn't ever fully untangle from the sisterhood of Valkyries. Despite wanting to protect his precious daughter her interest in combat was hardly surprising considering.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he banned Sif from joining the Valkyries," Heimdall said. "He seems to think such a calling is a death sentence."

"No more than being any other warrior," Brunnhilde said.

"I don't think he's ever fully gotten over Mother's death," Heimdall murmured. "And he is afraid of history repeating, I think."

Brunnhilde shrugged. "I suppose I can see that, but banning her from doing something isn't going to stop her." Heimdall just inclined his head slightly by way of agreeing. The two of them let silence fall for a few moments before Brunnhilde got to her feet again. "So where is Dellingr's Darling?" she asked as she brushed off the back of her crisp white pants. 

"In the training ring," Heimdall said. "She has been spending all of her free time there trying to catch up with the boys her age."

"Admirable," Brunnhilde said as she turned and began to saunter off. "I think I'll go and say hello to the little scamp."

"Father will not be happy with that," Heimdall called without bothering to look over his shoulder at her.

"Dellingr can stuff it," Brunnhilde called back lightly. "Through you, she's my cousin too, and I'm going to go say hello." Heimdall just shook his head and was glad -not for the first time- that he no longer lived at home because undoubtedly his step-mother was going to be hearing quite a lot about Brunnhilde later on that night. Dellingr allowed Brunnhilde to get under his skin far easier than he really should but Heimdall didn't see that changing anytime soon.

Brunnhilde caught a few people staring as she made her way through the streets of Asgard. The distinctive white and silver armor of a Valkyrie shining in the bright sunlight stood out like a beacon among the warm golds and tans of most buildings on the street. Valkyries didn't often come down from their halls even though the rules saying that they couldn't do so had long ago been removed when Odin came to power. They had everything they could possibly need where they were and so usually only left when called to battle.

Several girls stared in awe at Brunnhilde as she passed and she couldn't help but smile back. She always enjoyed it when other girls felt inspired by her presence, it gave her hope that one day the damage that Bor had done by insisting girls could not fight would be repaired.

As she approached the training grounds, many boys stared at her openly and with a little less awe
than the girls in town. Some seemed downright bewildered by her very existence. Tyr was supervising the offloading of several carts of supplies, and so Brunnhilde made her way to him. "Hello, Tyr," she greeted as she peered into a box that was being taken past. The crate contained nothing but onions the size of her fist. Brunnhilde frowned and straightened again. "Resupply day is it?"

"Yes. We have a larger group than usual this year, and we were caught a little off guard," Tyr said as he checked boxes and their contents against the list in his hand. "At least Thor isn't going to be here for the foreseeable future. Even though he only ate lunch in the barracks, he could eat enough for ten recruits if he'd been working particularly hard."

Brunnhilde smiled. "A warrior must eat, Tyr."

"He certainly does do that," Tyr said as he made another check mark. "I wasn't expecting any Valkyries to stop by, but I can guess why you're here. Dellingr's daughter?"

"Is she any good?" Brunnhilde asked as she leaned over Tyr's shoulder to peer down at the list he was checking off. Nothing on the paper really caught her eye to abscond with, however.

Tyr shrugged. "She's a beginner, but she does have a mean right hook, judging from a few black eye's I've seen around," he said. "She's got potential, but I don't know if she'll stick with it that long."

Brunnhilde frowned. "Why say that?"

"Well, you know how boys are," Tyr said. "It won't be easy for her to get anywhere with them trying to make her give up."

"Where's your faith, Tyr?" Brunnhilde asked.

"Being tempered by realism," he said dryly.

Brunnhilde snorted, "How boring. Well, I'm going to go take a look-see."

"You do that. And try to not cause any trouble... or beat up any of my students. No matter how stupid they are," Tyr said, giving her a particularly firm look. Brunnhilde just smiled and walked off without promising anything. Tyr sighed and went back to marking his sheet. "And here I thought things would calm down without Thor and Loki around for a little while..."

Brunnhilde disappeared into the barracks and made her way upstairs. The long building had a splendid view of the training grounds down below and dozens of windows one could use to comfortably peer out of. Brunnhilde found one that wasn't too crowded with anything else and pushed the shutters open to lean outside. Down below in the packed-dirt training ring, Brunnhilde could spot Sif in the middle.

Sif was in trousers, a light shirt, and her long blonde hair was pulled back in a horsetail as she went through a series of familiar forms and motions used in training. Judging by the sweat staining her shirt and coating her skin, Brunnhilde could tell the girl had been working for quite a while already. Her sword strikes were slow and her form sloppy, but like Tyr had said, she had only just started.

Brunnhilde studied her 'cousin' via marriage for almost ten minutes before she noticed a group approaching where Sif was training. Now entirely too curious at the development, Brunnhilde vaulted through the window and landed on the ground in a crouch. The Valkyrie started heading down the short set of stairs to the sunken in training grounds just as the group of boys reached
where Sif was practicing. Surprisingly, there were a few girls in the group as well that Brunnhilde judged to be daughters of members of the court by their pretty dresses.

"Still pretending to be a boy, troll face?" a red-headed girl in the front said nastily.

Sif stopped and turned around sharply. "What do you want, Lorelei?" she demanded. "Don't you have something better to do than come bother me?"

"I have so much better to do," Lorelei said flippantly. "But you're bothering the boys. They can't practice with you hogging all the training area."

Sif scoffed. "There's plenty of space. It's not my problem if they're too scared to be on the same field as me."

"We're not scared!" several boys protested.

"Then why go running to Lorelei?" Sif asked.

"We didn't!" one boy denied. "She came by on her own!" another shouted. "We don't need a girl's help!"

Lorelei glared at the boys before turning to Sif. "Why don't you just give up on this craziness? It's not like you'll ever be able to keep up with the men. You're wasting everyone's time!"

Brunnhilde had heard enough but she never actually got a chance to say anything. Before she could a completely different voice called out. "Shouldn't you be studying for your next practical so that you don't fail it this time, Lorelei?"

The group of kids confronting Sif turned and spread to reveal a pretty girl with silvery blonde hair and intensely colored eyes of a rare sea-foam hue. "Mind your own business, Sigyn!" Lorelei snapped as her face turned pink.

"Why should I?" Sigyn asked folding her arms over her chest. "You don't mind yours."

Lorelei scoffed and flipped her hair. "You shouldn't even be here in Asgard! It's not like you're that talented!"

Sigyn didn't seem particularly upset by that claim. "I'm talented enough to be Lady Eir's primary apprentice... unlike you who can barely fix a broken tooth," Sigyn drawled.

"I'm not a healer!" Lorelei argued.

"And yet you're here trying to make a fuss about someone doing something they are good at. Honestly, Lorelei, I knew you weren't the brightest star in the sky but I had hoped you were at least above a black hole," Sigyn said. A few kids, including Sif, laughed at that although all the boys at least attempted to disguise it.

Lorelei glared at the offending boys before turned her glare back at Sigyn. "You'll regret that, Sigyn. I never forget a slight!"

Sigyn raised an eyebrow. "I'm surprised you remember anything given your last test scores." Lorelei's face was now bright red, and deep maroon energy started building around her arms. Sigyn still didn't seem worried. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Lorelei."

"Shut up!"
Bolts of pure power went flying before Brunnhilde could step in to stop the developing fight. To the Valkyrie's surprise, Sigyn flicked her hand, and the bolt bounced off of an aqua colored barrier and flew off into the distance harmlessly. Lorelei let out a noise of pure frustration and stamped her foot. "I told you that was a bad idea," Sigyn said. "But you just never listen to anyone else, do you?"

"You horrid Alfr trollop!"

Sigyn rolled her eyes. "I'm not surprised you can't even tell the difference between an Alfr and a Vanir," she said. "Are you done with this hissy fit or are you going to continue to waste everyone's time?"

Lorelei looked ready to explode, but she took a deep breath and seemed to fight down whatever urge she had. "Fine. Not like I care anyway!" she declared before storming off with the few girls she had in tow hurrying after her. "I'll deal with you later, Sigyn!" Lorelei shouted back.

"Ooh, scary," Sigyn mocked. Sigyn glanced at the crowd of boys still there looking bewildered. "Well? Go on," she said with a shooing motion. "I'm sure you have things to do. Try not to strain yourselves thinking about what just happened." Slowly the boys dispersed, muttering among themselves and still sounding very confused.

"I could have handled her," Sif said as she rested her training sword on her shoulder.

"Oh, I don't doubt that," Sigyn said. "But not without punching her and then I would have had to listen to her whine about it all through lessons tomorrow."

Sif chuckled some. "Ah, yes, I can see why that would be annoying."

"Well, I'm glad to see that there are a couple girls who aren't going to be perfect little housewives," Brunnhilde said from where she had ended up leaning against the fence. Both girls turned quickly, and their eyes widened when they recognized her Valkyrie armor. The girls continued to stare, and Brunnhilde couldn't help but laugh. "You two look like you just saw a dragon on the loose."

"Auntie Brunnhilde," Sif said. "I-I didn't know you were coming today!"

Brunnhilde frowned at being called 'auntie' again. "Yes, well, I decided I'd surprise you. I heard you got into Tyr’s training classes. An impressive feat."

“Ah, well, I might have caused a scene in the farewell feast to the Princes,” Sif said looking caught between being embarrassed and being proud of herself.

“It’s more likely that Loserlei was the one causing the scene,” Sigyn drawled.

Sif burst out laughing so hard she nearly doubled over. Sigyn looked a little taken aback. “What?” she asked, looking over to Brunnhilde who could only shrug.

“Loserlei?” Sif managed to question between bursts of breathless laughter.

“Well, it’s fitting,” Sigyn said slightly defensively.

Sif managed to straighten and wiped the corner of her eye. “Yes, yes it is,” she agreed with a huge grin. “And I may have to borrow it. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone call that annoying little twit a name before."

“I’m not afraid of her,” Sigyn said. “As you saw, she can’t hurt me. I may not have much gift for
the offensive, but what I protect stays protected. Father says its survival instinct for my mouth…”

Brunnhilde snorted. “I think you both held your own just fine. Now, I am here for the day and I, for one, would very much prefer to spend it not talking about annoying little redheads. Show me what you're working on Sif. Sigyn, you are welcome to join us.”

"Perhaps I will just watch," Sigyn said. "I'm not overly fond of weapons."

Brunnhilde inclined her head in acknowledgment. "As you wish. Just stay back if you don't want to get caught up in it," she commanded as she drew her sword. Sif's eyes widened at the sight of the blade. "Well, little cousin? Surely, you are not afraid?"

"Of course not," Sif said as she hurried to bring her practice weapon up. The way she held herself belied that, but Brunnhilde let her have the illusion of the lie. Warriors still felt fear they just had to learn to overcome it and so bringing attention to it would only defeat the purpose.

"Good," Brunnhilde complimented as she saw Sif settle into a conventional stance. Without another word, she lashed out with her sword with a lesser amount of force than usual. Sif still looked caught off guard by the strength of the blow but scrambled to recover.

Sigyn wandered over to the stairs and sat down to watch the two others spar. She pulled the small book she had brought with her out of her pocket and opened it up to start reading while Brunnhilde began drilling Sif and shouting out various tips and corrections. They stayed like that for most of the afternoon until the sun was starting to reach out towards the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

Heimdall and Valkyries- Because Heimdall of myth had nine mothers I have interpreted that as he was essentially raised by nine mother-like figures and that brought me somewhat naturally to the conclusion that the Valkyries were the most logical candidates. They are a very close sisterhood type order and also serves a purpose to inspire Sif. This is not claiming that Heimdall is blood related to Brunnhilde but they acknowledge a tie by using familial titles. Most Valkyries would call Heimdall some sort of title like nephew or cousin based mostly on age and comfort level.

Sigyn- I realized Sigyn has no speaking parts yet! For shame! She's gonna be sassy in this. The sassiest sass master that ever sassed. And Loki adores it. Or he will once he works himself up to actually talking to her again.
Dinner was, if possible, even more uncomfortable than tea in the garden had been. Loki was so incredibly grateful to have his brother. Thor chattered on incessantly about something Loki wasn't even listening to, but it kept all the attention of the table. Loki didn't have to participate and took the opportunity to avoid socializing gladly. He wasn't sure if it was just his imagination or what but Loki swore that Gerd kept *looking* at him and it was off-putting, to say the least. He just wanted those horrible red eyes to go away. Of course, Loki didn't look up from his plate to confirm that the spouse of Freyr was looking, but Loki also didn't feel the need to verify that.

Loki wasn't even sure what he was eating. Or if he was eating. He didn't feel hungry. If anything he felt somewhat nauseous and had since he and Thor had first started heading back to the palace with the realization that Freyr and Gerd had arrived. He was fairly certain he ate at least a few bites of whatever it was because his mother wasn't pestering him to eat anything and she would have if he hadn't taken at least a little.

Thor and Loki were used to both formal and informal dinners with diplomats even though they tended to be excused from the more formal ones, but never before had even the casual dinners seemed to last so *long*. Loki swore half the night was going by while they sat there around the table. Loki tried his best to pull his attention back to whatever Thor was rambling about but found that he just couldn't. This was even worse than sitting down at tea. Loki couldn't make some excuse about Ofnir and leave. He had to wait, and the waiting was excruciating.

After some time, a servant came and gestured at Lok's plate questioningly. Loki nodded and pushed away from the table slightly so that his partially eaten food could be taken away. There would be another few courses, there always were, but he'd managed to sit through the main meal. Loki looked up at his Mother. "May I be excused?"

Frigga frowned slightly, and Loki could tell that she wasn't happy with the amount he'd eaten at dinner. He couldn't help it though. Loki wanted to be anywhere but there. Frigga studied her son another moment before sighing and nodding. "You may."

Loki jumped up quickly from his seat and hurried off without a second glance. Not that he was fleeing, per say, he would just really rather not be there any longer than he had to be. Loki hurried to his room and practically flung himself over the bed. Ofnir lifted his head quickly and then blinked several times since he had been disturbed from where he'd been sleeping on Loki's pillow.
Loki didn't notice Ofnir at all and just kicked off his shoes and pulled his blankets over top of his head. He wasn't sure why but for the first time in, he was pretty sure his entire life, he felt cold, and he didn't like that feeling. Loki curled up under the blanket and shook although he wasn't sure why he was shaking so badly. He knew being cold made people tremble, but he'd never noticed Thor this bad when he was cold.

Loki curled up tighter even as he felt Ofnir crawl over him and tuck himself close to where Loki's head was buried against his own knees. Loki closed his eyes and tried to just breathe and stop shaking so badly. He heard Ofnir make a few noises and rub up against him despite the blanket.

After a little while, Loki heard the door to his room open. "Loki?"

Loki almost groaned but managed not to. "What, Thor?" he asked without getting out from under the covers. He found he liked being curled up under them like he was.

Loki felt the bed slump as Thor got on it. "Are you alright, brother?"

"I'm fine," Loki grumbled. And that was true. Physically he was sure he was entirely healthy. He just felt like never leaving his bed again was all. There was a moment's silence, and then Thor managed to worm his way under the covers with Loki. "I can't believe she made us sit through dinner like that," Loki grumbled.

"It wasn't really that bad was it?" Thor asked.

"It was that bad," Loki insisted.

Thor sighed and clasped the back of Loki's neck with one hand to draw their foreheads together. "You're getting yourself worked up over something that doesn't even matter. I promise you."

"That's easy for you to say," Loki muttered although he had to admit -if only to himself- his brother's familiar gesture of comfort and closeness really did seem to help calm him down. He hadn't realized how hard his heart had been pounding in his chest until the tightness began to ease.

"It isn't easy," Thor denied. "Not when I see how upset this all makes you."

Loki closed his eyes and reached up to wrap his own hand around Thor's neck. "Thank you for coming and checking on me, brother. I feel better now."

"You're still shaking, Loki," Thor pointed out unhappily.

"Maybe," Loki admitted. No matter how hard he tried to stop, he just couldn't seem to do so. He wasn't even cold anymore, but his muscles kept trembling without his say. "But I do feel better than I did before you came in."

"Should I get Mother?"

Loki shook his head. "No. I think I'll just go to sleep..."

"You did do a lot of magic today," Thor pointed out. "It's no wonder you're tired."

"It's no worse than when I was trying to figure out the cold charm for Ofnir's collar," Loki said. "Or at least it wasn't any worse until dinner. For some reason that really tired me out. I think I'll skip breakfast tomorrow."

"Then you'll just complain about missing breakfast all morning," Thor said.
Loki scoffed. "I would not."

"You would too, and you know it."

Loki huffed and gave Thor a slight shove. "You're the one that eats like a pig," Loki accused. "You have four stomachs like a cow, and they never fill. It's the only explanation."

Thor shoved Loki back. "At least I don't eat so fast I nearly choke myself."

"I have more important things to do with my time than eating," Loki declared. "I don't see why I should have to wait for you to stuff your face with another three helpings of whatever we're eating."

And just like that, a small scuffle broke out. Ofnir hissed in displeasure as he was bumped into and the blankets jerked around under him. He crawled back onto the pillow and eyed the noisy and moving lump that was the two brothers with one disapproving slit pupil before settling down again. "Ow!" Thor shouted before he went tumbling off the bed entirely and hit the ground with a thud.

Loki poked his head out from under the blankets to look down at the now frowning blonde. "Serves you right," Loki said.

"Fine, I won't be sympathetic next time," Thor replied.

Loki's eyebrow went up. "If you really think you can hold back..."

"Brat," Thor accused as he got to his feet. Loki wasn't in the least bit phased by the name. Thor sighed and brushed himself off. "You sure you're alright?" Thor asked.

"I'm sure, brother," Loki answered. "Right now I'm just mostly tired, so I'm going to go to bed early."

Thor still didn't look entirely convinced but nodded. "Alright. Goodnight then. If you need me-"

"I won't," Loki interrupted with exasperation.

"-then I'll be in my room," Thor finished in spite of Loki.

Loki rolled his eyes. "Goodnight, Thor."

Thor nodded and left while Loki just shook his head a little. He might have reacted somewhat... poorly at meeting Gerd, but he wasn't a baby. He didn't need his big brother to stay with him all night just to make him feel better. Loki got out of bed just long enough to change into his sleep shirt and leggings and turn out the light. As soon as Loki was back in bed, Ofnir shifted to curl up against his chest. Loki wrapped his arms around the lizard and let himself settle into the plush mattress and pillow so that he could sleep. Loki lay there for over an hour just listening to Ofnir snore beside him and trying to get to sleep himself.

Loki was lying on his back on something hard, and he was hot. So unbearably hot that he swore that he could hear his skin beginning to crack and flake. The hot air made him want to cough, but at the same time his lungs seemed to shrivel up in his chest, and he couldn't get the air to do so. Loki sat up and looked around but couldn't see for the glare from somewhere up above and the waves of heat all around him. When he blinked his eyes to try and refocus, it was like two screens of rough metal scraping along his eyes. It hurt to blink, and tears escaped from his eyes only to practically sizzle along his cheeks.
His tongue didn't feel any wetter than his lips as he tried to soothe the cracks that were forming. He could taste blood from the deep crevasses, and that made Loki cringe. Loki brought his hands up to rub his streaming eyes and gasped when he saw his own skin. His hands were blue. Bright blue with lines running over his tendons and meeting with his black nails. "No!" he gasped in horror, unable to tear his eyes away. A sudden breeze of pure ice swept past and the desert that he had been roasting in turned into endless snow and ice.

Loki cried out and scrambled to his feet. The wind was howling, and snow was flying every which way to block sight. Loki couldn't stop the panic as he backed away; as if he would suddenly find some way out of the endless tundra.

Loki bumped into something and gave a short cry of surprise. He jumped forward and spun around. His horror mounted when he came face to face with a massive blue figure. Lines that seemed far too familiar to him were engraved into a stern face. Loki backed away several steps as red eyes seemed to look straight into his soul. He wasn't sure who this was, but the lines he knew he had seen before and something about those razor sharp cheekbones echoed something else Loki was sure he'd seen before. Loki swallowed hard as the Jotunn stepped closer, its long stride crossing the distance before Loki could do anything. The Jotunn grabbed Loki tightly around one arm, and Loki screamed.

Loki woke up choking on his own breath and covered in a thin sheen of sweat. He looked around in horror but realized where he really was after a moment. His heart was still thundering so loudly in his chest he was surprised that Ofnir slept soundly so nearby. Loki trembled and forced himself to take several deep breaths. Every limb felt weak, and the room was too dark.

He got to his feet and went to his wash basin in the corner. Loki still felt unsteady as he splashed some water over his face and neck to rinse away the fear. Loki wasn't sure why the dream had frightened him so much. The Jotunn hadn't even done anything really. But nonetheless, he was frightened to his core from the nightmare.

Loki braced himself over his wash basin and tried to not remember those red eyes fixing him with such an intense stare. He wasn't entirely successful, and as he stared at his own slightly rippling reflection, he realized he remembered what his own real face looked like. His horror at the dream returned with a vengeance, and despite trying to tear his eyes away from the water, he couldn't quite manage it.

The ceramic bowl suddenly broke nearly in half, and the water almost exploded outwards to splash over everything. Loki gasped in surprise and backed away quickly. He hadn't meant to do that. Loki suddenly realized the room was too dark and too confining. He needed to be outside. He needed someplace less stifling. He turned and opened the door to the balcony and nearly tripped in his haste to get outside.

Loki grabbed the railing of the porch and tried to catch his breath as best he could. Ofnir trilled from the doorway, and Loki absently closed the door before the little wyvern could follow him out. He didn't trust himself to keep an eye on the reptile just then. He just needed a moment to gather his wits. But staying still to do that didn't seem to be an option either. Loki needed to move. No real reason other than his body was thrumming with adrenaline, and he was sure that was why he was still shaking like he was.

Loki climbed up onto the porch railing and then jumped down to the courtyard below. He landed smoothly in a crouch among several manicured bushes. Loki took a moment to gather himself before straightening and starting walking. The moon was huge in the sky above him, and he was sure it had to be very late at night.
Loki aimlessly wandered the several open-air courtyards and sitting areas that were dotted throughout the palace and was glad to feel himself calming down. He was reasonably sure that he wouldn't be getting to sleep again that night, but at least his hands weren't shaking still. Loki was still profoundly unsettled, but the terror had faded. Loki kicked a small stone back into the rock garden it had been lost from. He really shouldn't have been as scared as he had been, he realized. The dream wasn't even that scary. He wasn't a baby to be afraid of Jotnar in the night. The stupid giant hadn't even done anything. Just grabbed him. And yet that one Frost Giant reaching for him was somehow a million times more frightening than the dreams of those idiots back in Asgard that seemed to enjoy cornering him when Thor and Tyr weren't around. Loki didn't understand that. Those stupid muscle-bound Aesir could actually do things -had actually done things- and the Jotnar couldn't. So why were they so much more terrifying to him?

Loki paused beside a small tree that was covered in dark red bark and rather than leaves had tiny white flowers exploding from each delicate branch. The whole thing only reached midway up Loki's chest and exuded a calming sweet smell that Loki thought was extremely pleasing. He reached out and fingered one of the small blooms. The flowers were soft as silk against his the pads of his fingers, and more of that wholesome smell escaped and clung to Loki's hand. The ball of tension that had built up in his chest relaxed almost instantly, and Loki sighed.

"It is called a Starfly Blossom," a voice said.

Loki jumped and spun around so fast he almost tripped. Sitting at a nearby table that Loki hadn't noticed was Gerd. Loki's eyes widened. How had he missed the giant sitting there? Was he really that consumed with his own thoughts? "W-what?"

"The tree. It's a Starfly Blossom. The sweet scent it gives off attracts Starflies to pollinate it," Gerd explained, misreading what Loki was asking.

"I know that," Loki said automatically. Although he knew the tree as a Vanaheim Cloud Tree. Starfly Blossom was just a different name for the same plant.

Gerd raised a pale eyebrow. "I see," they said. Loki could only stare at the tall figure. "I'm sorry. I've startled you, haven't I?"

"Are you not?" Gerd asked, sounding disbelieving. "Well, my mistake," they said indulgently.

The silence between the two of them lingered for several uncomfortable minutes. Gerd didn't seem to notice and looked up at the moon, which seemed to make the lines along their skin glow. "I like it out here at night. It is cooler and more comfortable, don't you think?"

Loki swallowed hard and didn't answer. He did find it more comfortable after the sun set but he didn't think admitting it was wise. Unless… again Loki had to wonder if Gerd knew about him. About what he was. The thought was very unsettling, but he found he just had to know. "Did Mother tell you?" he asked, barely able to get his voice above a whisper.
“Tell me what, little one?” Gerd asked.

“About what I am?” Loki managed to clarify.

Gerd was quiet as they studied the youngster in front of them. “About being Jotnar? No, she did not,” Gerd answered. “But I could tell.”

Loki’s eyes snapped up instantly. “How?” he demanded. The idea of someone being able to tell deeply upset him. He didn’t want anyone to know anything like that about him. It was bad enough he never fit in because of his magic and his dislike of sparing. Loki didn’t need to add being Jotnar on top of that.

“You are so very terrified of me, Loki,” Gerd said. “Far more than you should be considering you’ve never met a Giant of any sort before. None could have hurt you in the past, the whole of the Nine Realms would have felt the Allfather’s wrath if something a thing were to happen. So, there had to be some other reason. I know you were born at the end of the war so, I thought at first it was simply too many war stories you’d overheard, but that didn’t seem right either.”

Loki looked off to the side awkwardly. The war stories he’d heard didn’t help, but Gerd was right that they weren’t what really upset him. War stories were just any other stories; most likely embellished beyond all reason until they couldn’t be taken seriously anymore. “So, what could have possibly been the cause, I wondered?” Gerd continued. “And then your mother said that you had a baby wyvern as a pet. Now that is quite odd. There would have to be some reason for a wyvern to be attracted to you. You didn’t seem to have any bits of you missing from handling one, you see,” Gerd pointed out. “From there it only took a minor leap.”

Loki shifted where he stood uncomfortably. He still didn’t like that Gerd had figured him out so easily. “If it helps, if I were not half Jotnar myself it would be much more difficult to guess,” they offered.

Loki shrugged. That didn’t really help him feel better. Silence returned between them, and Gerd took a sip of whatever drink they had with them. Finally, they sighed, “Why are you so afraid of me, Loki?”

The silence lingered for several minutes as Loki tried to figure out how to put it all into words. “You’re so strange… and-and the book said that I was supposed to be killed and… I just I don’t understand how any of it…” Loki broke off there and wrapped his arms around himself. There was just so much to try and comprehend. Nothing was the same now. Jotnar were so different from Aesir, Loki just couldn’t process it no matter how hard he worked at it. And he had been trying. He really had.

Gerd tilted their head to the side thoughtfully before extending an arm. "Come here, little one. I think we need to talk."

"Talk about what?" Loki demanded without moving closer.

"About Jotnar," Gerd said, not lowering their arm despite the fact that Loki hadn't moved into their offer of comfort. "As wonderfully useful as Heritage Tomes are, they shouldn't be the only place to get your information about what you are. I see you're scared of all these changes. There's no reason for that."

Loki frowned darkly at the ground somewhere off to his right. "I know Father could change me if tried... Father can do anything, he's the Allfather."
"Odin is powerful," Gerd agreed. "But not even the Norns can change what you are, Loki. Now come here."

There was an awkward pause of several minutes where Loki didn't move, and Gerd just sat there waiting. Finally, Loki relented and moved to Gerd's side. The Jotunn pulled Loki up into their lap and, though Loki protested and squirmed, wrapped their arm around the young Prince to keep him in place. Slowly, Loki's skin started to show blue where Gerd's arm was touching. Loki shied away, but there was nowhere to move to, and so the sapphire continued to spread. "Enough of that now. There is a lot more to being a Jotunn than just our size or what we look like."

"Such as?" Loki asked, sounding petulant and unhappy to have been put in Gerd's lap so easily.

"Well, I'm sure you've noticed that smells offend you more easily than they do your brother," Gerd began. "That would be because we have a stronger sense of smell than Asgardians or Vanir or really any of the other races. It's only natural when so many animals in Jotunheim are camouflaged to blend with the snow."

Loki frowned but then slowly began to nod. "I suppose that does make sense..." he muttered. "But I wasn't really wondering about that."

"You wanted an example," Gerd replied without pause. "Don't be upset when I give you one. If you have something that is bothering you... tell me, and I'll explain it to you."

At first, Loki didn't say anything and started trying to subtly slide off of Gerd's lap. The partner of Freyr was able to keep Loki in place without too much of an effort, which only seemed to annoy the young prince more. Loki sighed in exasperation. "I'm not a child. Why do I have to be in your lap for this?" he finally demanded.

"You are a child," Gerd replied instantly. "You're not even fully grown yet."

"I'm not going to get as tall as you. I'm defective," Loki muttered.

Gerd raised one eyebrow. "You're hardly that," they said. "There are quite a few with your condition in Jotunheim now that the law was overturned. It might be a hard life for them, but we've started to notice that to make up for their smaller size they're quite adept at Seidr use. We hadn't ever known that before due to how few survived to any real age. None that I know of are as strong with it as you, but the majority of them are stronger than normal sized Jotnar. You're quite normal, Loki." Gerd had heard just how strong Loki already was with his magic, so much so that Frigga had mentioned trying to find some Alfr tutors for the young mage specifically for his skills. Gerd had their suspicions as to why Loki would be so strong, especially now that they saw the dynasty lines on Loki's body.

"I don't feel normal," Loki said, looking down at his blue hands. He was beginning to tremble again.

"Why not?" Gerd asked. "Are you so very different than how you were before you found out about this?"

Loki shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not a boy anymore..."

"You're not not a boy," Gerd said. Loki sent the older Jotunn an annoyed look. "Well, it's true. If you want to be a boy, then you're perfectly able to do that."

"Boys don't..." Loki broke off there and looked away from Gerd.
"And what don't boys do?" Gerd asked. Loki kept looking away and didn't answer. Gerd sighed, "You're going to have to tell me, Loki. I don't know anything about boys versus girls seeing how we don’t have such distinctions, so I don't know what is upsetting you so much."

There was a very long silence between them as Loki stubbornly refused to explain exactly what was bothering him. Eventually, Gerd decided to take a guess as to what might be bothering Loki although they could only think of one significant thing that parted the two genders in most races. "You don't have to carry children if you don't want to," Gerd said. "And even if you did I would say that doing so made you stronger than most 'men'. It is not an easy thing to do."

"I don't want to," Loki said firmly.

"You might change your mind," Gerd commented. "But that doesn't matter. Like I said... there are plenty Jotnar that never carry children. It is a choice."

"If I were to... do that," Loki began awkwardly, "then I really would be Ergi."

Gerd frowned. "I don't know what that means..."

"It's bad," Loki said. "Unmanly..."

"Can you really be unmanly if you are a Jotunn?" Gerd asked thoughtfully. "I don't believe that you can."

"But I'm not a Jotunn."

"You are," Gerd said. "Enough of this. Just relax, Loki. You're worrying about this far too much when none of it actually matters. You can be whatever you wish to be." Loki began to argue again, but Gerd clasped a hand to the back of his neck and squeezed lightly. Loki went silent, and Gerd gently pulled the younger Jotunn closer. "I said enough, Loki, don't worry about things that might not even happen. Just be yourself."

Loki couldn't quite help but relax against Gerd as the ball of nerves inside of him eased. "I don't think that'll work..."

"Why not?" Gerd asked, still rubbing the back of Loki's neck.

"... because I don't know what that is anymore," Loki muttered.

"There's no great secret, Loki," Gerd said. "Just do what you like and ignore what others say and do. Their opinions don't matter. If other people's opinions mattered... I would not be married now to a man that showers me with praise and love."

Loki was quiet for several minutes. "You think too much, Loki," Gerd said. "And worry too much." Loki let out a shaky exhale and tried to do as Gerd suggested and stop thinking. Unfortunately, that was so much easier said than done for him. “It’s alright, little one,” Gerd said, brushing some of Loki’s hair back gently. “I promise you everything will be fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Loki's Anxiety and Nightmare- Loki's subconscious is definitely trying to reach out to him here but of course since Loki wants absolutely nothing to do with his Jotnar
heritage it's causing some problems. Luckily he's got some support systems in place this time to help him through it. And yes, that Jotunn in his dreams is basically Laufey or what Loki imagines is Laufey since they've never actually met that Loki can recall.

**Starflies**- Only a brief mention here but basically they are a type of firefly only they don't glow yellow or blink quite the same way Earth fireflies do.

**Cloud Tree/Starfly Blossom**- These small trees are based off of two trees in particular. Dwarf Japanese Maples and Cherry Blossoms. Both of which I find to be absolutely lovely. I used to go to the capital to see the Cherry Blossoms in bloom with my grandparents when they were alive and so I've always very much loved them.

**Gerd**- Gerd is definitely only just starting to play their role as a surrogate third parent sort of role for Loki. Now that they've finally gotten past that Loki constantly running away from things he doesn't want to confront thing (at least for the most part) Gerd should be able to help Loki really accept who he is. You'll be seeing and hearing a lot more from Gerd in the future.
Loki didn’t ask any more questions of Gerd and Gerd, in turn, didn’t press. Gerd could tell that the realization of his identity was something that Loki would have to process and come to terms with bit by bit. Loki only allowed Gerd to hold him another few minutes after the hug before insisting on being put down and then making an excuse and hurrying away. Gerd couldn’t say they were surprised. From what little they had seen of Loki the boy didn’t seem overly fond of physical displays of affection even from close family.

Gerd finished their drink and glanced up at the moon one more time before getting up and returning to the guest rooms that they and their husband were occupying for their stay. As soon as Gerd slid into bed beside Freyr their partner’s arm wrapped around their waist. “Mm, I was beginning to worry,” Freyr murmured against Gerd’s bare shoulder. “Your walks don’t usually take so long.”

“I ran into Little Loki.”

Freyr pushed himself up just slightly to look down at his partner with somewhat blurry eyes. “Did he cause you trouble?” he asked. He hadn’t failed to notice the way the young prince seemed to take some sort of offense to Gerd, and he didn’t like that in the least. Freyr would never allow anyone, not even children, to disrespect his partner.

“Of course not,” Gerd said before pulling Freyr down again. “Do not be so overprotective. He was just scared of me, and he’s hardly the first. Nor will he be the last.”

“He has no reason to be afraid of you,” Freyr muttered as he squeezed Gerd’s waist lightly. “I do not know how anyone could look upon your beauty and be frightened.” Freyr had been struck entirely dumb when he first spotted Gerd. He’d been in love instantly, not frightened by any stretch of the imagination.

“If it helps your poor self to understand,” Gerd said as they rolled enough to wrap their own arm around their smaller partner. “I think he fears more what I represent than me myself.”
“What you represent?” Freyr echoed. “How do you mean?”

Gerd was quiet for a moment as they played with Freyr’s hair. “If I tell you, you must not tell anyone else, dearest. It is not truly my secret to tell.” Freyr looked even more surprised and confused but nodded. “Loki is a Banthum sufferer.”

Freyr seemed very confused by that. “Banthum sufferer?” he echoed. “But that would mean he’s a Jotunn.”

“Yes, it would,” Gerd agreed. “But he has only recently discovered this. He thought that he was Aesir until he started showing signs. I’m only guessing here, but I would think that the All-Father’s impressive guise did not quite manage to hold back his true nature and so Frigga and Odin had to finally tell him what he was.”

“Why wouldn’t they just tell him to begin with?” Freyr asked. “I thought they were smarter than that.”

Gerd sighed. “Most likely to try and protect him. They did adopt him at the end of a war with Jotunheim. And the opinion of giants in Asgard has never been terribly high, to begin with.”

“One of their queens was a Jotunn,” Freyr pointed out.

“And that ended quite badly if you’ll remember,” Gerd said. “Bor despised Bestla at the end. It got so bad that they were forced to leave Asgard entirely and separate from their children. All because Bor felt his manliness was in jeopardy.”

“He married a Jotunn…and yet he thought his manliness in jeopardy?” Freyr asked. That was difficult for Freyr to imagine since he himself had no problems with his own masculinity just because his ‘wife’ could conceivably be called a husband instead. It made no difference as to his own gender, after all.

Gerd smiled and leaned down to give their husband a kiss. “You were rather taken aback to learn I had a penis on our wedding night, oh-enlightened-one.”

Freyr blushed a bright pink in the dark. The wedding night had been a shock -and an embarrassing one, at that- he admitted. “Perhaps a bit…but I rather think we’ve found good compromises about that,” he mumbled. After a few awkward nights together he had gotten used to his love’s anatomy and wouldn’t change anything now. “But he was married to Bestla for centuries…they had biological children together. How could Bor have felt so threatened?”

Gerd hummed a little and played with Freyr’s hair. “In Jotunheim it was common knowledge that Bestla -when they were young- suffered a very serious accident involving a war beast. Their…external anatomy had to be removed because of it.” Freyr reflexively shuddered at the idea. That must have been a bad accident. Gerd shrugged, “Such things happen. We adjust. Bestla would only be able to bear children, and as a dam of the royal line, Bestla would want a strong sire for their children. Bor was quite strong. Bestla didn’t realize their husband didn’t know about the accident or very much about Jotnar at all, so didn’t feel the need to disclose the information. When ‘the truth’ came out several centuries and children later…Bor was retroactively horrified and never touched Bestla again. He claimed it was a deliberate deception to lessen him and started many of the rumors about Jotnar’s ‘inherent evilness’ that is still a reasonably popular opinion in Asgard today.”

Freyr thought about what his partner had said for several minutes. “Seems silly to get upset so long after the fact. And surely there would have been scars from such a thing.”
“I’m sure he dismissed the scars,” Gerd said. “It is well known that Jotunheim is dangerous. As far as he knew they were only superficial. But yes, it is silly to get so upset so long after the fact.”

“So, why does Loki run the other direction when he sees you, love?” Freyr asked. “Shouldn’t he be glad to have someone more like himself to talk with?”

Gerd sighed. “Try to think of it from his perspective, darling. You are a young boy just coming into your own and very suddenly you are told that you have a vagina and could bear children.” Freyr thought and then cringed. Yes, he could see how that would be upsetting. “His very nature is different from what he thought it was. There will be growing pains. I eased some of his fears tonight, but I do not doubt that there are plenty he still has and needs to come to terms with.”

Freyr hummed thoughtfully and let his fingers trace a line that ran along Gerd’s side down to their hip. “You know, imagining you comforting that little boy is really a wonderful image,” he said. “I like you motherly.”

“Is that so?” Gerd asked in amusement.

“Yes, it is,” he said as he leaned closer and pressed a kiss to Gerd’s cool shoulder.

“We have a war brewing, Dearest,” Gerd pointed out. “Now’s hardly the time.”

Freyr looked up. “Now is a perfect time!” he argued. “Heirs bring a sense of stability to the people and even if it didn’t… I think you’d be stunning with my child growing in you.”

“Perhaps I would,” Gerd said. “But we won’t be finding that out anytime soon, Darling. Practicing will have to satisfy you for now.”

“Mm, well, practice is very satisfying, I’ll admit,” Freyr said as he pushed himself up and leaned over to capture his partner’s mouth with his own. Gerd laughed into the kiss and wrapped their arms around Freyr.

The next day Gerd decided to join the other ‘women’ at tea. Being the spouse of the heir to the throne meant that their role tended to fit more with the womenfolk of Asgard and Vanaheim. It reinforced the somewhat incorrect term of ‘wife,’ but Gerd had long ago gotten over that. Nobody they had come across seemed to intend it as a form of slight, and correcting entire cultures was an exhausting prospect. The best option was to just work things to their advantage.

Gerd wasn’t in any sort of hurry, however, so when they overheard Thor and Loki sitting on the steps of one of the gardens they paused. “-turned blue, Thor,” Loki said. “And I couldn’t control it at all. Just because Gerd touched me.”

“Did it hurt?” Thor asked, sounding very worried.

There was a moment’s silence. “No, it didn’t hurt really. But it feels very strange. I can’t really explain it. But, I guess, if I must… it feels like when your arm or leg is asleep, and then the blood comes rushing back to it, and the whole of the limb starts to tingle… it is like that only instead of in the flesh it is on the skin.”

“It is because of the guise,” Gerd supplied as they walked fully out of the corridor. The two boys startled and turned to face them. “I’m sorry to startle you. I was just passing by and heard what you were talking about.”

“What do you mean it’s the guise?” Loki asked. Gerd saw how Loki had a grip on his own arms and how his fingers tightened almost as if the boy was afraid his skin would change without his
say so. Gerd supposed when one technically wasn’t in control of how they looked it was a legitimate fear.

“Odin’s guise is very sophisticated,” Gerd answered. “It guides your body to the ‘proper’ anatomy… or as close as it can come and removes your dynasty lines. But aside from that it also changes your very skin. Not just the color either. Odin has given the guise some measure of protection for you against heat and sun exposure. I doubt it is much but that combined with your… genetic condition means it’s possible for you to live in such a warm place as Asgard. I doubt I would last very long there even during a mild summer much less grow up there and I am only half Jotnar.”

Loki frowned and looked down at one hand. “I don’t really like how it feels…”

“You’re just not used to it,” Thor argued. “It will get better if you were to spend more time in that form.”

Loki scoffed. “Well, I’m not going to.”

“I really doubt it’s that bad, brother,” Thor said with a heavy sigh.

“And that’s very easy for you to say,” Loki snapped.

Gerd raised an eyebrow at the exchange. Obviously, this was an argument the brothers had had before. Before Gerd could offer an opinion on the matter though, Thor surprised them by grabbing hold of the back of Loki’s neck. “I know it bothers you and if I could, I would do whatever you wanted to ease things for you. But alas, I am not nearly as gifted as you are, brother. I have only my own self that you see here.”

Loki was silent at that and let himself be pulled closer even though Gerd was right there. The giant observed the pair another moment before clearing their throat. "You know, you have a bit more Jotnar in you than I think you realize, Thor," Gerd said. Both Thor and Loki looked up in confusion. Gerd gestured to them. "How long have you been doing that?"

Thor just blinked. "Doing what?" He couldn't place anything he was doing that was odd in any way.

"Clasping your brother's neck like that," Gerd clarified.

"I just... always have?" Thor answered uncertainly.

Gerd smiled. "It is a Jotnar gesture," they explained. "When you come from a species that can form blades of ice on one's arms, letting another touch your neck is a great show of trust and affection. Only family and lovers usually are allowed to perform such a gesture."

"You did it to me before..." Loki said.

"You're also my little cousin, aren't you?" Gerd asked back. Loki frowned but didn't contradict Gerd with technicalities. "Besides, you were upset, and I thought it might calm you down, which it did."

Thor thought back, and though he tried, he couldn't come up with a single point where he'd started using the gesture with Loki. He couldn't come up with one, but he also wasn't sure how to take the idea that he was doing it because of some Jotnar instinct Thor didn't even know he had. "But I am only a quarter Jotnar..."
"So?" Gerd asked. "It is something that Jotnar have been doing for millennia. A few generations are not enough to wipe away the instinct entirely. I would also doubt very much that holding your brother's neck is the only Jotunn trait that you have."

"What do you mean?" Thor asked uneasily.

Gerd chuckled some. "Don't worry, I doubt its anything too extreme for your poor Asgardian sensibilities," they said teasingly. "But little quirks I'm sure you've never thought about very much. For instance, I imagine it takes more for you to get cold than your friends. Not as much as Loki but probably still more."

"I... haven't noticed that," Thor said, still uneasy.

"It was an example," Gerd said, slightly exasperated. What was it with the sons of Odin and being given examples? "My point is... it's still in your blood. It's not that surprising that a few traits have been passed along. I would think you'd like having more in common with your brother."

Thor supposed that there was a point to be made about that, but he was still uneasy. "I guess it's just because I've never really thought about it..." Thor said. "I mean, it's not something I ever really think about... being part Jotunn."

"I don't ever think about being part Fjallverr either, but I am," Gerd said. "And it still plays a part in my life. I'm glad I'm half Fjallverr... it makes it easier for me to live here in Vanaheim where it is milder of temperature." Gerd studied the boys for another few moments. "If you boys would like... I could teach you both more about your heritage."

Thor blinked. "You would do that?"

"It is hardly a difficulty. Freyr will be very busy in the coming days with trying to negotiate with the unhappy masses," Gerd pointed out. "And teaching two is not so much more difficult than teaching one. I think you would both benefit greatly from it. We Jotnar are a complicated people that are often overlooked because our complexities aren’t obvious. Besides, Loki’s already agreed to learn."

That got the younger boy to his feet. "I never agreed to any such thing!" he denied.

"So you would rather be ignorant of all you could do?" Gerd asked lightly.

Loki opened his mouth to respond but seemed to catch himself, leaving him just gaping at the older Jotunn. Loki tried to recover with a few half-sentences but nothing genuinely coherent. "I thought not," Gerd said with satisfaction. Truthfully it had been a slight gamble, but one that they were glad paid off. "You didn’t seem the type to enjoy being ignorant. Tomorrow then?"

"Yes," Thor agreed quickly. "Tomorrow. Thank you, Gerd. It’s most appreciated." Gerd inclined their head and continued down the hall towards tea. As they left they heard Loki not so quietly scolding Thor for speaking on behalf of both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Bestla- I feel really bad for Bestla in this story. Really they didn't do anything wrong but Bor was an insecure homophobic ass that couldn't handle the realization that his
wife used to have a penis before they even met. Bestla had a really rotten time in Asgard after that came out and eventually had to make the hard decision to leave for their own safety even though they couldn't take their kids with them. They died very unhappy and alone. Add to that the fact that Bor killed Loptr and well... just sadness all around. If there is any one villain in this story... it's Bor and he's already dead so they're fighting the after effects of him rather than actually him.

**Thor's gesture** - I really wanted Thor's gesture to be something beyond just 'oh that's just what he does to show his affection' sort of thing. So I made it a typical Jotnar thing to remind us all that, yes, he's got some ice giant in his blood too. It also gives a wonderful reason for Gerd to invite Thor to Jotnar Lessons, which I'm sure without Thor there would be much harder for Loki to handle. (Is it odd that I'm referring to these characters as if I'm not deciding what they say/do/how they react? Probably...)

The night was just as bitterly cold as every other night before it. The only source of warmth was the giant fire crackling away in the middle of the room but it was defeated by the frigid air blowing in through the destroyed walls. King Loki had leaned back far in his throne and had his eyes closed with the broken Gungnir resting against his shoulder. The sound of footsteps coming closer prompted the ruler of ruins to open his eyes and look at who was bothering him so late at night.

His visitor stopped beside the fire, which cast sharp shadows across his perpetually scowling face. "I should have known," Loki said without bothering to straighten. "To what do I owe this visit, oh great watchman of the Gods?" he asked.

Heimdall with his hair grey and somewhat unkempt and a strip of fabric wrapped around his head to cover his eyes didn't respond at first. He shifted a plain wooden staff in his gnarled hands. The wind tugged at the sloppily patched and snow wet cloak he was wearing. "I'll not play games with you, Loki. What are you up to?" he finally asked.

"Up to?" Loki echoed. "Why, I've just been sitting here, Heimdall, like always. I never get up to anything anymore."

Heimdall's scowl grew deeper. "How long will you draw this out? What further purpose could you have after destroying so much, King of Bones?"

Loki shrugged casually. "Funnily enough I had very nearly decided to 'end it' like you suggested. But then something -well, someone- caught my eye. You remember what that's like don't you?"

"You are not amusing," Heimdall said.

"You never did have any sort of sense of humor. Makes being stuck here with you truly dreadful," Loki replied.

"Then die and end both of our sentences. There's nothing stopping you," Heimdall pointed out dryly.
Loki waved that comment away. "Nothing but my own stubbornness. But, as I said, I'm not up to anything, Heimdall. You've grown even more paranoid in your old age."

"Just because I can no longer see you does not mean that I cannot tell when you are plotting," Heimdall said, his grip shifting on his staff until his knuckles turned white. "Within the Nine Realms there is still life that has escaped you. I will ensure that it remains away from your grasp."

Loki scoffed. "As if those tiny little creatures matter to me. Rest easy, Heimdall, I have no intention of completely purging all the realms. That was never my intention in the first place, despite what you might think."

"I know you have been doing magic again," Heimdall accused.

"Trifles to amuse myself, that's all," King Loki answered. "You worry too much."

"There is no such thing when dealing with you," Heimdall said. "We should have ended you long ago. When you first betrayed us."

Loki contemplated that for a moment. "You sound so very certain about that, but there must always be a Loki to restart things... or end them. Depending on where we are, of course. If I wasn't necessary then Odin wouldn't keep bringing me into Asgard cycle after painful cycle. I would think you'd appreciate finally not having to relive the same horrid existence over and over again. To watch our loved ones suffer and die learning the same lessons on endless loop only to forget it all when they come back and remake the mistakes that lead to their demise in slightly different ways. Or are you one of those sick people that enjoy watching people suffer? I wouldn't put it past you. After all, you've watched me without so much as lifting a hand as Asgard pushed me into the only role they've ever wanted me to have."

"You chose your lot," Heimdall argued.

Loki narrowed his eyes and leaned closer though he gripped the edge of his broken throne tightly. "You all got what you wanted. Loki must always be the villain of Asgard. No matter how hard I try or what selfless things I do, you all only ever see me one way. I can sacrifice myself over and over and never be seen as anything more than an enemy. Well, I gave it to you, your precious Ragnarok, so do not complain upon receiving it."

Heimdall took a step closer to the throne. "Always the victim aren't you? You never take responsibility for your own actions. No, Loki, it was your own ambition and jealousy that led us to this."

"It counterbalances your continued attempts to blame me for literally everything that has ever gone wrong," Loki snapped back. "Oh no, Hodr killed Baldr, it must be Loki's fault!" he said mockingly.

"It was your fault," Heimdall growled. "You got the mistletoe and turned it into a weapon. You guided Hodr's hand."

"Then why kill poor Hodr?" Loki asked. "If it was my fault how is it justice to kill Hodr?"

"He struck the killing blow."

"But you just said it was my fault," Loki said in mock surprise. "How can you claim it right to kill a nearly inconsolably grieving blind man if he wasn't at fault? And that's not even taking into account my sons..." he said, his voice growing deadly at the end.

"...It was punishment," Heimdall said although he sounded very uncomfortable. "Perhaps not the
best, but it wouldn't have been done if you hadn't conspired to murder Baldr.

"And you wonder why I smiled as I watched Asgard burn," Loki said moving to finally sit back again.

"None of it would have happened at all if you hadn't killed Baldr," Heimdall pointed out. "You started all of the heartache that followed."

Loki shook his head. "No. The Norns did. If you'll remember... Baldr's sleepless nights worried the whole realm to the point everyone was scrambling to save him," Loki said with dripping sarcasm. "It was sickening. Who else could get everyone to swear never to harm him just because he had a few nightmares? Do you know how my nightmares were handled? Go back to your room, Loki. Warriors do not get scared of dreams in the dead of night. Baldr was supposedly a grown man and warrior, but, oh no, his dreams must be more! Clearly, his very life is in danger because he hasn't slept well in a few days." Loki scoffed loudly.

"It did prove to be more," Heimdall said.

Loki rolled his eyes. "Maybe Odin and Frigga shouldn't have so obviously had favorite children then. But it doesn't matter, because it won't be happening again."

"You cannot continue this forever," Heimdall argued. "Eventually you will give in and we can finally end this stalemate."

"Do you honestly think that after so long suffering that I give in so easily?" Loki asked. "The universe shall explode before I let it restart this cycle. Because I have finally found the perfect solution for both of us, my dear watchman."

"I knew you schemed," Heimdall accused.

Loki waved his hand to the side dismissively. "Yes, yes. You knew I would have plans, do you wish a medal for the most obvious deduction ever, blind man? But contrary to what you think... my plans are not nefarious in nature. So, 'scheming' and being 'up to' something are not accurate descriptors at all."

"Your nature does not change, Loki."

"I am chaos, Heimdall. The one thing I always do is change."

Heimdall did not look convinced. "Everywhere you are allowed to flourish you bring nothing but destruction and death. I'll not allow you to spread your cancer anywhere else. Enough innocents have died because of you."

"This time my goal is to save innocence, Heimdall," Loki said. "And there are a few things that you can do to help me."

"And why would I ever help you?" Heimdall demanded.

Loki shrugged. "Because I am your king and you are nothing if not a loyal lap dog," he reasoned.

"You are not my king," Heimdall denied as he took several more steps closer. "Odin was my king. Thor was my king. You will never be my king."

"Well, to say I were surprised would be a lie and I don't do that anymore," Loki said as he rested his cheek on one hand.
Heimdall scoffed. "To believe a liar when he says he can no longer lie is an oxymoron that would only lead to folly," he declared. "If you could not lie we would not be in this predicament in the first place."

"Wrong. We are in 'this predicament' as you call it because I told the truth," King Loki answered. "But that is hardly the point. My point, oh watch dog with no eyes, is that you can do what you've always wanted to do. Stop this from happening somewhere else."

"I will never help you, Loki. I know you too well. You are a selfish thing. The only thing that you truly seek is your own gain," Heimdall accused. "No matter what you want. I am not so foolish as to give it to you."

Loki sighed heavily. "Fine, don't be helpful. I will do as I always do, and fix it myself."

"Yes, well, you should seeing how you are the one that made the mess in the first place," Heimdall said, entirely unmoved.

"I tire of your continual blame game, Heimdall," Loki told him. "At this point does who did what really matter? I'm the one who's looking to actually do something about it."

"Do something about what?" Heimdall demanded. "All of Midgard is nothing but a field of bones and dust and Asgard is a mound of burned ruins filled with the proof of your treachery!"

Loki sighed again and rubbed his forehead just above his brow. "For one that was once so far sighted you never seem to look at the right things," he muttered, more to himself than Heimdall. "I don't know what I was expecting from one such as you."

"You refuse to let the cycle restart and yet you claim to be able to 'fix' things," Heimdall turned away. "That makes no sense, trickster."

"For someone who has seen so much you do lack a certain amount of imagination," Loki said with a grin. "Leave it all to me, watch dog." Heimdall frowned and -had he still the eyes to do it- would have turned to look at the God sitting on the tarnished throne he had coveted so highly. "I planned our demise... I can plan our salvation just as well."

Chapter End Notes

**Loki and Heimdall**- In myth, the last two Gods to die during Ragnarok are Loki and Heimdall. They are both mortally wounded but have a quick chat before dying where Loki says basically, the only thing that kept him going and not insane during the snake incident (admittedly a debatable claim) was imagining his revenge of creating Ragnarok. Heimdall tells him he failed because two humans escaped and a few Gods including Thor's sons were still alive. They both then proceeded to keel over dead.

**Favored Son Baldr**- Yeah, he's actually referred to in Myth as 'the favorite' son, which is kinda messed up. I mean... they had so many its really bad parenting to obviously favor one kid over the others.

**King Loki pt. 2**- In Journey To Mystery, King Loki basically snaps because after turning over a new leaf and being good and helpful and atoning for past crimes, he's still only seen as a trickster and not really trusted or one of his people. So he says
F*CK! it and destroys Midgard entirely. This King Loki is from even further down that sort of timeline where he takes over Asgard as well, leaving only him and Heimdall.

**Ragnarok Cycle**- In Marvel, one of the ways they explain conflicting myth tellings and genealogy and just get even more creative license from Norse myths beyond the Multiverses that they already have is by using the Ragnarok Cycle. This is where Asgard basically gets a hard reset every so often when Ragnarok occurs and the whole craziness starts over. For instance, Hela is often explained as being older than Loki and his daughter by her being daughter of a previous incarnation of Loki from an earlier cycle. This idea of a cycle is actually supported by Myth as after the story of Ragnarok the survivors find golden chess pieces of all the now dead gods, giants and so forth in the grass and start to play a game with them... implying the story restarts to be told again.
Walk and Talk

Chapter Summary

Thor and Loki chat a bit and go for a walk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bloodlines are very important to Jotnar. Mostly because of how prominent your bloodline is since they are on display in Dynasty Lines. When you come right down to it, there are only twenty main bloodlines in the entire population. Each of these branches has branches within them, and it's entirely possible another Jotnar wouldn't be able to identify which subfamily you belong to unless they are more closely related or deal with them on a regular basis. But the twenty major clans each have a few key distinguishing features that can be spotted at a glance by all other Jotnar and even well-informed non-Jotnar. The most exclusive families with the fewest members are the clans of Norfi, Hyndla, Mokkurkalfi, and of course the Royal line that can trace back all the way to Ymir. But things get more complicated when you get into Reclamation...

Thor looked out at the rain that was pouring down from the stormy sky with a troubled expression. His chin was rested on his arm on the windowsill, and he was hunched over as he tracked the rivulets of water coming down the currently clear glass. "You are going to drown the realm," Loki drawled from where he was standing in the doorway. "Or at the very least the city."

Thor didn't look up and continued to brood. The brothers had had their first 'lesson' on Jotnar that day with Gerd and, though most of it was about things that Thor and Loki had already known, somehow the conversation had ventured to something Thor had never considered. Loki sighed and entered the room, "What is it?"

"I did not like all of what I heard today," Thor grumbled. Lightning flashed in the dark clouds overhead, and thunder rumbled.

"Think of how I feel," Loki replied before sitting down with his back to the window that Thor was staring out of. Ofnir clambered up onto Loki's lap only a few heartbeats later, and Loki absently ran his hand over the lizard's spines, smoothing them down gently. "What exactly did we get told to send you into such a foul mood?"

Thor scowled as the large droplets of water splat against the window. "That Reclamation business."

"Ah," was all Loki said in response to that. After a long moment, Loki reached over to Thor's right hand and tugged at it. "Come on then," he commanded. Thor allowed his hand to be pulled and watched with half his attention as Loki pulled a length of twine out of his pocket and started to tie it. First around the base of Thor's middle finger then down to his wrist. Thor recognized the bit of magic as a simple dampening spell that their mother used when they were younger and more prone to losing control of their powers. Essentially every Asgardian mother knew such tricks, and essential charms as part of running a household and almost all children had worn such dampeners at some point although most stopped when it became apparent they had no abnormal powers or when they gained more control.
"I do not like the thought that a Jotnar family could take you away," Thor muttered as he watched his brother twist and knot the twine in on itself. Thor had never considered the possibility of someone taking his brother away from them before and Gerd's explanation of the ritualistic adoption ceremony had not eased Thor's mind.

"I doubt any would," Loki said without looking up from his work. "They'd have to know I was... that, and I don't intend for any to know."

"But they still could," Thor pointed out.

"Thor, they left me to die. No Jotnar clan is going to want me," Loki sighed in exasperation.

Thor didn't believe that in the least. "But you heard what Gerd said. Strong mages are rare on Jotunheim, and you're one of the strongest in all the realms."

"First, they would have to know," Loki repeated. "And second, even if they did find out Mother would never let anyone take me away. Plus apparently, you would drown them in stormwater..." Loki finished tying off the thin piece of twine around Thor's wrist, and the Thunder God felt the difference immediately. Though he was still in a foul mood, the unhappiness was no longer being funneled outwards to feed the storm.

"My thanks, Loki," Thor muttered as he looked at the bit of rope on his hand.

Loki inclined his head slightly and then went back to petting Ofnir. "It has been a while since you've needed that."

Thor sighed and tucked his now decorated hand into the crook of his opposite elbow. Usually, he was able to stop his emotions from running wild and fueling a storm while awake. Nightmares were the most common cause of unexpected torrential downpours nowadays, and so Thor wore a dampener to bed to prevent it. During the day he had no need. "I don't like the thought of someone taking you from us," Thor said. "Especially not like that."

Gerd had explained, with a certain vagueness that Thor found more unsettling than Freyr's partner had probably expected, the basics of the ritual known as Reclamation. There was something about altering the orphan's Dynasty Lines, which seeing how those lines were much like giant fingerprints, was not an easy prospect. Added to the fact that it was usually done on children and there was apparently a chance for 'complications' that Gerd hadn't discussed in any depth with them. Thor's imagination had run every possibility from disfigurement to death, and Thor hadn't been able to stop himself from imagining far too detailed scenarios staring his baby brother.

"You are sometimes too protective, Thor," Loki said as he leaned over to rest his head on Thor's shoulder. "Nobody in Jotunheim will be trying to take me away."

The brothers sat by the window in silence for perhaps half an hour as the storm outside tapered off and died without Thor's continued emotional baggage feeding it. The sun began to break the cloud coverage away, and little animals that had sought shelter during the storm were reappearing. "I suppose Vanaheim is used to lots of rain, so no harm was done," Loki mused.

Thor smiled, "I am just glad Father isn't here." Odin would have had a few words about Thor's lack of control, no doubt.

"I can hear him now," Loki said. "A Prince should know how to contain his own powers. If you cannot control yourself, perhaps we should return to using dampeners all the time," Loki mocked in a near perfect imitation of Odin's disapproving voice.
Thor snorted. "You are too good at that," he decided before holding his hand up, "And I'm not wearing this all day." Thor hated dampeners. They itched uncomfortably, and his parents had had a damned time trying to keep them on him when he was younger. Of course, Loki had always hated them more, but his powers didn't affect more than himself usually so he got away without wearing them more often than Thor had.

"I don't care," Loki replied. "If you're not going to make us swim for higher ground any longer than feel free to take it off."

Thor glanced at the careful woven knots and then the still cloudy sky. "... perhaps a little longer," he admitted. "Just to be safe." Already he was sure he'd get spoken to by their mother due to the sudden downpour.

"I'm sure the citizens appreciate your restraint," Loki said only a little sarcastically. "But now that you've scared everyone indoors, we should go out and enjoy the quiet. We haven't been exploring in a few days what with everything going on."

"Where would you want to go?"

"That's the point of exploring, Thor," Loki said in exasperation.

Thor thought for a moment before shrugging. "Alright. We have some time before evening meal so we might as well," he agreed as he got to his feet. He could do with getting out some energy in ways other than storm calling, and wandering sounded just as good as any other method at the moment.

Loki got to his feet with Ofnir in his arms. The wyvern let out a pleased trill and climbed higher with the leverage of Loki's shoulders. "You are spoiling that thing," Thor commented as he got up and followed behind his brother.

"I am not," Loki said with a dignified sniff. "He's just a baby. He wouldn't be able to keep up if I didn't carry him."

"You could leave him in your room," Thor pointed out.

Loki cast Thor an annoyed look. "Do you really think locking a bored wyvern in my room all day would end well for anyone, Thor? He needs stimulation and activity to develop well."

"He's an animal, Loki," Thor sighed.

"So are Glaer, Skeidbrimir, Gisl, Sillfrintoppur, Lettfeti, Sinir, Falhofnir, Gultoppr, Audun and about half the horses in the stables that are smart enough to actually speak," Loki pointed out in annoyance. "Being an animal is not an excuse."

Thor rolled his eyes. "You're comparing Ofnir to horses that have been specially bred over generations to be that smart," Thor replied. "Don't you think that's a little unfair? Unrealistic expectations and all that?" Loki didn't answer and just kept walking through the palace with Ofnir peering over his shoulder. "Then again... maybe not," Thor muttered as Ofnir studied him with those predatory eyes of his.

Thor chuckled and pet Ofnir's head fondly. The wyvern chirruped happily at the attention. Thor was sure that if the wyvern had feathers, he'd be preening right then.

The brothers left the palace grounds and began to wander in the general direction of the river. Even from a distance, they could see the water was moving fast, and the banks had almost disappeared
from the influx of rain from Thor's storm. "Waaait," a little voice called out before they had gotten more than three steps past the gate.

Thor and Loki both stopped and turned. Forseti was hurrying towards them with a determined expression. Thor acted automatically and swooped down to pick up their nephew. "What are you doing out here?"

"I dun wanna stay in an' pway," Forseti declared, jutting his lower lip out in a pout.

"Your mother would not be happy you were out here," Thor warned as he settled the boy on his hip.

Forseti's pout became more pronounced. "I dun wanna pway inside," he insisted. "I wanna go wif you an' Woki."

"We should take him back inside," Loki said with an exasperated sigh. Forseti nearly wailed a long 'no' and clung tightly to Thor's neck with a fist tightly clenched in the fledgling thunder god's hair. Thor winced and tried to coax Forseti to let go. "Forseti, you can't come with us. Your mother will worry."

Forseti protested even louder and right into Thor's ear. Thor winced and tried to carefully pry the boy further away but was unsuccessful. "I suppose we could take him with us," Thor ventured. "If we keep an eye on him." Forseti immediately quieted much to Thor's relief.

"I'll be good," Forseti promised with a sniff. "Pwease, Woki?"

Thor tried to subtly undo Forseti's grip in his hair and failed. The boy had an iron clasp when he wanted. "Forseti," Loki began with a sigh, "we aren't going to go and do anything exciting."

"I wanna go," Forseti insisted.

Thor knew that really Loki was right, but the way Forseti's voice quivered and tears built back up in his eyes at an alarming rate crumbled that resolve away. "Surely, it is not so dangerous we can't bring him with us," Thor said. "We're bringing Ofnir already."

Loki stared at the both of them for a moment and then sighed. "Pushover," he grumbled. "You dare say I spoil Ofnir after this I will knock you flat..." Thor at least didn't bother to hide his guilty expression. He really didn't think he was that big a pushover, but he did realize he was probably easier to convince than his brother would ever be. But what could Thor say? He hated big sad eyes staring up at him. Always had. "Come on," Loki grunted as he started down the stairs.

Forseti grinned like the cat that had gotten the milk and finally unclenched his hand from around Thor's hair. Thor sighed and followed after Loki. "We both have our own passengers now, at least," Thor said lightly.

Loki chuckled softly. "I suppose," he agreed. "Although I think yours the more dangerous."

"Woki! I'm not dangaworse!" Forseti protested.

"Oh, on the contrary, Nephew," Loki said over his shoulder. "You are the most dangerous of us all."

Forseti laughed. "No, I'm not! Thor! Woki's being siwy!"

Thor grinned. "Oh?"
"Uh huh!"

"I'm not being silly at all," Loki denied. "You're the most fearsome creature alive, I think. If something happened to you, your mother would be angry. Have you ever seen your mother angry?" he asked.

Forseti's eyes went huge. "Uh huh. It's scary!"

"See?" Loki asked. "You're the most dangerous because you can make your mother be scary."

"Ooh," Forseti breathed as if it all made perfect sense.

Thor had to quickly shift his arms and body to better support Forseti as the boy decided to climb. The movement was awkward, but Thor managed to not drop the boy. Forseti ended up clinging to Thor's back with his arms and legs wrapped around the young Thunderer tightly.

The sons of Odin, with their passengers, meandered towards the river chatting idly about nothing in particular. The canals that they passed in the street were gushing with water from Thor's storm, and more than a few birds had found little puddles to flap around in. As they crossed the bridge over the bursting river, Loki sighed. "I've been thinking about what you said before we left home, Thor."

Thor was caught off guard by the topic change and scrambled to think of what he'd told Loki before they left Asgard. "Oh?" he prompted while still racking his brain. Hopefully, Loki wouldn't realize Thor wasn't entirely sure what he was talking about.

Judging from the frown on Loki's face, Thor figured he'd failed to hide it. "About Sigyn," he said in exasperation.

"Oh! What about it?" Thor asked.

Loki sighed and ran his fingers down Ofnir's back. "I really do like her... she's pretty, and she doesn't think of me as a pest. When we spoke that first time in the library-"

"Only time," Thor couldn't quite stop himself from saying.

Loki glared, "Either way. When we spoke, she asked questions and seemed to actually care what my answers were. I don't even think she realized who I was and just thought I was some page or something." A thoughtful expression crossed his face, and Thor waited. "I just don't know what to do..."

Thor hummed as he thought about it. "Well, seeing how we're not in Asgard right now. Maybe you should send her a letter?" he suggested. "Might be easier to talk to her if you can plan it all out ahead of time." He had never really thought of his brother as 'shy,' but Thor figured if he were nervous then Loki would appreciate having as much time as he needed. Loki always had hated being rushed.

"Maybe... it's just. Wouldn't that be weird? Getting a letter from someone you only spoke to once?" Loki asked.

Thor shrugged. "I don't know. I've never gotten a letter like that. But it's worth a try, isn't it? You don't want to wait until we get back to talk to her do you?" They had no idea how long they would be in Vanaheim. Waiting could lead to her finding someone else.

"I guess not," Loki said with a sigh. "But what do I even say to her? Everything I can think of
sounds so... trite and silly."

"I can't imagine anything you wanting to tell her sounding trite and silly," Thor drawled. "I think you're too hard on yourself. Don't you agree, nephew?" Thor asked with a little bounce. Forseti shrieked a laugh and agreed loudly with the young Thunder God. "See, Brother? You worry too much. She will love you writing to her. I'm sure of it."

Loki still looked very unsure but nodded. "I guess I just have to come up with something to say." He frowned at the ground as they walked. "Why is it so hard talking to a girl than it is getting us out of trouble?"

"Practice," Thor answered. "You get us out of trouble a lot more than you talk to girls."

Chapter End Notes

Norfi, Hyndla, Mokkurkalfi- Names of various Giants of myth. Norfi was one of the first giants and the father of Nat. Hyndla was a giant that Freya visited to ask about the background of Ottar, a very devote worshipper of Freya. And Mokkurkalfi was actually made by giants artificially from clay and the heart of a mare. He was absolutely huge and fought against Thor and Thalfi in the battlefield.

Reclamation- Jotnar form of adoption. Basically the idea is to build up a clans numbers and thereby their ability to survive they might take in an abandoned or orphaned child from another clan. But they wouldn't want any evidence of the old clan on display and have to adjust the child's markings. It's kind of brutal but their whole culture has just a bit of a brutal edge to it.

Dampeners- Gods tend to have unusual powers. In this fic I'm going with the idea that they have various methods to control the powers of very young Gods. This idea of various Gods having particular powers will be explored much later in the story and I will hint that the X-Men will take particular interest in the idea.

Glaer, Skeidbrimir, Gisl, Sillfrintoppur, Lettfeti, Sinir, Falhofnir, Gultoppr, Audun- Aside from Audun, those are all names of horses named in Eddic Poetry. Audun I came up with myself since the only horse Odin is named to have is Sleipnir and he's not around yet.
Thor reacted as fast as he could to block the piece of wood coming right for his head. He managed to do so and scrambled back a step with a curse. "Thor! Watch your language!"

Thor bit back his immediate retort as he lashed out with his own training sword. "Yes, Mother!" he called somewhat angrily as Loki essentially danced out of his reach. Thor lunged to follow, but Loki spun and brought his training sword back down. Thor brought up his to block before countering. He almost got Loki in the gut, but all that happened was his brother disappeared in a shimmer of green. "Loki! No illusions!" he snapped.

"You shouldn't shun an advantage, Thor," Loki argued. "So, I see no reason to not practice with it too."

"It isn't like I'm ever going to not fight with magic," Loki argued. "So, I see no reason to not practice with it too."

Thor growled and lunged again. Loki yelped a little and scrambled back while blocking. "Easy, Thor!" Loki shouted as the wooden swords cracked against each other loudly and sent vibrations tingling up both of their arms. "You'll break the fuckin' things!"

"Loki!"

"Sorry, Mother!" Loki called even as he sprung further back from one of Thor's slashes.

Thor tried his best to temper his anger and frustrations. He knew this would be the hardest part of
training with Loki. His brother just could not seem to fight without magic backing him. Something that was impossibly frustrating to deal with for someone without the same skills. This was the exact reason that Thor had originally grown fed up and dismissive of his brother's tactics.

Thor knew now that there was still value in his brother's style of fighting, but that didn't make it any easier to not get angry over. There was another loud crack as wood connected and Loki's sword flung off into the distance where it hit the side of the palace with a clatter. Loki was still moving back but stumbled at the loss of his weapon and hit the ground hard. Thor managed to bring himself up short even as Loki stared up at him with wide eyes.

"Asgaedia wept, Thor! What was that about?" Loki asked as he shook his hand that had been holding his sword out to the side. His shocked expression morphed into one of annoyance very quickly.

"That was real fighting," Thor said before he could censor himself.

Loki scowled darkly and pushed himself up. "So was I," Loki snapped. "Don't get mad when I show you up!"

"You didn't show me up," Thor replied, unable to stop from feeling insulted by the accusation. "You were using your magic when we were supposed to be practicing with swords! It defeats the purpose, Loki!"

"It does not defeat the purpose!" Loki argued. "That's like saying dodging defeats the purpose!"

"Boys!" Frigga called firmly. "Enough of this."

Thor tried to contain his frustrations, but he still heard distant thunder. Loki scoffed some and went to pick up his practice sword. Thor felt terrible at his loss of control when Loki picked it up and revealed that it now had a bend about halfway up where Thor's strike had broken it. Loki scowled at the wood before tossing it into the bag of training swords it had come from. "I'm going to go wash up," he grumbled.

"Loki!"

Loki ignored Thor entirely, and the blonde huffed. Frigga was standing there frowning very disapprovingly, and Thor couldn't help but wince. "You could have hurt your brother with those strikes, Thor," Frigga scolded. "There was no need to get so angry."

"I don't mean to," Thor argued. "It's just frustrating when he pulls his tricks," he added in a low grumble.

Frigga stepped down into the yard and walked over to where Thor was putting away his own training sword. "You should try to think of 'his tricks' as an advantage, Thor," she said. "One day you might have to face a mage and training so much with Loki would give you an excellent advantage. I doubt an enemy mage would be so kind as to not take your head off."

Thor frowned and, though he knew what his mother said was true, couldn't help but still dislike it. "I'm trying to help him with swords though, Mother!" he complained. "He should focus on that before adding in his magic."

"Oh really?" Frigga asked lightly. "And when you train with Tyr you only focus on the strength of your swings and nothing else?" she asked entirely too innocently. Thor opened his mouth to respond and then what she said caught up to his brain, and he promptly shut it again. "Mastering one thing at the expense of another makes no sense, Thor. Especially when, as Loki pointed out, in
a real fight I would rather hope he uses everything at his disposal to not be hurt. Just as I would expect you to call upon a storm to save your own life and limb if it were necessary."

"But it's so frustrating, Mother!" Thor said as he tossed his sword into the bag a little harder than was truly necessary.

"Learning often is, Thor," Frigga replied. "Your brother challenges you in ways others don't. Don't take it out on him that you are finding it difficult to adjust to. I know it can't be easy for him to keep up with your endurance, but he hasn't incinerated your training sword out of frustration now has he?"

Thor felt ashamed of himself and kicked at the dirt. "No," he grumbled.

Frigga reached over and pushed some of his loose hair behind his ear. "It is perfectly understandable to be frustrated, darling. But do try to contain it better, would you?"

"... yes, Mother," Thor agreed.

"Good boy, now, go get cleaned up for dinner," Frigga said with a nod of her head off towards the palace doors.

Thor nodded and hurried out of the courtyard to go get his bathing things. He grabbed up everything he used in the bathroom along with clothes appropriate for dinner and then headed to the bath. Thor wasn't in the least surprised to see that Loki's things were still there although his brother wasn't actually in the first room. Thor washed off the sweat and grime from practice and rinsed the soaps off before going into the actual bath.

Loki was sitting on one of the benches and glaring at the steaming water. Thor padded over to that side of the bath and bent down so that his head was right by Loki's. "I'm sorry, brother," he said. Loki jumped, and Thor got splashed in the face.

Thor sputtered and straightened enough to wipe the water from his eyes even as Loki shouted at Thor for surprising him. "It isn't my fault you weren't paying attention," Thor said as he got into the bath beside Loki. "Did you have to splash me?"

"It's your penance for startling me," Loki replied moodily as he brought his knees up to wrap his arms around. "What're you doing here?"

"Taking a bath," Thor answered. "Isn't that obvious?"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "You're hardly one for hygiene, Thor."

"I'm not that bad," Thor protested. "Just because I don't require three different types of soap..."

"It isn't my fault my face doesn't like the same soap as anything else," Loki grumbled. "Now what do you want?"

Thor said and leaned closer. "I wanted to apologize for earlier. You're just frustrating to fight against, you know," he said. "I'm not used to people not being where I'm swinging." Well, he was more used to it than he was perhaps letting on, but in those cases, his beloved brother was trying to at the very least severely maim him, if not kill him.

"I felt like you were trying to take my arm off with those blows," Loki complained.

"I'm sorry," Thor said again. "I just don't think about it when I get frustrated."
Loki frowned at that and used his foot to push at Thor's side. Thor grunted but obediently straightened so that there was a little more space between them. "I think you're developing beserker habits. It's not healthy."

"I'm not a beserker," Thor protested.

"I said habits," Loki pointed out. "And it's still not healthy. You need better anger management."

Thor rolled his eyes a little. "I'll get right on that."

"You should." Thor sighed and leaned over again to rest his head on Loki's shoulder. "We're naked, Thor!" Loki protested. "Get off me."

"Do you forgive me?"

Loki made a face. "Under threat of nearness while nude, yes, I forgive you," he said with a shrug of his shoulder.

"Prude," Thor accused lightly as he straightened.

"Oh, sorry for not wanting my naked brother hanging all over me," Loki said sarcastically. "You're not exactly what I fantasize about at night, Thor."

"No... you're more into pretty girls with eyes the color of the sea," Thor said lightly. He was unable to hide his grin when Loki blushed bright pink. "Have you written that letter yet?"

Loki gave Thor a hard shove. "It's none of your business!"

"So, that's a no, then," Thor interpreted.

"You are the worst," Loki grumbled as he turned to get out of the water. "I'm going to get dressed before I give into temptation and drown you."

Thor chuckled and climbed out as well. "I'm sure Mother would love to help you," he said as he grabbed his towel from where he dropped it and then made his way back to the previous room.

"I am not going to ask Mother how to write a love letter to a girl!" Loki nearly screeched.

"Oooh, so it is a love letter," Thor said with a huge grin. "I'm so glad to hear you admit it, Loki."

"I should have definitely drowned you," Loki grumbled as he dried himself off roughly with his own towel. His face was bright pink in embarrassment, and he was looking anywhere but in Thor's direction.

Thor grinned and leaned across Loki with his arm wrapped around his brother's neck. "You wouldn't drown me, brother. You actually like me, don't you?" he asked with his best attempt at pleading puppy eyes -or whatever it was that Stark had once called them.

Loki glanced over and frowned. "Don't play cute, Thor."

"But brother... I only want your love," Thor persisted.

Loki made a face and shrugged his shoulders to dislodge Thor. "Ugh, what is with you today?" he asked. "If I didn't know better I'd say you were being all hormonal or something and that's supposed to be my problem, not yours."
Thor sobered some at that. "I just really am sorry, Loki, for losing my temper. I don't want you to be upset with me."

Loki sighed heavily. "Alright, alright," he said. "But try to let it not become a habit, eh?"

"I'll try my best," Thor promised sincerely. He didn't want to repeat those mistakes that drove his brother away the first time. And getting angry at Loki for using his magic was definitely one that he could recognize with his future knowledge.

"Good, now get dressed, nudist," Loki said as he pulled his own pants on.

"I'm not a nudist," Thor said as he dried himself off quickly.

"I beg to differ," Loki muttered. "Sometimes I'm surprised you even have shirts with how often you leave them lying around randomly."

Thor rolled his eyes. "That's during practice, and it's because it's hot in the training fields," he pointed out. "It isn't like you've never taken your shirt off when we practice in Asgard."

"When is the last time I did that?" Loki demanded.

Thor paused halfway through pulling his shirt over his head and thought back. "Um... alright, I'm not sure," he admitted as he finished tugging his tunic down over his head. "But I know you've done it."

"Yes, and I got teased for the next fortnight over it," Loki snapped. "Not all of us are blessed with muscles the size of various fruits."

"Fruits?" Thor echoed in confusion.

"Well, that's what Amora was using for comparison when she rambled about it during classes that night," Loki said. "It was so tiresome."

Thor was still feeling somewhat lost. "I... have never thought to compare muscles to fruit," he said as he continued dressing.

"Well, I don't recommend starting," Loki said. "It got very difficult to listen to, and believe me, I tried not to. Also, did you bring a comb? Your hair is like a bird's nest. A wet birds nest." Thor lifted a hand to his hair and ran his fingers through the strands a few times. Loki looked distinctly unimpressed. "Oh, yes, that definitely fixes it. Sit down, you giant lump, and I'll fix it for you otherwise Mother will throw a fit."

"It can't be that bad," Thor argued although he sat down like Loki told him.

"It can be that bad," Loki denied as he pulled a comb out of his own things and started untangling Thor's hair from the bottom. "It looks like you put your head in a hurricane rather than under a water spout. I have no idea how you manage it, Thor, I really do not."

"I'm gifted," Thor said.

Loki snorted at that. "I'd say cursed," he drawled. "I'm glad my hair is so obedient. Bad enough it gets brittle with the wrong soaps, I don't need it going crazy too."

"You are altogether too vain," Thor commented with a roll of his eyes.

"I like looking good," Loki said with a tug on Thor's hair. "There is nothing wrong with that."
Besides, not all of us can be blue-eyed blondes with fruit shaped muscles that all the girls fawn over incessantly. I swear, it was as if they'd never seen a blonde Asgardian before!

Thor winced as Loki tugged the comb through his hair a little more savagely. "Well, don't rip mine out, would you kindly?"

"... sorry," Loki said and patted Thor's head. "Forgot what I was doing for a moment there."

Thor thought about leaving his hair a mess but knew that his mother would indeed protest so let Loki return to untangling it. As he sat there allowing Loki to work, the door to the bathroom opened and Gerd stepped in. "Gerd," Thor said in surprise. The giant spouse of Freyr looked equally surprised to see them there. Loki paused mid-motion, and before Thor could censor himself, he continued, "I thought you'd use the other side."

Loki tugged hard on Thor's hair, causing the thunderer to yelp. "You can ignore him, Gerd. He's an idiot," Loki said quickly.

Gerd only looked vaguely amused. "While most consider me a woman I have found that most actual women do not appreciate having someone with a penis in their bathing chambers," they said. "So, I use this side, and usually there is not anyone around at this time of day."

"Ah, we just finished training," Thor explained although he felt color burning at his cheeks.

"Indeed. Well, don't mind me," Gerd said as they went to the corner. Thor couldn't quite help but stare for a moment, and then Loki tugged at his hair and brought him back to his senses. Thor quickly turned back around and kept his eyes riveted to the tiles in front of him.

"Are all giants, um... singularly gendered?" Thor asked without looking over.

Gerd hummed aloud. "Most are, yes," they answered. "Aldrnari, or Fire Giants, long ago crossbred with fire demons so often that they would be less prone to it. That is why Fire Giant and Fire Demon is often used interchangeably nowadays. The only other giants I can think of that regularly present as only one sex or the other are storm giants, and nobody has seen one of them in millennia. And, of course, diluting the bloodline with non-giants would have a rather high likelihood of producing offspring that wouldn't be hermaphrodites."

Thor really wished that he had a filter on the questions he decided to ask because he regretted the answers nine times out of ten. Gerd had reminded him that there had been a chance (a slim one but still) that he himself could have been born with both genders. Thor wasn't at all sure how to process that or how he felt about it.

For a moment there was only silence and then the sound of water gushing across the tiles as Gerd turned on a faucet. Loki leaned close to Thor. "Could you just not ask any more questions, brother?" he asked. Thor nodded quickly and resolved to keep his mouth shut. Loki sighed and straightened.

Thor tried to think about nothing as Loki continued to work at his hair. Eventually, he found himself trying to remember the last time Loki had done such a thing and had to think back far further than he wanted to. Surely it hadn't been that long? They had been close for centuries before their relationship turned bitter. And yet, Thor was struggling to remember the last time they had done something so simple.

Loki's fingers were quick and efficient as he finished untangling Thor's shoulder-length hair. "It's growing fast," he commented as he pulled a few sections back and braided it out of the way.
"Not as fast as yours," Thor replied. "Didn't you just have mother cut your hair a few weeks ago?" Already Loki's hair had gotten to match Thor's at shoulder length, but Thor could swear that before they'd come to Vanaheim, it had been closer to the bottom of his ears.

Loki sighed and tied the braids off. "Yes, and it is very frustrating. I look enough like a girl as it is."

"You're a very fetching girl, though," Thor offered.

Loki pushed Thor's head forward roughly. "I'm not a girl at all!" Thor couldn't help but smile even as Loki slapped him upside the head and then went to put his comb away with his soaps and laundry. Thor gathered up his old clothes and wash things as well.

Just before the brothers left the bath, Gerd called out to them, "See you at dinner, boys."

"Ah. Yes, see you at dinner, Lady Gerd..." Thor said, feeling very awkward. He looked over before he could catch himself but thankfully only saw Gerd's muscled back. "Is there something better to call you?" he asked as he looked away quickly.

Gerd seemed to think about that for a moment. "Heillr Gerd would be perhaps more correct than Lady." Thor frowned at that. Being whole and healthy didn't seem like a title to him whereas Lady definitely was. Gerd must have seen his expression because they laughed. "It means something slightly different in Jotunheim, Thor."

"Oh. Well, then we will see you at dinner Heillr Gerd," Thor said with a slight bow and then hurried out of the bathroom with Loki.

The two of them walked together while chatting about nothing, in particular, all the way back to their rooms. Thor tossed his things carelessly into his chambers before crossing the hall to wait on Loki. "You could just leave it all on your bed," Thor pointed out as Loki put each container of soaps into specific places on his dressing table.

Loki cast him a glare. "Just because you're a slob doesn't mean I have to be. I rather like knowing where my own things are," he said. Ofnir groaned and then rolled over where he was sleeping in Loki's bed.

Thor supposed there was a bit of irony in the God of Mischief and Chaos being unable to handle his own things in a mess, but his brother was so full of contradictions what was one more, really? "I know where my things are," Thor said with a gesture back to his room. "They're in there."

"And where did they land?" Loki asked sweetly.

"... in the room," Thor replied.

Loki snorted a little and then went to pull his own hair back. Before Thor realized he was doing it, he had crossed the room and batted Loki's hands away. "Here. I'll do it for you," Thor volunteered.

Loki looked like he would protest but then lowered his arms. "Don't make it lopsided this time."

"Mother thought it was cute when it was lopsided," Thor defended.

"I'm not cute," Loki grumbled.

"I fear, baby brother," Thor said as he twined several strands of inky black hair together, "that you will always be considered cute by Mother. You are the youngest and all."
"Yes, but now there's Forseti to be cute. She hardly needs to coo over me," Loki said. "And I'm too old for it."

Thor smiled and recalled that, even as an adult, Frigga had never entirely stopped 'cooing' over Loki. She was perhaps less obvious about it and turned most of it into doting behavior, but Thor could tell she still found Loki cute. Especially when his tantrums didn't result in destruction. "I doubt you will ever be too old."

Loki made a face. "Don't smile when you say that," Loki ordered.

"I will try not to," Thor agreed although he was already struggling against another smile. Thor tied off the braids he had done and leaned forward to wrap his arms around Loki's neck in a hug. "It just proves how much she loves you. How much we all love you, Brother." Thor knew that Loki would not have abandoned his doubts so quickly about his family's love and liked to remind him whenever possible.

There was a moment of silence, and then, Loki dropped his head back against Thor's shoulder. "I know you do, Thor," he murmured. "It's just... so hard being so different. And now we're doing these lessons and... I know I need to learn these things, but I don't want to."

"That is why I am with you," Thor said softly. "We will do it together. Just like everything else."

Loki slowly smiled though it looked to Thor as if he was fighting the urge. "Sap," he accused before elbowing Thor lightly in the ribs. Thor pulled back, and Loki raised his hand to the braids in his hair. He frowned. "You did them crooked."

Chapter End Notes

**Aldrnari** - The name I've given to fire giants of Muspelheim. Marvel was somewhat inconsistent with if they gave various kinds of giants actual Norse sounding names or not. Especially since jotnar are supposed to just be giants and not specifically the icy variety.

**Storm Giants** - As I've mentioned previously, I have a whole family tree of different giants planned out. Storm Giants is actually an entire branch of that tree, all of which are extinct.
Thor studied the diagram that Gerd had drawn for them. Though the tree seemed straightforward enough, he couldn't help but think that Gerd had simplified it massively to make it that way. "So, all of these over here are gone, right?" Thor asked pointing to one branch of the tree.

"That's right," Gerd confirmed. "For several centuries. There were rumors for some time that small pockets of storm giants had fled Jotunheim after the tribal wars but after a few decades even those..."
"Tribal wars?" Loki questioned. He'd been fairly quiet all lesson but, like usual, he couldn't bury his indomitable curiosity forever. The more of these Jotnar lessons they had with Gerd, the faster he allowed himself to become drawn into whatever the topic of the day was. Thor took that as a good sign since he figured that meant his brother was slowly coming to terms with what he actually was. Then again, maybe Loki just couldn't abide the thought of Thor knowing more about something then he would. Whatever the reason, Thor was glad every time that Loki finally became involved in the lesson.

Gerd nodded at Loki's question. "When Jotunheim was still a young planet it was far closer in temperature to here on Vanaheim or perhaps even Midgard if you know what the environment there is like. Jotunheim was not the near-complete tundra it is today, and the first giants were even larger towering figures. The size of mountains, at no exaggeration. A few of them reportedly still survive in the wildest regions as hermits. But, that is neither here nor there. As the giants grew smaller, they also developed very specialized survival adaptations."

"Like blood that doesn't freeze?" Thor offered. Just the other day, Gerd had explained how Jotnar blood had a unique enzyme that acted like anti-freeze by lowering the freezing point to almost ridiculous levels. Thor had never noticed before that Jotnar blood never seemed to freeze even when spilled across the ice; but, looking back, it was definitely true. He also hadn't known that -on the rare occasion that Jotnar were frozen- they were able to be recovered and thawed with virtually no lasting damage due to that enzyme. Gerd had even explained it by telling a story of a Jotunn that deliberately froze themselves to escape a harsh storm and was revived later as if nothing had happened.

"Just so," Gerd agreed. "And as each of these specialized tribes began to grow they started fighting with each other for territory. The volcanic isles that rung in the equator were very active back then, and the Aldrnari claimed that area immediately but clashed with the Fjallverr that also liked the equator area because it had the most landmasses. The storm giants were sandwiched between the constant fighting in the mountain and fire territories and the frozen caps where the Jotnar were populating quickly with very little resistance. Hence, being attacked from so many sides, the storm giants fled Jotunheim first and nobody bothered to keep track of where they ended up.

"Once the storm giants were gone, the ice began to spread as the Jotnar took over more and more land. The Fjallverr seemed to realize the First Winter -which is what the final battle of the tribal wars was called- was coming and retreated underground where they would be sheltered. They were uniquely able to do that due to their own abilities. The Aldrnari did not back down. They never have," Gerd explained. "Their tempers don't seem to allow that."

Thor thought on this new information for a moment. He had never really put much thought into how the Jotnar had ended up where they were in his past life. Thor was surprisingly interested in the whole thing considering he'd rarely thought much on history before. Then again he did always like war stories, and that might have something to do with it. "So, they tried to fight the Jotnar?"

Gerd nodded. "Yes, but they didn't seem to consider how outmatched they were. The fire giants were relegated to volcanic islands, and Jotnar are able to freeze a thick layer over oceans if there are enough of us. So... between the oceans giving Jotnar plenty more ice to use and the fact that they were at both ice caps and steadily encroaching... the Aldrnari were surrounded and fighting a losing battle. Eventually, they had to flee to Muspelheim -very unhappily, I might add."

"So... there are still Fjallverr on Jotunheim?" Loki questioned. "Hence why they cross most often?"

Gerd gave a slight smile at the supposition. "That's right. Fjallverr tend to endure patiently rather
than fight, and sure enough, the Jotnar eventually found they disliked the equator and retreated some, leaving a more temperate area -small as it might be- behind them. Fjallverr eventually came back out of their deep underground fortresses, and the Jotnar never bothered to pester them again over territory they didn't particularly want. A sort of unwritten truce formed. Proximity tends to lead to more regular interactions and beings like myself who are half Jotnar and half Fjallverr," they said with a gesture to themselves. "Also, most of the visitors of Jotunheim tend to arrive nearer to the equator where they can survive easier."

"So, how temperate would that be?" Thor asked. For a Jotnar, Thor couldn't imagine that 'temperate' was all that warm.

"Well, during the middle of summer it sometimes reaches as high as ten degrees above freezing at the equator," Gerd supplied.

Thor looked down at the chart in front of him again thoughtfully. Ymir's name was huge and proud at the top of the upside down tree. "I always heard that Ymir was a Jotunn but... that story you just told us made it sound like he wasn't." Thor prompted.

Gerd shrugged a little. "The winners write history, Thor. The Jotnar won the planet and not only named Jotunheim after themselves, but claimed the first giant as a member of their own, even if the time that had passed made them almost another species entirely. Of course, even after the planet was soundly under the dominion of the Jotnar, there was still fighting to determine who would be in charge."

Loki frowned at that and looked up at Gerd. "But, I thought you said they decided on the current royal line because they could be traced back to Ymir," he said. "Sounds pretty straightforward to me."

"Well, that was how it ended up being, true enough. And, to be entirely honest, it isn't really possible to trace back that far. Laufey can trace back further than most, but even that line gets muddled if you go back far enough," Gerd explained. "Especially once you get back to before the different branches really became their own sub-races among giants. It does sound very good though, doesn't it?"

Thor nodded, but Loki just shrugged. "It would be more accurate to say that it was the royal line's shrewdness and unusually high number of seidr wielders that was why they won the in-fighting after the other giants fled," Gerd told them. "For generations before and during the First Winter, that clan spent no small effort in finding strong seidmadr and bringing them into the bloodline. Almost to the point of having a monopoly on them. So, when the question arose of who would lead the Jotnar... well they were able to make their case very definitively with their magic and their clever war tactics. It was afterward -to make the other clans feel less bitter about their defeat, and keep them from rebelling, I feel- that any connection to Ymir was even brought up. Even now, it wasn't for poor war tactics or inability or even being outsmarted that Laufey lost the war to King Odin."

"So, why did Laufey lose?" Loki asked almost as a challenge. Thor had to fight the urge to look at his brother. Hearing Loki say that name without bitterness or disgust was so bizarre, Thor hadn't entirely been prepared for it. Thor also wasn't entirely sure he liked it. Thor figured he should since that meant Loki wouldn't hate himself, but Thor had always disliked Laufey, which only increased after he found out what happened when Loki was born. Laufey deserved Loki's hatred, Thor thought.

"Well, the initial battles were lost because Laufey honestly didn't think Odin would care to protect Midgard," Gerd explained with a vaguely dismissive hand gesture. "Everyone knew that Midgard
was barely populated and the areas that were populated were only home to beings much less advanced than ourselves. Then, when Odin followed the Jotnar back to Jotunheim -also unexpectedly- he did so with his full forces and allied forces that were able to use more magic than the Jotnar. The royal family's tendency to keep highly skilled seidmadr to their own family bit them in the arse when the elves were brought in. Between the number of forces, the unexpectedness of being followed home, and the seidr they were ill-equipped to handle that meant that Laufey was at quite the disadvantage. Still, it wasn't a war they gave up easily. They made Asgard fight for that win."

Thor thought on all the stories and slander against the Jotnar and couldn't help but agree that the Asgardians had had to fight hard. They wouldn't bother with such gruesome stories if they had an easy time during that war. The rumors about the Jotnar were certainly the opposite of the rumors about the Alfr. Jotnar were always depicted as brutal savages, which usually meant that the Asgardians had found them to be challenging opponents. Thor almost thought it was a sort of backhanded compliment now that he really took the time to think about how the Jotnar were presented compared to the other races. Anybody else thinking that was highly doubtful but Thor liked the slightly more positive spin he'd come up with.

"Speaking of Laufey," Gerd began again, "Seeing how he is the current King of the Jotnar, it might be prudent to talk about him specifically."

"Must we?" Thor asked before he could stop himself.

"Even if, by the time you take the throne Laufey is no longer the ruler of Jotunheim, it would be good to pay attention to his methods for it is very likely his heir will have more than a thing or two in common," Gerd reasoned patiently.

Loki nodded. "Gerd does have a point," he said. "But, why do you call Laufey a he?"

"Due to the frequency with which our leader interacts with other cultures and the fact that most of those other cultures tend to be ruled by males, it has become our habit to refer to our leader as male as well," Gerd supplied. "Mostly just to make things easier for those species that are unable to wrap their minds around non-binary beings. It is also why Laufey is referred to as 'King' even though that title is most often reserved for male monarchs."

"I suppose that makes sense..." Loki mused.

"Now, under the surrender that Laufey signed Jotunheim is required to respond to any summons of the rightful King of Asgard for the next twenty-five millennium. Well, less than that now but not by any significant amount. This includes but is not limited to calls for troops," Gerd informed the two youngsters.

Thor couldn't quite help but perk up at the news. "We can call on a Jotnar army?"

"Your father can," Gerd corrected. "But it is doubtful he ever will what with the attitude that Asgardian forces have towards Jotnar ones. Not that the attitude is not returned, I'll mention. But, as I was saying, Jotunheim is also subject to quite a few trading tariffs upon them under the conditions of the surrender. Unfortunately, that doesn't preclude other realms from placing even more restrictions on trade with Jotunheim, and unfortunately, that oversight along with the removal of the Casket of Ancient Winters has left Jotunheim very impoverished. The idea was to make it so that they wouldn't have the inclination to attack other realms again because they'd be too busy needing to rebuild so much but, personally, I think it went a bit too far."

"Jotunheim has always been a bit on the isolationist side, we Jotnar usually don't care if we're well
liked or not, and the frigid temperatures of our home tend to ward off visitors. That does have the unfortunate side effect of us not having the largest trade before the war, and now that is nearly decimated. The situation in Jotunheim is very tenuous right now, and we remember why that is. It will be difficult to rebuild anything resembling good relations with Jotunheim after the terms of the surrender are up. And I think that your father realizes he was perhaps a bit overly harsh because he's agreed to several of Laufey King's ratification measures over the centuries including relaxation of a few tariffs," Gerd said.

"What does Jotunheim even trade?" Loki asked with a frown. "All they have there is ice isn't it?"

Gerd gave Loki a brief smile. "That is the popular opinion but not actually true, Loki," they said not unkindly. "Jotunheim has quite a few natural resources available if you know where to look and aren't meek about trying to get to them. Jotunheim is not a place for anyone without boldness. We have quite a few enormous sea creatures that, while exceedingly dangerous to hunt, provide everything from meat, oil, hide, scales, and ivory. Most of that we use ourselves, but we used to trade in it as well. Then there are smaller sea creatures that are harder to get to due to their tendency to live under the thickest ice sheets and also land animals that have the fur we use and trade. And in the caves of Jotunheim, there are rare plants and minerals that, while not terribly helpful in their raw form, can be used with other elements in the refining process."

Thor thought about that for a moment. He'd never actually considered what was under the ice of Jotunheim. Thor had been solely focused on fighting the few times he'd gone there and between the Jotnar and their war beasts, that had seemed plenty to concern himself with. He had known, on some level, that Jotnar were primarily hunters like Asgardians but Thor hadn't put too much thought into what they hunted it did make sense though, that giants would hunt equally large prey. Thor thought he actually might have enjoyed trying his hand at such a thing.

"Our biggest deficit," Gerd was saying, "Was that our forge skills are... lacking. The heat required to make metal malleable is extraordinarily unhealthy for us for long periods. The few Jotnar that go into blacksmithing are highly revered for enduring it but also tend to have very shortened lives for that same reason. Due to lack of those who will do it, we aren't as capable of it as most other races. Most of the blacksmithing on Jotunheim is done by the Fjallverr because they are better able to handle the heat, but they have trouble with reining in their strength."

"I could do it," Loki said, more to himself than anyone else.

Gerd looked mildly surprised. "What was that, little one?"

Loki looked up quickly from where he had been staring at the papers in front of him. "What?"

"You said you could do it out loud, brother," Thor said.

Loki stared for a moment. Gerd raised an eyebrow and just waited. After another moment Loki cleared his throat. "Well, I mean... I handle heat better," he said awkwardly. "And I already know several fire spells. I don't think it would be that hard."

Thor was a little surprised. Gerd seemed to be surprised as well. "You know spells to control fire?" they asked.

Loki shrugged. "Most war spells are fire based," he pointed out. "They're a bit harder to control, but I can do it."

"That is... practically unheard of Loki," Gerd said with wide eyes. "Doesn't it hurt to try and handle something like fire?"
Again Loki shrugged. "It's not the most comfortable, but I got used to it," he said. Gerd looked very impressed. Thor had never really thought about it before since Loki had always been a God of Fire along with his Mischief, but upon looking back, it was somewhat odd that a Jotunn would be able to be at all involved with that particular element. Loki shifted in his seat. "It's not that impressive is it?"

"It is," Gerd said.

"Oh, well, I learned fire magics before I knew I shouldn't be able to," Loki said with just a bit of awkwardness.

Gerd smiled. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make it seem like it was a bad thing. Quite the opposite. It's extraordinarily impressive. I don't know as much about seidr as your mother would, but I do know what being too warm feels like for me and the idea of being so near a fire is one thing I would very much like to avoid. I would imagine it would only be worse for you being full-blooded Jotnar," they explained.

"Maybe it's because I'm a runt then," Loki muttered. "We're supposed to be better at heat, right?"

Gerd's smile fell very quickly, and Thor frowned. "I would prefer it if you didn't call yourself that, Loki," Gerd said.

Thor nodded in agreement. "Yes, Brother. I agree with Heillr Gerd. You are no runt. You are just the size you should be," he insisted. If Loki hadn't been born smaller than average Thor would never have known him and that would have been quite horrible to Thor's mind.

"Well, what else am I supposed to call it?" Loki asked testily.

"It has become more appropriate to call those with your conditions bantams rather than runts," Gerd supplied. "It is by far less offensive." Loki grunted to show he understood but said nothing else. After a moment, Gerd tried to bring Loki back into the conversation, "Do you think being a smith would be something you'd enjoy, Loki?"

Loki shrugged. "I could do it," he said almost as if Gerd's question was a challenge.

"I don't doubt it," Gerd replied. "I was just wondering if you had a genuine interest or if just the idea of doing it while other Jotnar can't was what you were most interested in."

Thor couldn't quite help the snort of laughter that brought out. Loki cast his brother a quick glare, but Thor ignored it. Loki was definitely the sort of person to learn something just because he was told he shouldn't or couldn't. "Hush up, Thor," Loki grumbled.

"Sorry, brother," Thor said, entirely insincerely.

"Maybe I do have genuine interest, Thor," Loki said. "Did you ever think of that?"

Thor tried to stifle his smile but failed miserably. "I'm sure you do, Loki."

Loki huffed and folded his arms across his chest. "See if I make you anything," he grumbled.

Thor sobered instantly. "Ah, no, Loki. Don't be like that! I'm sorry!" Thor still remembered the hunting knife that Loki had made him in his first life that had been perfectly sized for Thor's hand and had been terribly well balanced and sharpened. That knife had always been Thor's favorite, and he didn't want to risk it not existing this time. Mostly because it was a present from Loki but also because it was a damn fine blade. Loki hadn't been as good a smith as say Eitri or Alvaldi nor
anywhere near as prolific at the craft but he was a painful perfectionist when he set about making something.

"How quickly you change your tune, brother," Loki said.

"Well, I'm sure if you mention your interest to your parents they will be more than happy to provide for you a chance to learn such a skill," Gerd said before Thor could come up with a retort. "None of your other brothers, except for Hodr, have taken up any sort of craftsmanship." Hodr, though not unskilled on the battlefield, was primarily a carver who worked with all sorts of mediums although his two favorites seemed to be wood and ice. Thor suddenly wondered about that. Ice was a queer material for an Aesir to choose, much less to prefer, and Thor wondered if that was some of their family's Jotnar blood coming out. He'd never thought to ask before.

"We're the sons of Odin," Loki pointed out. "The art of battle and states craft are more important for us to learn. Nobody would be happy if we all became artists."

Gerd shrugged. "It doesn't hurt to have a hobby," they replied lightly. "But we seem to have gone off on a tangent. Let's get back to our lesson, shall we?"

Gerd spoke to them about a few more things for another half hour before Frigga came to the room. "I do hope your lesson has been informative?" she asked once Gerd had finished the current thought. Thor and Loki just nodded in agreement. "Good. Unfortunately, I will have to cut things short. Thor and Loki need to pack."

"Pack?" Thor echoed.

"Yes, Thor Darling," Frigga said. "We'll be travelling with your brother to his home in the country tomorrow."

Loki and Thor shared a quick look. They had known that they would be eventually going to Baldr's home, but the brothers had anticipated a little more warning before they did. "And I have arranged with your brother to visit and continue these lessons," Gerd interjected. "So, don't think you'll be getting free of them so easily. They just won't be as frequent."

"Oh goodie," Loki muttered lowly. He didn't say it quite soft enough to escape notice, however.

"Now, none of that," Frigga said gently but still firmly. Such a tone she had long ago perfected from raising so many sons and the way Loki's shoulder's hunched just slightly made it clear the effect remained the same. "Gerd is spending their own free time teaching you two. You should be grateful."

"We are grateful," Thor said instantly before turning to Gerd. "Thank you again for the lessons Heillr Gerd."

Gerd smiled. "You are again welcome. But we haven't nearly reached the full breadth of what I can share with you both."

"For other times," Frigga said. "Go on you two. I don't want to have you scrambling in the morning to try and collect everything."

The brothers muttered their agreement and then left the small sitting area that had been serving as their makeshift classroom. "I will be glad for the break," Loki admitted after they had gotten far enough away that they wouldn't be overheard.

"It is a lot to learn about," Thor said even though he was positive Loki wanted a break from Jotnar
Loki thought about that for a moment before nodding. "Alright. I think he should be home about now."

Thor and Loki changed direction to head towards the front doors of the palace. Even though the brothers had only been to Sven's home a few times, they were easily able to recall which of the cramped houses in the more impoverished quarter of the city he and his mother lived in. Sven was, understandably, a little upset that Thor and Loki were going to be leaving the palace since they were two of the few kids his own age that took the time to include him in any of their activities. Thor could see that Sven was trying to hide his disappointment, but he wasn't doing a very good job of it.

Loki must have thought so too. "Oh, honestly!" he sighed. "It isn't like you can't come to visit us at our brother's home. We might not see you every day, but it'll be far too boring without anyone else around," he claimed.

Sven looked very surprised. "But... a-are you sure that your brother wouldn't mind me being there?"

"I can't see why he would," Loki replied and folded his arms across his chest. "Gerd is already going to be visiting often enough. One half-Alfr boy shouldn't be that much trouble."

Sven brightened considerably at that. "Thank you, Prince Loki!" Sven cried as he hugged Loki tightly.

"Gah! Enough of that!" Loki protested as he pushed the other boy away. "If I knew you'd assault me I wouldn't have offered." Thor smiled, unable to help himself find humor in the idea that Loki thought a friendly hug was somehow an assault.

"Right, sorry," Sven said as he backed away. "I just. I'm really glad to have actual friends for once."

Loki frowned slightly but then inclined his head. "Well, you're not so terrible," he muttered after a minute. This time Sven smiled along with Thor.

Chapter End Notes

Jotnar Blood- Jotnar in this verse have several biological ways of dealing with the extreme temperatures of their home planet. The most important of those is the enzyme that keeps them from freezing and helps preserve their vital functions should the actually get frozen by accident or on purpose for whatever reason. This Enzyme is also produced by the gland that I mentioned in the description of Banthum syndrome that Loki has, which is why runts have a more difficult time in the cold of their home planet.

Jotunheim's Equator- The climate at Jotunheim's Equator is basically Greenland. The warmest it gets is just above freezing and that's only during the summer. Most of the rest of Jotunheim is as shown in the movies... a block of ice.
**Loki Laufeyson**- Loki, despite how he would deny it, is in fact Laufey's kid. I hope it was clear enough as I was describing Laufey's clan's history that Loki being good with Seidr and clever and a bit ruthless is really just par for the course for his family history. If he hadn't been born small, he would have fit right in with his natural born family.

**Loki, God of...**- Scholars continue to debate on what Loki's primary role in Norse mythology is some say he's just a trickster some say he's like a devil figure and other's say it's pointless to try and categorize him at all. Earlier in this story I referred to Loki as God of Fire, and though that something that has been associated with him before it is up for debate and perhaps a more accurate title would be God of Smiths. Though because smiths were so dependent on fire and the name of another god was so close to Loki's things might have gotten muddled. Here I'm sort of interpreting it as God of Smiths and he shares in on God of Fire work with others. Sort of like he controls a specific aspect of fire, although being Loki I'm sure he will jump out of that box fairly regularly. Also I just loved the idea of an ice giant like Loki who can't be normal being God of Fire in some capacity.

**Bantam**- Bantam is, by definition, a small and feisty or quarrelsome person. That just speaks to Loki doesn't it? It's also a breed of chicken which is unfortunate but amusing. Also the chicken might be named because of the place it came from when first imported into Europe. The word Bantam is also the word I used to get Banthum for the genetic condition that Loki has.

**Hodr and Ice**- Hodr, if you remember, is God of winter. In the Almighty Johnsons the character that has Hodr's essence carves ice and I thought it very fitting. I also gave Hodr the carving of wood however because Hodr is only a forth ice giant and can't actually use many Jotnar abilities. He's just better able to withstand the cold because he got the traits a bit stronger than any of his other brothers.

**Alvaldi**- A blink and you’ll miss it, but noticeable change is I’m using an uncommon version of the name Ivaldi (the father of three dwarves that Loki goes to during the hair incident that ends up getting his lips sewn shut) here. This was done for a reason though. I promise you.
The Time in Vanaheim

Chapter Summary

The boys on their vacation

Chapter Notes

I wasn't going to make you sit through two years of basically filler, lol. Maybe I'll write out a few of the individual incidents as one shots at some point but that isn't an immediate priority.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The trip from the capital to their brother's estate wasn't too long or painful, but it was, unfortunately, boring. Loki spent the whole time reading while Thor ended up used as a pillow for Ofnir's backside and tail. Thor would have minded more if he hadn't dozed off himself several times throughout the trip from pure boredom. Their brother's estate was not much like the other estates in Vanaheim or their grandfather's palace. Baldr's home was an old stone fortress that had been abandoned near the end of the Vanaheim-Asgardian War centuries previously. When Baldr abdicated his claim to Asgard's throne after marrying Nanna, Fjorgynn had appointed him a decent sized area to govern in Vanaheim instead. The fortress, Breidablik, had been in a prime location for that area of land, so had been rebuilt and updated to serve as their home. This re-purposing had led to some of the rooms in the halls having odd features and dimensions that were interesting to explore or look at but ultimately useless.

Their mother only stayed for a few weeks with them before heading back to Asgard alone. She had already been gone much longer than either King or Queen would typically be. Both brothers took advantage of Frigga being gone to behave a little more wildly than they normally would have. Breidablik was located up on a cliff overlooking a large lake with quite a bit of forested area around it, which served as a perfect playground for two young Gods with -according to their mother during scoldings- more energy than sense.

On sunny days, Thor dragged Loki out into the woods and fields to go explore or to practice with weapons until Loki began to get tired of it. Then they would go for a swim or possibly return to the fortress to relax. Not that Loki didn't also drag Thor off to do what he wanted. Thor had found himself doing all sorts of strange things due to his brother. From looking for bizarre flowers in the woods that Loki swore had a purpose to trying to find new activities to waste hours on like inventing new -slightly dangerous- games. Loki was never content with just doing the same things over and over again, and Thor wasn't happy to be without company, so they often found new ways to waste time together. The whole experience was just what Thor had wanted and missed from his last life. Before, the brothers had already started to slowly drift apart, and Thor couldn't remember spending so much brotherly bonding time with Loki.

After only a few months, Loki and Thor had explored every inch of the fort and then quite a bit of the wooded area right outside of the walls. The boys had found dozens of trails that went every
which way through the forest and even made a few new ones as they traipsed down to the lake routinely.

The amount of area they had to run around in and entertain themselves with, made Thor happy, and, before Frigga left, she had hired an Alfr tutor for Loki’s magic, which pleased the young mage immensely on top of all the new places to explore. With so much to do for both of them, time seemed to fly by without Thor noticing. They soon started getting visitors from all sorts of people. Sven would show up at least a few times a month (usually with Gerd as an escort for yet another Jotnar lesson). Their friends from Asgard appeared once or twice for several weeks at a time. Frigga attempted to keep a regular schedule to see her sons. Even their elder brothers Tyr and Hodr stopped by, though Hodr was much closer and thus more regular a visitor than Tyr. Through the visits, Thor didn’t fail to notice how much easier Loki gravitated towards the blind god than their other brothers. Thor supposed it wasn’t that surprising since both Hodr and Loki had quite a lot in common, from their interests to the way the other Asgardians didn’t tend to take them seriously in terms of martial prowess to even their preference for colder temperatures.

As the winter holiday started to come closer, their friends stayed home more often, so visitors began to dwindle, but Thor was glad when Odin made the time to see them even if it hadn’t been for very long. Thor had worried that Odin wouldn’t have managed to come and visit at all, which would have hurt Loki terribly. Thor too if he were honest.

Winter in Vanaheim, Thor found, was especially entertaining. Asgard had some pretty harsh winters, but Vanaheim had picturesque winters full of fluffy snowfall and sheets of ice just thick enough to cause objects to sparkle under the sun. The conditions outside rarely got so bad to deter the boys from going out, and Loki was always more willing to venture outside when it was colder. During their extended vacation in Vanaheim, Loki was outside in the snow virtually every day sometimes without any sort of jacket at all (which their mother scolded him over when she heard about it). Gerd had spent almost two weeks visiting at that time to teach Loki the basics of manipulating ice since that was apparently easier to learn when it was colder out. Loki was absolutely delighted when he finally managed to freeze over an entire pond with a thick enough layer that the brothers had been able to skate upon it safely. He then proceeded to tease Thor mercilessly at the Thunder God’s lack of grace. The snowball fight that followed would no doubt go down in history even if both brothers accused the other of cheating in various ways.

Around that time, Thor also suddenly noticed how much larger Ofnir had grown. Only a few months after arriving at Baldr’s estate Loki had ceased being able to carry the reptile, but by the time of the first snow, the Wyvern had been the size of a horse. At first, Nanna was desperately worried about Ofnir seeing how he was growing so fast and was still very venomous, but Ofnir didn’t seem interested in eating people in the least.

Thor thought at first that because Loki had only been feeding him already killed meat -that the Wyvern had gotten too used to it. Then they had been off exploring with the lizard after a snow storm, and Ofnir had surprised them by jumping off a cliff and landing on a mountain goat with no warning whatsoever. After scarfing the goat down in only a few vicious bites, Ofnir had happily trotted back to Loki like some sort of bloody-toothed puppy. Loki quickly decided after that incident that it was time to train Ofnir to hunt properly.

Training Ofnir ended up taking a lot of Loki’s free time, but it did serve a purpose of continuing to get the mage outside despite the temperature warming up again. Their friends returned to their sporadic visits and were happy to tell Thor and Loki all about what was happening in Asgard while they were essentially exiled 'for their own good.' Sif, Dagr, and Hogun had the easiest time visiting as Dellingr was originally from Vanaheim and the children of Dellingr were able to move from realm to realm with less regulation through their father's diplomatic status.
Sven still visited the most often, and Thor was especially glad for that. The more and more he got to know Sven there seemed to be increasing similarities between the young half-Alfr and Captain Rogers. Sven was not much of a fighter but seemed to be learning how to defend himself with the help of Loki and -surprisingly enough- Nanna. Though she was not a fighter by trade, Nanna had shown impressive skill with knives and at defensive maneuvers. Sven was steadily improving, and Thor was beginning to catch glimpses of familiar movements that he'd seen for years fighting beside Rogers. Thor still wasn't entirely sure if it was his imagination or not, but he liked to think it wasn't.

Of course, not everything in Vanaheim was a perfect pastoral wonderland. Loki still had days where he was short-tempered and somewhat volatile, and Thor made it a point to let his brother have his space during those times. He'd pressed about the matter once and had found he hadn't liked the result. Thor would have gone the rest of his life perfectly happy without knowing that his brother's hormones were forcing him to be a female until certain... issues resolved themselves. Thor hoped he never had a daughter because he was pretty sure he'd never be able to even think about that without some amount of discomfort. The first time it happened (before knew what was going on) Frigga had hurried to visit Loki and reassure him. The next few times it had been both Gerd and Frigga until Loki pushed them away entirely to deal with things himself. Loki seemed more in control after a few times but still far from happy, so Thor took to bribery to keep his brother easier to live with for those short spans of time.

After the whole... cycle incident, Thor tried his best to not pry too deeply into anything bothering Loki that seemed like it might be best left alone. Unfortunately, Thor also couldn't help but worry over his baby brother, and that led to being probably overly interested in things that were none of his business. Right before winter had gotten into full swing, Thor found a few letters tucked away in Loki's room after a brotherly tussle had pushed Loki's mattress catty-corner off the frame. Thor, naturally, snatched them up, and later on, read through them. Thor had found the letters unbearably sweet, especially since they had all come from Sigyn. He didn't know what Loki had written to her, but she had obviously liked it since she called him the 'sweetest' and 'most talented boy that ever existed in the nine realms' several times through a couple different letters. Loki had caught Thor red-handed cooing over his brother's love letters, and Thor had ended up hiding in a cave in the woods for two nights while Ofnir growled outside. Eventually, Loki called his pet off, but Thor still ended up with several unpleasant pranks against him in retaliation for months after. Thor still couldn't quite bring himself to be regretful of his actions, though. Seeing Loki's face turn bright pink and knowing that Sigyn was already more than taken by Loki's silver tongue was well worth the consequences from snooping. Thor kept an eye out and noticed that Loki got and sent letters regularly although, no matter how he looked, Thor could never find any of them again. That was probably fine although Thor was super curious to know how things were going between the two of them.

As the day marking their first full year in Vanaheim passed, Thor couldn't help but wonder how much longer they'd be there. Undoubtedly, his father would have put a stop to the raiders by this point. Though Vanaheim was fun and spending time with his brother, sister-in-law, and nephew was always enjoyable, Thor was starting to really want to go back to Asgard. Mostly, Thor missed having his friends around constantly. While they visited when they could, that wasn't the same thing, and he rarely got to see all of them at the same time. Odin had sent all of Thor's friends - Sven, Fandral, Hogun, Dagr, Astrild, and even Sif- to Baldr's to celebrate Thor's birthday but that had been the only time. It was also the first time Sven had met the others, which had been slightly rocky but overall went well.

But still, Thor and Loki were kept at their brother's house for their own safety to their frustration. As the second year in Vanaheim continued, Thor hit a growth spurt that sent him several inches taller than Loki, much to the younger Prince's never-ending annoyance. Thor knew that it wouldn't
last (Thor never did stay taller for very long), but he enjoyed having about four inches more height than Loki for a little bit. Ofnir continued to grow at a rapid pace and act like he was still the size of a house cat. Eventually, Ofnir got too big to comfortably fit in through the doors of the fortress even though he still wasn't full grown. Loki had to spend the better part of two months teaching Ofnir to sleep by himself outside in stages. Loki had to, first, sleep out in the yard with Ofnir, and then slowly moved back to the doorway of the fortress, and then onto his balcony, and finally, inside his own room. So long as Loki's window faced where Ofnir slept, the Wyvern was content enough to actually take the separation. If he wasn't such a dangerous creature, Thor might have found it rather cute the way Loki's pet clamoured after him all the time.

Ofnir still hadn't gotten the hang of flying, thankfully. Thor didn't think he wanted to know how much trouble the giant reptile (which refused to be tied up in any way) would get into if he could fly off on a whim. Loki mentioned that Ofnir's wings were getting stronger though so Thor worried it wouldn't be much longer before the beast managed to figure out more than just gliding off cliffs.

Thor's own skills were also developing rapidly. Not long into the summer of their second year on Vanaheim Thor got particularly peeved - at admittedly nothing really- but his anger had set off a storm of a century which tore several ancient trees straight from the ground and destroyed part of the fortress wall with lightning. He'd gotten a very disapproving talking to after that both in letter form and when their mother next visited. Not that Thor had intended to cause that much destruction to his brother's home or lands.

Unfortunately, there weren't any other strong storm callers, and so, there wasn't anyone to teach Thor any different ways of handling his powers. He'd had the same problem in his previous life, and the ultimate solution had ended up being Mjolnir to help him focus his energy. Thor couldn't say if his parents would find something different this time around or not before settling on the hammer, but either way, he would try to use what little he had previously learned about controlling his temper to try and keep things from... being destroyed. At least until he became old enough that Odin entrusted his weapon to him again.

The days kept ticking by like seconds, and soon enough winter had come around for the second time. Again Gerd took several weeks to visit and teach Loki even more about manipulating ice with his innate powers. This time Loki focused mostly on creating blades of ice. He didn't seem to like encasing his whole arm like Gerd showed him, but forming razor sharp dagger-like icicles to throw was something he excelled at.

Thor found it surprisingly fascinating to watch his brother practice. He'd always been dismissive of Jotnar ice powers in the past, but now that he was taking the time to actually look at what was happening without having to worry about blocking a weapon, it really was sort of mesmerizing to watch. Loki was still learning so forming the blades went slower than Thor had ever seen in the past, and he could actually see the process for once. The way the almost fluffy looking crystals of frost built up in Loki's hand and then hardened and grew until it was as big as Loki wanted was kind of oddly pretty.

Thor suddenly began to wonder if he could manage to make it hail during one of his storms. Ice should be part of him too although not nearly as much as it was Loki. Plus, if he could rip trees out of the ground roots and all hail didn't seem like it would be that much harder. Too bad Thor really didn't have anywhere he could practice such things or anyone to practice with. He made a mental note to, when he got older again, find somewhere remote where he could try it out. Maybe by then, he'd be able to go to Loki for help in figuring it out.

Just over two years after Loki and Thor had been sent away from Asgard, they finally got word from their father about the situation. An agreement had been reached, and a solution was almost
completed that would keep Asgard safe from raiders. With that news, the brothers were able to finally head back home. Two years was not, in fact, that long for a God, but it was still longer than either of them had anticipated. Thor especially had figured it would only take perhaps a few months for their father to come up with a plan.

Planning the trip back to Asgard took a few months, mainly because Ofnir was not going to be easy to transport. The Wyvern was large, dangerous, and not at all fond of confinement. They eventually settled for having Loki put a spell on some of Ofnir's food so that the lizard would sleep for the duration of the trip in the ship's cargo hold. That was determined to be the safest route for everyone involved and least traumatic for the animal. Gerd promised the princes they would come and visit in Asgard and Thor, in turn, promised Sven to ask his father to grant a travel permit so that the boy could still come and visit. When asked what he’d do if Odin said no, Thor had made the hasty promise of coming back to visit Sven instead. And so, about two and a half years after the two princes had stepped onto Vanaheim for the first time they were on their way back, perfectly safe and eager to get back home.

Chapter End Notes

**Breidablik** - Named in *Gylfaginning* as the name of Baldr's Hall and means Broad-gleaming. Not much is really mentioned about it besides that and it being the 'fairest dwelling' which well... not sure how a dwelling can be fair or what that would mean for the ancient Norse, but there ya go.

**Loki and Hodr** - These two really do have a lot in common in this story but also a slight reference to the myth of Loki getting with the unsuspecting Hodr and killing Baldr. Not that this Loki intends that but still... references!
When they arrived back in Asgard, they were greeted with all sorts of fanfare that Thor had honestly not expected. He should have, in retrospect, but he hadn't. Perhaps because they weren't returning victorious from a hunt or a battle like was usually the case when Thor was met with cheers in the street. They were just coming home after being with their brother for a while. Loki seemed equally startled by the reception as they followed their Mother from the docks back towards the palace. The entire capital city surrounding the castle seemed to be in the midst of a festival of some sort with countless food stalls erected and children playing games in whatever open space they could find between clusters of onlookers. There were glittering bits of magic fluttering down through the sky and shiny instruments being played. "Mother, what's going on?" Loki asked as they walked along the high road and saw a stand selling hot boar skewers that had been glazed in some sort of sticky looking reddish sauce. "This can't all be just because we're home."

Frigga smiled down at her sons. "The people like you, darling."

"The people barely know us," Loki pointed out.

Thor nodded just a bit in agreement. He knew from experience that even though most of Asgard would recognize Loki and himself on sight easily enough, they wouldn't be real figures in society for a few more centuries when they reach their first majority. Most of their time was still taken up by lessons and training. "You are still the heirs to the throne," Frigga said, brushing Loki's slicked back hair behind his ear. "Not having either of you in Asgard make the people nervous and feeling insecure."

"I suppose..." Loki said although he still didn't look entirely convinced.

"There is also a celebration for beginning the last bit of construction," Tyr, who had come to meet them at the docks, commented from where he was walking on Thor's other side.

"Construction?" Loki echoed. "What construction?"

"To keep out the raiders?" Thor guessed. That was the only sort of construction project of any note he could recall from his first childhood, anyway. Although it hadn't been nearly as big of a deal then as the raiders had not caused anywhere near the ruckus that they had this time. Thor had barely taken any note of it at all and spent most of the time gallivanting with his friends.

Tyr nodded. "Yes. They've been constructing a barrier around all of Asgard. As you might imagine that has been taking a long time," he said with a gesture towards the mountains in the distance.

"Magical?" Loki guessed.
"I would assume, but I haven't been a part of it really," Tyr said. "You'd have to ask Father tonight at the feast."

Thor perked up instantly. "There's to be a feast as well?"

"Of course! We wouldn't give up a chance for one!" Tyr laughed before ruffling Thor's hair. "What do you take us for? Alfr? You've spent far too much time in Vanaheim."

"You seem in quite the happy mood, Tyr," Loki observed. "Did you miss us that much?"

Tyr waved his hand casually off to the side. "It has not been as quiet as I feared, but I suppose I did miss you terrors after the first year or so."

"We are hardly terrors, brother," Thor denied.

"Thor, you have returned from Vanaheim of all places with a near fully grown wyvern in tow... I think terrors to be quite appropriate," Tyr pointed out with a nod of his head at the large covered cage that was rolling along behind them and currently holding a still slumbering Ofnir. "I'm fairly certain that father didn't think even you two could get into much trouble in Vanaheim and you bring home a giant venomous lizard."

"That's Loki's fault," Thor said.

Loki shot him an annoyed look. "It is not my fault. I did nothing wrong to be faulted for. Getting a pet is not a crime."

"Of course, it's not, Loki," Tyr said, dropping his hand onto Loki's hair and ruffling it. Loki jerked his head away and glared at his older brother even as he flattened the black locks back into place. "But I think you are the only person I know that would end up with such an... exotic pet."

"A boarhound would have been so very dull," Loki said and folded his arms over his chest. Thor would never dare say it to Loki's face, but his brother looked almost adorable with a pout and his arms crossed like that. Such a comment would no doubt end with Thor being subject to any variety of pranks from Loki. Only their Mother had ever called Loki anything resembling cute without repercussions.

"You don't seem much like a dog person, brother," Thor admitted. Loki was much too capricious in nature. The straightforwardness of most dog breeds would clash against the younger Prince's moods too often to be truly compatible. In fact, the only canine that Thor could recall Loki getting along with for any significant length of time was Fenris, and that was an understandable exception.

"Well, why would I be when I can be a dragon person instead?" Loki replied with an indignant sniff. "Dragons are definitely far superior to dogs. Ask anyone."

"Wyverns are not technically dragons, Loki," Tyr reminded.

Loki waved his hand dismissively. "Technicalities and semantics. They are within the same family."

"You're the very first to use 'technicalities and semantics' against us, Loki," Thor complained.

Loki rolled his eyes. He probably would have said something in response, but was interrupted. "Boys, try to not argue the moment you are home. You can start fighting tomorrow if you truly must, but I'd like at least one evening of enjoying having you two safe with us again," Frigga said from where she had moved a few steps in front of her three sons.
"Yes, Mother," the sons of Odin said together in the exact same tone of voice.

Thor glanced back at the festival of sorts that was going on and wished that he could slip off to go explore it. Some of his favorite market food was out on full display, and he could smell the mulled wine that he was particularly fond of steaming in the slightly chilled air. They were still at the very tail end of a chilly Asgardian spring even though they had left Vanahem in the middle of summer. None of the realms were entirely in sync with their seasonal changes although Vanahem and Asgard were closest. Summer would be starting properly soon enough, and the last bit of chill would melt away. Sometimes Thor felt as if Asgard really only had two seasons since Spring and Autumn were both so short compared to some of the other realms. He'd been amazed at how long Autumn lasted in Midgard's city of New York when he first lived there.

Odin was waiting for them at the top of the many steps leading to the palace entry hall with Gungnir in his hand and no real expression on his face. Thor wasn't put off by the lack of enthusiasm, however. They were still being watched by a vast number of the Asgardian population and Odin did prescribe to the practice of remaining aloof in public. He didn't always manage it, but he did try to.

"Father," Thor greeted even as he and his brothers sunk down to one knee and their Mother ascended the steps to stand beside Odin on his right. Loki murmured an echo of the greeting just a moment later.

"My sons. It is good that you have returned to us and in one piece," Odin said with a nearly imperceptible motion of his free hand to signal they could stand. Tyr moved off to Odin's left side. "I hope you enjoyed your visit to our sister realm of Vanahem."

Thor nodded. "We did, but it is still very good to be home, Father."

"I trust it was informative as well?" Odin asked, his eye moving more towards Loki with meaning that would escape any not within the royal family. "And that you did not fall behind in your studies, no matter the topic you were given?"

"... of course, Father," Loki murmured although his eyes dropped to the ground in evident discomfort.

Odin nodded. "Good," Odin said before descending the few steps that separated him from his youngest two sons. He reached out and put a hand to Loki's shoulder and gave it a squeeze before turning his attention to the large cage sitting behind them. The large black cloth covering the cage fluttered near one bottom edge, and Odin brushed past to lift the fabric there with the end of Gungnir. Thor noticed one of the guards almost startle as Odin revealed the cause of the fluttering was Ofnir's breathing.

Ofnir was sound asleep with his head resting on his own thick tail. The quills along Ofnir's tail and down his spine had thickened and sharpened with age until they were like black daggers the length of Thor's forearm. The wyvern's teeth had also been replaced by his adult set and those averaged just shy of being a hand long. "He's gotten big," Odin observed as he studied the wickedly sharp claws at the top of Ofnir's wings. "Is he flying yet?"

"No, but he's trying to figure it out," Loki said. "He's gliding still mostly."

Odin grunted a little and studied the blue scaly beast for another moment. "I had an area of the garden cleared and separated so that your pet can stay there, but I want you to understand, Loki, that the moment he becomes a problem he'll have to be returned to a place he is more suited," Odin said firmly. "I won't have him becoming a danger to Asgard or her people."
"Yes, Father," Loki agreed.

"Good." Odin gestured to some nearby Einherjar. "Take the cage to the pen that was erected in the private garden. My son will be along shortly to ensure everything is as it should be." The golden clad guards bowed and went to push and pull the cage as large as a Midgardian eighteen-wheeled truck off to one of the entrances to the gardens. The younger ones still looked apprehensive

"Will he remain asleep for very long?" Tyr asked curiously. He had perhaps even less knowledge of magic than Thor did since he didn't have the benefit of growing up beside a seidmadr as powerful as Loki.

"Another few hours at least," Frigga answered. "Loki and I tested how long a sleep charm lasts on him several times before we brought him along and we just renewed it before disembarking."

Loki watched the cage slowly move away before turning to Odin. "Will he be near my balcony? He does best there," he said.

"Not directly beneath but within sight," Odin answered. "Your mother helped pick out the best location for his pen. She even gave up part of her garden for it."

"Thank you, Mother," Loki said.

"You're very welcome, darling," Frigga answered with a smile. She happened to think that taking care of Ofnir had been good for Loki even if she wasn't entirely thrilled with her son's choice of pet. Helping her fears about Ofnir, though, was the fact that the wyvern seemed somewhat protective of Loki and a venomous, armored flying reptile was a fearsome guard animal.

Odin gestured to the front of the palace. "Come, my sons, you've been travelling for several days. You should take the time to clean up and relax while your things are unloaded from the ship."

The royal family all made their way into the palace and, once they were out of sight of the general public, Odin visibly relaxed. "I'm glad you're back in Asgard, sons," Odin said, allowing a smile to cross his face. "But we will all be much safer now."

"Seems us going didn't achieve much though," Loki grumbled. Thor was sure he hadn't actually meant for Odin to hear.

"I will not lose my sons to the plotting of our enemies, Loki," Odin said sharply. "You two are the heirs to Asgard and, as such, targeted. I'll not have you kidnapped and killed. No matter how unlikely you think it is, I've seen such things happen before, and I won't take that risk with you two."

Loki sighed but nodded. "I understand, Father. Besides, we're home now."

"You are," Odin agreed. "Now, off you get. I'm sure your little friends will be by shortly to see you both."

"Thank you, Father," Thor said before grasping Loki's wrist and dragging his brother off towards their rooms. Loki gave a slightly startled noise but otherwise managed to keep up enough to not get his arm pulled out of his socket or trip over his own feet. Once Loki was following him, Thor let his brother's wrist go.

The two brothers reached their rooms in their parent's wing quickly and Thor darted into his to quickly get out of the more formal clothes their mother had wanted them to wear (she must have realized there were going to be many of the public out to see them) and into more casual
clothes that Thor could ruin. Their mother would most likely not appreciate them destroying their nice clothes even though they could be easily replaced. After changing, Thor went down the hall and knocked on Loki's door. "Loki? Are you dressed?" There were a long few minutes of silence and Thor knocked again. "Loki?"

Still, Loki didn't answer, so Thor cautiously opened the door to peek in. He was glad when he didn't see his brother in the middle of changing, but that just leads to the question of why he hadn't answered. "Brother?" Luckily, it only took a moment for Thor to realize the doors to Loki's balcony were open. Thor went in and quickly spotted his brother leaning across the stone railing to peer out at something. Loki hadn't even changed out of his nice green tunic yet although he had shed his shoes, which Thor stepped over on his way to the balcony. "What are you looking at?" Thor asked.

Loki looked back in surprise. "Thor. You really can see Ofnir's pen from my balcony. Come see," he said before turning and pointing.

Thor hurried over and looked out at where Loki was pointing. Even if Loki hadn't been pointing Thor would have been hard-pressed to not notice the substantial change to the garden. About an eighth of an acre -Thor estimated- had been cleared out of the flower beds and paths and little courtyards that once occupied the space to leave one rectangle ringed with extraordinarily tall walls with iron spikes at the top. A large tree that Thor was sure hadn't been there before was now in the middle, and the terrain had been turned into rocky hillocks that scruffy tufts of grass sprouted up from. A large pool of water took up a large portion of the lowest level of the enclosure and even ran the full length of the wall that was facing the city, to deter Ofnir from trying to leave that way, Thor assumed. Other than the tree, however, the largest feature of the pen was a shelter made of vast slabs of dark rock forming a makeshift cave. Ofnir was visible where the Einherjar must have dragged him from his cage -and that was probably a task in of itself- on top of an unusually flat bit of rock just in front of the cave opening.

"It is larger than I expected," Thor said. "They must have removed at least three courtyards."

Loki nodded. "But he does need that much space... perhaps even more. Wyverns do like to roam quite a bit. In the wild, they go miles and miles just to hunt."

"Well, Ofnir won't need to do that," Thor pointed out. "You feed him whatever he wants."

"Not whatever he wants," Loki denied.

"Maybe I should get a pet," Thor mused as he leaned against Loki's railing. He did rather miss his goats. Though he hadn't been able to take the beasts to Midgard in his first life he had always wanted to. He imagined that his mortal friends would have found them quite amazing seeing how most normal goats didn't get anywhere near the size that his beloved Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjostr had. Of course, the mortal goats weren't the steeds of mighty Gods either, so that probably had something to do with it. Normally sized goats wouldn't have been able to pull his chariot even an inch.

Loki glanced at Thor sideways. "And what sort of pet would you want? One of those hunting hounds you were talking about before?"

"Though I imagine I would enjoy a hunting hound, I was thinking of something more interesting than a dog," Thor said. "Perhaps a goat."

"A goat?" Loki echoed with a face of distaste. "Why would you want a goat? We eat those, Thor."
"So?" Thor challenged. "We eat rabbit as well, and people keep those as pets."

Loki blinked several times in apparent confusion. "Who keeps rabbits as pets?" he asked. "That doesn't sound remotely interesting as a pet."

"Lots of people raise rabbits," Thor replied slightly defensively even though he had no real desire to have any hare for pets.

"People raise them to eat, Thor. Not to be pets," Loki said before straightening. "Anyway. I still don't think you should have pets that Ofnir would be very pleased to eat."

Thor waved that away. "Ofnir prefers aquatic mammals," he said.

"It isn't as if he's never devoured goats before, though," Loki pointed out. "But anyway, get out of my room so I can get changed. Then I have to go down and make sure Ofnir's pen is suitable."

"Can't you see that from here?"

Loki cast Thor an entirely unimpressed look. "I can hardly be sure of all the details from here," he said as if the very idea that he'd already seen enough was entirely ridiculous. "For instance, how deep is that water? Ofnir is quite large and if he were to try and get in the water would he even fit?"

"I think he'll survive such a thing, Loki..."

"It's not about survival. It's about comfort," Loki argued as he went to his dresser and pulled out a less formal outfit than the one he was currently wearing. "And keeping Ofnir comfortable means, he will be less likely to cause trouble and possibly bite someone. And then Father would get upset and send Ofnir somewhere else."

Thor sighed but decided against pointing out how mother hen-like his brother was being. Loki disappeared into his bathroom to change while Thor glanced back out at the new pen that took up a goodly portion of the private gardens. Idly, the young Thunder God wondered how Odin had convinced Frigga to give up so much of one of her passion projects. Then again, Thor thought, it was for Loki, and their mother would not prioritize plants over his happiness. As Thor watched, Ofnir rolled over onto his back, and his tail flopped to the side with a solid thump.

Loki came out again with his clothes changed. "Alright, let's go," Loki said. "Ofnir won't be awake for a while, but I would still rather be sure everything is as it should be now."

"Yes, Mother Loki," Thor said teasingly.

Loki glared at his brother but surprisingly just turned and left the room. Thor hurried after, glad to have gotten away with such an outright mockery. Up until he stepped out of Loki's room and his foot slid out from under him due to a thin layer of ice across the stone floor. Thor couldn't help the cry of surprise as he tumbled and landed hard on the ground, his head banging the door on his way down. "Loki!"

"Why, Thor, you should really be more careful," Loki said innocently before ruining it with a huge grin. Thor couldn't help the growl that escaped as he struggled to his feet. Loki just cackled madly and then rushed down the hall, leaving Thor behind still trying to not fall to the ground. He didn't quite manage it as his heel slipped on the ice again.

Thor struggled to his feet for a second time while cursing his brother and then managed to get back to unfrozen ground. Loki had disappeared down the hall, but Thor didn't let that stop him, and he
ran along after. Luckily, Thor knew where his brother was going and managed to catch up to the
dark-haired trickster just before they reached Ofnir's pen in the gardens. Thor tackled Loki with a
roar, and his brother gave a yelp as they both went careening sideways off the path. The two of
them ended up in a bush shouting at each other and struggling to get out of the scratchy tangle.

"Thor! Get off me!" Loki growled as he pushed at Thor's larger bulk.

"You brought it upon yourself!"

"I did not, oaf!"

Thor and Loki continued to wrestle while slowly falling out of the now mostly broken bush for
several minutes until they became aware of someone laughing nearby. Both Princes stopped and
looked over to see Fandral and Astrild standing just a few feet down the path at a crossroads
looking entirely too amused. "I guess they're not as tired after their trip as I thought," Astrild said
with a wide grin. "Nice to see they haven't gotten too Princely in their absence."

Loki frowned and finally managed to push Thor away. "It hasn't been that long since you've seen
us," he said. "Besides, it's Thor's fault."

Thor rolled his eyes as he got up from the dirty and made a very halfhearted attempt to brush
himself off. "What are you two doing here?"

"We were elected to come and get you," Fandral said cheerily.

"Elected? By who?" Loki asked.

"Sif," Fandral said with a somewhat wistful expression on his face.

Astrild rolled his eyes. "Ignore him. He's addled."

"I am not addled."

"Sif joined our training group since we last saw you," Astrild continued as if Fandral hadn't
protested at all. "And she proceeded to introduce Fandral to the ground over and over again. He's
been moon-eyed ever since. I think she knocked something loose finally."

Fandral took a swing which Astrild dodged by sidestepping. "Anyway. We are to come and collect
you because she said so," Astrild told them. "And I'm not about to argue with Sif. The Valkyries
have been teaching her all sorts of terrible tricks." Thor wasn't terribly surprised to hear that in his
and Loki's absence Sif had begun to lead their group of friends. She was a very confident girl and
always had been. That combined with a mean punch meant she easily could get others to follow
her.

Loki sighed and shook his head. "Fine, we'll go with you. Just let me check on Ofnir first," he said
as he started to walk again.

"Oh, is that what this big wall is for?" Astrild asked. "Everyone was speculating what the Allfather
was having built in the gardens."

"Ofnir is too big now to be inside," Thor supplied as the three other boys followed Loki down the
path towards a large metal door that had the world tree engraved upon the front. "And even if he
wasn't, I don't think Mother would want a wyvern in the palace in the first place."

"Who can blame her?" Fandral asked.
Loki tossed a bit of a glare over his shoulder. "Ofnir is perfectly harmless and really quite loving. Just because he's venomous doesn't mean he's a monster."

Fandral held up his hands in defense. "Of course not," he said although he didn't sound entirely convinced of that.

"Best not agitate the one that owns said venomous reptile, Fan," Astrild drawled.

Loki huffed and held a hand out to the gate. The emerald green and gold of his magic wreathed Loki's hand and then flowed into the iron door. After a heartbeat, the World Tree on the front of the gate began to shift its branches, and smaller parts of iron banding rotated into different positions or slid away entirely. As the door moved, a thin seam became more and more visible. Finally, the door's decorative front -which seemed to be one giant lock- stopped changing and the gates slowly opened with a groan.

Loki went into the pen without hesitation, and Thor was only a few steps behind. Fandral and Astrild paused for a good five minutes before reluctantly entering as well. Loki didn't even seem to notice anyone else was in the enclosure with him. He was too busy wandering around and looking at various features in the pen with a vaguely disapproving frown on his face. "What's the matter?"

Thor asked as Loki crossed his arms. Everything looked perfectly fine to Thor, but then he was substantially less exacting than his little brother.

"Nothing, I suppose," Loki muttered as he turned his attention to Ofnir instead of the rocky landscape that would serve to help keep Ofnir's claws maintained just by him walking across it. Ofnir was not on his back any longer, but he was sprawled out across the stones with one wing draped off the slight incline carelessly.

"He really has gotten big," Fandral said from where he and Astrild were hanging well back. Though the rest of their group had met Ofnir on the times they had visited the Princes in Vanaheim, none of them had been terribly overjoyed by the giant lizard's existence. "How much does he eat now?"

Loki shrugged as he went to run his hands over Ofnir's long neck. "Oh, a full grown dolphin or a couple of large seals every few days seems to satisfy him well enough," he answered. "They have rather slow digestion, wyvers."

"Right..." Fandral drawled as he eyed Ofnir's muzzle full of sharp teeth.

Loki patted Ofnir's blue scaly neck fondly before going off to poke his head into the shelter that had been erected. After a few moments, he nodded and then waved his hands to summon his magic. A giant stuffed bear with only three arms, multicolored patches over most of its body, and a stitched smile that was obliviously unaware of the multiple and repeated repairs that had been done to it fell into reality right beside Loki. Loki pushed it into the cave with a little difficulty since the bear was bigger than he was and quite awkwardly shaped. When he came back out, he noticed both Fandral and Astrild staring. "What?"

"Does-does your terrifyingly deadly pet have a stuffed bear?" Astrild asked finally.

"He didn't like not being able to fit in my room with me anymore," Loki said defensively. "He does better when he has his toy."

"Okay, that's just unfairly adorable," Astrild said.

Loki sighed and rolled his eyes. "Let's just go," he said. "Ofnir is fine here and won't be waking up
anytime soon anyway."

"Oh good," Fandral said. "We've got such things to show you two!"

"And we're anxious to see what's happened while we were gone," Thor chirped. "So where are we meeting the others?"

"Sif and Dagr's house," Astrild said.

"Great, let's go then." Loki didn't look enthused, but Thor hooked his arm around Loki's shoulders before starting to follow Astrild and Fandral. "Come, brother, it won't be so bad to see our friends again will it?"

Loki sighed. "I suppose not... but I think it'll be terribly boring." Thor suppressed a chuckle at that but figured that Loki would cheer up quickly enough. Or leave.

Councilman Dellingr lived in the aristocratic quarter of Asgard where large estates were everywhere. The estate was about a fifteen-minute walk from the palace and had two massive and slightly curved stones in the front that had been covered with carvings. Four curved stone benches were forming a circle around the base of those monolithic pillars. Sitting on one of those benches were the rest of their group. Dagr and Sif were bickering about something or another while Hogun just watched them looking mildly amused. But what was very surprising was the pretty blonde sitting on another bench. Thor felt Loki stiffen up beside him and couldn't help but glance over at his brother. Loki looked entirely thunderstruck but, Thor thought that was understandable. Neither of them had been aware that Sigyn had somehow entered their friend circle.

"There you are!" Sif said when she noticed them. "It took you long enough to find them!"

"It wasn't us," Astrild protested. "Loki had to go check on his pet first."

Sigyn looked up quickly at that and Thor had to suppress his amusement to see Loki's cheeks color almost immediately. "Hello, Loki. It's good to have you back in Asgard," Sigyn said with a sweet smile.

"Sigyn."

Thor was having a tough time not bursting into laughter, but Loki seemed to notice and elbowed Thor hard. Dagr seemed to be utterly oblivious to what was going on between Loki and Sigyn and started talking, "Well, now that you are here we can fill you in on everything that's been going on. It's really been too boring without you two here."

"That would be very appreciated, Dagr," Thor said as his smile again escaped. Dagr started rambling about things, and eventually, the others began to participate as well and all but ignored the younger prince and Sigyn who were still glancing at each other. Thor did his absolute best to not draw attention to it because he would hate to make his brother get defensive and closed off. Sigyn probably wouldn't appreciate it either. So, he also didn't draw attention to the fact that after they left the courtyard to go explore the changes in the city, Loki and Sigyn were several paces behind and walking a bit closer than was perhaps necessary. Maybe Thor would tease his brother about it later, but for now, he would let Loki just actually be with his not-my-girlfriend-Thor-stop-it for the first time in two years.

Chapter End Notes
Seasons- Because the realms are not physically connected in this verse I figured assuming their seasons lined up would be just too convenient. So, I decided it would be more realistic to say some are close to lining up with each other but none do exactly. Just a thing to keep in mind. Also, I can't find this again but I swear somewhere I once read something about only having two seasons in myth... but like I said, can't find that again so maybe I'm misremembering something.

Ofnir's Toy- It's adorable okay? I love it when big bad monster types act cute and loving.
Slipping away from the others and their little tour of Asgard was not particularly challenging to do. Loki and Sigyn had been trailing behind the other adolescents, which Loki doubted more than at most two of them had been aware of, and when the group stopped to have Sif explain a new training barracks to Thor, they didn't pay any more attention either. So it was a simple matter of not stopping along with the others and wandering off down a side street with Sigyn, who looked amused and almost as mischievous as Loki himself could. Asgaedia's Eyes it was a beautiful look on her. "I don't believe that we should be alone, Prince Loki," Sigyn said with her pretty mouth curled up at the ends.

"I don't particularly care, if you don't," Loki replied. "Although, I thought I asked you not to call me 'Prince,' Loki will be more than alright."

"Prince Loki is who you are though," Sigyn replied.

"I'd rather not be that with you," Loki said as he paused by a large planter box. Being Prince of Asgard was usually rather enjoyable for how much freedom it gave him, although in this regard the title Prince was just a hindrance. Princes were meant to only be involved with others of their station, and Loki knew that was a huge part of why Tyr had abdicated his claim to the throne. Although, even if Sigyn were of some royal status the old advisers wouldn't be happy as the rules for royal courting were older and far more conservative than what was common. That was designed to ensure no children occurred out of wedlock and threatened the stability of the throne. Or at least, that was the excuse that was used. Personally, Loki thought they were just busybodies who couldn't keep out of other people's lives. Loki rarely worried about following modern traditions, so ancient courting rules were definitely off his list of concerns. True, some of the older senators would lose what few white hairs they had left at the very idea of Loki pursuing someone romantically before Thor did, even more, because Sigyn wasn't a noble, and yet more at the idea of him doing it without proper chaperones.

Sigyn's smile grew just a little more. "You're so scandalous," she said teasingly.

"You haven't even begun to see me be scandalous, my lovely Osprey," Loki replied as he reached up to gently brush her pale hair back from her face and tuck it behind her ear.

"You know most people wouldn't compare me to such a bird," Sigyn said as the two of them began
Loki inclined his head just slightly and hesitantly moved to hook two of his fingers around her hand. "That is because they do not see what I do," he murmured. Part of him wished that he was still writing to her and not standing right beside her. Loki was far more confident when he could spend hours picking out the exact right words that conveyed his thoughts in the most elegant and complete way as possible.

"And what do you see, my lord?" Sigyn asked as she used her thumb to trace the way his finger curled around hers. Loki felt his face heat up at the gesture, and Sigyn smiled.

"I see the most beautiful girl in all the realms who's beauty makes people underestimate you. They think you're a delicate little flower, but they've not seen you flyting with someone," Loki said. "Five days after when what you said finally registers to them, then they realize you are not as demure as they seem to think you."

Sigyn laughed aloud, and Loki felt his heart swoop at the sound. He did love her laugh. It was a sweet, smooth noise that reminded Loki of that fine Alfr wine that he'd snuck from his mother's private stock in the kitchen that one time. Loki imagined he could get drunk off it just as quickly as he had that liqueur. "You think it only takes them five days to realize what I call them?"

Loki shrugged in the most casual way he could manage with how awkward he felt. He felt gangling and not at all in control of himself in front of her, and no matter what he did the feeling only grew worse. Why in all the realms had he thought he could pursue anyone like her? "I was assuming you wouldn't waste your time with anyone without at least some modicum of intelligence," he admitted.

"Then I could only ever flyte with you," Sigyn said.

"I wouldn't mind that," Loki admitted. "You're far more challenging than anyone else I could hope to match wits with." Loki hadn't intended to ever trade verbal barbs with Sigyn since he had been trying to make her like him and people didn't tend to like him when he gave them a verbal lashing, and yet he'd somehow gotten dragged into it over the course of their letters. Sigyn had commented once that nobody in Asgard was in the least entertaining with their words and even gave an example of a genuinely horrible limerick that Amora had tossed out during one of their arguments. Loki hadn't thought much of writing back a far more subtle but poignant jab, and things had spiraled from there. Loki had come to enjoy it, and through an unspoken agreement, both of the youths kept their jabs light enough to be good-natured glancing blows at best.

Sigyn's smile made her eyes sparkle. "You do have a delightful way with words, Loki. Even your insults are pretty," she told him. "Although I must admit I'm curious as to if you're as good with them in the moment as you are when you have time to write at your leisure."

"I like to think I am," Loki said. "Although I must admit I don't have much desire to insult you right now. Your extraordinarily beautiful eyes disarm me entirely with just a glance, Sigyn. It is truly a most dangerous weapon you wield."

"I think your eyes far more lovely than mine, Loki. I have never seen such a remarkable shade of green outside of high-quality emeralds," Sigyn said as she reached up to put a hand to his cheek. Her thumb brushed over the delicate skin under his eyes even as his face turned bright pink. "They hardly seem real..."

Loki looked off to the side immediately. "... they aren't," he muttered. Loki lifted his hand to gently hold her hand against his heated face, not wanting to lose the contact even though he had been the
one to turn away. "I have to wear a guise, and that's what gives them their color..."

"You wear a guise?" Sigyn echoed. Loki nodded still without looking over at her. "May I ask why?"

There was a long silence as Loki considered if he could bring himself to say it. He couldn't, he decided, but Loki didn't want to just not answer either. Oddly enough, he found he wanted to tell Sigyn something about it, which might have been why he'd admitted to his eyes not naturally being green. He hadn't intended to do that, but the truth had slipped out before he could stop it. "I... have a genetic condition," he muttered. That was true enough, if not quite right. "I don't really want to talk about it, but it makes me have to wear the guise."

"Well, if you always have to wear it then I would say it is your real eye color," Sigyn said as she lifted her other hand to make Loki look at her again. He was somewhat surprised and rather hopeful to hear that. Loki would much prefer to look the way the guise made him appear. "Don't look so self-conscious, Loki. It doesn't suit you at all."

"I just... I don't want you to think..." Loki broke off there, not entirely sure if he should finish the thought aloud.

"To think what?" Sigyn prodded gently. Loki bit his lower lip but still didn't answer. Sigyn hummed a little as her eyes searched his face carefully, the little specks of silver mixed into the blue-green catching the light like stars that kept Loki from looking away. "You know... I think it quite suits you. You are such a strong mage after all... it would make sense that it even affected your eye color."

"That's... very nice, but not quite how the guise works, I don't think," Loki murmured as he allowed himself to gently put his free hand on her side a little above her hip. "It is more of a veil over my real appearance."

Sigyn shook her head slightly. "No," she denied. "I don't think that's it at all. If it were merely there to cover your condition then it wouldn't make sense to choose such a striking color," Sigyn reasoned. "I find it much more likely that your magic just refused to be contained. Your eyes do match your magic almost perfectly and guises, by their very nature, would have to be weaker at the eyes."

Loki tilted his head a little as he thought about that. "I am not so sure, but I do like that thought," he admitted. "I always have liked having green eyes... much more than what they really look like."

Sigyn's smile grew. "And here I thought you were so smart," she said teasingly. "Of course that's the reason they're green. Otherwise wouldn't you have eyes of blue most of your brothers?"

"I... I don't know. Father is the one that crafted the guise in the first place," Loki admitted. "I didn't really think about if he meant for me to have green eyes or not."

"Like I said: they suit you," Sigyn said. "I could write very sappy poetry about your eyes."

"Sappy poetry?" Loki echoed.

Sigyn nodded. "Oh yes. I could compare them to all sorts of non-romantic juvenile things and gush for ages about how much I liked looking at them," she conspiratorially whispered.

Loki chuckled at that. "Shall we move from flying to trying to come up with the most obnoxious love poetry for each other then?" he asked. "Because I'm sure I could come up with a few sappy analogies for you as well."
"Mm, if it weren't for the fact that I feel it would get us in trouble somehow, I would agree," Sigyn said.

"How could such a thing possibly get us in trouble?" Loki asked as Sigyn began to pull back. He reluctantly allowed the move.

"I'm not sure," Sigyn admitted. "But from what I've heard you're quite good at finding trouble in unexpected places."

Loki frowned. "Who told you things like that?"

"Everyone tells me things like that," Sigyn replied with a bit of exasperation herself. "At first it was somewhat amusing; their attempts to 'save me' from your wild influence or whatever they thought they were doing. But, after the fourth or so talk, it began to grow tedious."

"It is rather tedious for me as well," Loki said. "Honestly, you accidentally blow up one feast with a stray spell, and you're branded a troublemaker for life. As if that would honestly be the way I would go about causing mayhem and ruining one of Thor's overblown parties."

Sigyn's eyebrow went up towards her hairline. "That seems very much like a story I need to hear, Loki."

Loki waved his hand a little to the side. "As I said it truly was an accident, and as such was lacking in my usual standards. If I had intended to blow up that boar, it would have been a much more magnificent spectacle." Sigyn laughed and reached over to take Loki's hand in hers. Loki was briefly startled, but when she only smiled and made no indication of being about to let go, Loki allowed himself to relax again. "Would you like to come with me somewhere?"

"I thought I was already doing that," Sigyn said with a gesture at the mostly empty street.

"I meant somewhere a little more specific," Loki said. "I haven't been able to go there for two years now, after all. And... I don't mind you coming with me." He wasn't sure if Sigyn would understand just how impressive that was as Loki didn't share his secret places with just anyone. Thor had been to several and his mother as well, but nobody outside of his family. Nobody but perhaps Sigyn now.

Sigyn studied Loki's face for a moment before nodding. "Alright. I'll be glad to go with you."

Loki couldn't stop the grin that flitted across his face. "You won't be disappointed," he promised. Loki took Sigyn's hand in a firm but gentle grip and led the way through the capitol. They were quiet, but it was not an uncomfortable silence. Loki didn't feel any urge whatsoever to fill the space between them with inane chatter. Neither of them liked such things in the first place, and Loki only did so when he wanted to keep Thor (or someone else) distracted long enough to pull off a prank or something of that nature.

"How far are we going?" Sigyn asked after nearly fifteen minutes of being led.

"A bit further," Loki admitted. "I wasn't really supposed to stumble across this place, but I did while I was fleeing from some boys who took exception to my comments questioning their family genetics..."

Sigyn's eyebrow went straight up. "Why were you doing that?"

"Well, they started it," Loki muttered. "And they were bigger than me so I couldn't exactly hit them and win."
"I suppose it didn't occur to you to hit them when their backs were turned?" Sigyn asked.

"Father would have been most unhappy to hear that I had done such a thing," Loki replied. "Besides... I wasn't entirely sure I could knock all of them out with one hit seeing how there were four of them and somewhat spread out..."

"And so you settled for insults," Sigyn finished. "I understand."

Loki was pleasantly surprised that Sigyn hadn't taken up some other reason for not insulting the bullies and was even nodding as if she too really did understand and wasn't just saying it. That was a reaction he rarely got and only ever seemed to when the person he was talking to had also ended up with only words and fleeing as viable choices at some point. Or several points, whatever.

The two young lovers eventually reached the border of Jarnsvíðr, and Loki cautiously led them into the trees. "They chased you all the way out here?" Sigyn asked in surprise. "You must have really unleashed quite the insult."

"I might have implied that their mothers were trolls and their fathers were swamp golems," Loki said with a shrug. "Honestly, I don't think they knew what the second was but they understood it probably wasn't anything good." Golems being constructs of a magical nature, muscle-bound idiots were unlikely to have been able to understand the depths of that insult but they hadn't really needed to either.

Sigyn laughed. "What interesting children that crossing would produce," she said in amusement.

Loki flashed a smile of his own as he made his way through the trees and brambles. They walked for another ten minutes until the forest was just starting to darken before they reached a small clearing. In the center of the small area was a huge and ancient tree that had massive knotted roots that curled up and over several rocks and even other roots like giant snakes. The old tree's truck was twisted and curved as if it had been made of something far more pliable at one time but froze mid-stretch. Loki carefully climbed over the massive roots to reach the base of the tree and put his free hand upon it. Loki was fairly certain this tree was one of the oldest in Asgard. Perhaps not the oldest but definitely one of. "My goodness," Sigyn said as she stared at the tree. "It must be at least twenty thousand years old," she estimated.

Loki nodded in agreement. "I was thinking something similar with how the roots climb over other trees that have fallen into the clearing. I doubt much else can grow within its root system. I call it the Veteran since all these other trees nearby seem so much younger than it. But what I want to show you is actually under the Veteran," Loki said as he carefully climbed down to where several of the roots tangled around each other before finding the ground.

"Under?" Sigyn echoed as she followed Loki still.

"Mhm," Loki hummed as he poked and prodded until the dirt and leaves between the roots fell away into a pitch black hole.

Sigyn braced herself on Loki's shoulder as she leaned over to peer down and Loki fought (but failed) to not blush. "It grew over the mouth of a cave system?" she guessed as she tried to make out any features in the blackness.

"That's what I think," Loki agreed. "I've explored here several times, and I want to show you one of the places that are in the caves. It isn't for everyone, though. So if you want to turn back now, that's fine."
"No, I want to see it," Sigyn insisted. "And you know where you're going right?" she asked.

Loki nodded. "I carved some light runes into the rock that I can activate once we're down there," he agreed. "So as long as we follow those it's a place I've explored already."

"Then lead the way, my Prince."

Loki blushed even darker red. "I told you not to call me that," he muttered even as he carefully climbed down into the hole. The first distance from the tree roots to the base of the hole wasn't nearly as far down as it looked from above and soon enough Loki was calling up to Sigyn. "Alright, come down!"

"Will you catch me if I fall?" she called back.

"Always," Loki promised.

Sigyn must have decided to test that because the next thing Loki knew she was falling towards him through the shaft of light of the hole opening. He let out a little noise of surprise even as he acted quickly. He stumbled slightly but managed to catch her. "You jumped?" he asked with wide eyes as he straightened.

"Well, yes," Sigyn said as if it were obvious. "You said you'd catch me."

"That didn't mean to jump, though!" Loki said, his heart still beating a staccato rhythm against his ribcage at the surprise. Sigyn just smiled and leaned forward to press a kiss to his cheek. Loki nearly dropped her in even more shock and reflexively tightened his grip slightly on her legs and waist so that he wouldn't.

"I'm sorry," she said, although Loki distantly noted that she didn't sound it. "But you caught me, as I knew you would, so all is well."

Loki swallowed hard and nodded before carefully setting her down on her feet. He was sure his face was as red as Volstagg's beard but tried his best to not show how affected he was beyond that obvious physical tell. He cleared his throat and ran a hand over his hair awkwardly. "Shall we?"

Sigyn smiled mischievously but nodded, "After you, my Lord."

Loki went to one wall and laid a hand against the cool and slightly moist stone. Only a few second's concentration was needed to light the rune that had been scratched into the surface of the wall. Instantly pale green and gold magic traced the lines of the carving and illuminated the area around the rune. Many more runes far into the dark lit up as well like fireflies responding to another of their kind. The color of the light was even similar. Loki reached back for Sigyn's hand, which she immediately offered, and then started down the dimly lit path.

The runes themselves were only enough to see the floor a few feet from where they were carved, but Loki could have brightened them if he'd wanted to expend that much magic. He didn't bother to do so, however since this particular path through the caves was really very safe. The two adolescents lapsed into a comfortable silence again as they walked. Every once and a while in the dark they heard the drip of water or the little shifting of pebbles likely caused by some harmless underground animal moving or just time itself.

The smell of cool rich dirt and mineral-rich water was pervasive and soothing. Or, at least, Loki had always found it that way. He didn't mind the darkness either. He took his time in leading Sigyn through the dark, especially if the stone under their feet was slick or at an incline. Sigyn likely had no way of knowing but the pair of them were descending quite a way down and travelling far away
from the Veteran tree that sat upon the cave's entrance. Loki hadn't bothered to measure precisely how far this path led, but he knew it was further than most would have thought. Something about being underground was disorienting, and quite often Loki found he had gone much beyond what he'd estimated while traversing the dark.

The pair continued for a while longer until the sound of water thundering nearby drew Sigyn up short. "A waterfall?" she asked.

"Yes," Loki agreed. "It's just around the bend up ahead. That's where we're going," he said. "But I promise, it's no ordinary waterfall." Sigyn looked intrigued even in the dim light of the caves and nodded, so Loki continued.

Sure enough, just beyond the latest curve, they came to a vast cave opening. Sigyn's jaw dropped, and Loki couldn't help but smile as he led her further into the large open space. The waterfall that Sigyn heard was falling to the right side of the spacious cavern and was hitting an outcropping before continuing on down into nothing. Out beyond the waterfall was nothing but space. Stars and galaxies twinkled in the distance, and a giant nebula of golden and neon blue cosmic dust swirled somewhere below and to the left with even more stars shining from within. The cave itself was full of many large crystals and gemstones in every color that glittered under the light of the Asgardian sun hitting them. The walls were a mosaic of colors, and while several of the gems were uncut and unpolished, it seemed as if many had been and Sigyn wondered if that was Loki's doing. The crystals were sharp and jagged things jutting out from the ceiling like a deadly chandelier, and Sigyn noted many in that collection and some that came from the walls were acting like prisms and sending more shafts of light deeper into the cave than just what the sun could reach. "We're under Asgard," Sigyn breathed as she cautiously approached the drop-off. Loki stayed close just in case he needed to pull her back. If one fell from here, there wouldn't be any saving you.

"Yes," Loki said before gesturing to the water that was making the edge slicker than he'd like. "I think that broke off a piece to reveal this," he said. "But it does make that edge quite slippery, so please be careful."

Sigyn smiled at him over her shoulder, and Loki felt his heart seize up. He shouldn't have brought her here. It only made her even more beautiful. It was hard enough to talk with her when she wasn't shining in the sunlight and framed by the beauty of space and priceless gems. "I know you'd save me should something happen, but to ease your worry, I'll step back," she agreed.

Loki led Sigyn over to a large flat stone that was far enough back from the waterfall that it was kept dry and sat down. Several large purple crystals jutted out from the walls near the rock he'd chosen, but there was enough space between them that Loki could lean against the wall without risk of impaling himself.

Sigyn slipped into his lap and curled up there, making Loki's heart try to leap straight through his throat to land on the ground. Loki cleared his throat even as he wrapped his arm around her slender waist. "It is chilly here," Sigyn said as she curled closer.

"The atmosphere is somewhat thin," Loki said by way of explanation. That lack of atmosphere also meant that gravity was a bit lesser than what they were used to. Not small enough that they were in danger of flying away but enough that the particles of water from the falls seemed to hang in the air just a little too long and their own movements seemed oddly out of sync and floaty. It only added to the dream-like quality of their surroundings.

Sigyn hummed and rested her head on Loki's shoulder as her eyes swept the cave again. "I was wrong," she mused. "Even the emeralds here fail to match your eyes," she added before he could ask.
"Nothing here matches you either," he murmured as he rested his cheek against the top of her head. They sat there in silence for several minutes, both of them terribly aware of each other. "Why did you choose this place to bring me?" Sigyn finally asked as she studied the way the light made several clusters of rubies and sapphires sparkle from where they were wedged into the pale golden stone that made up the cave's walls.

Loki bit his lip as he thought on his answer. "Because I wanted you to see it," he finally decided. He knew that Sigyn would appreciate it and, if he were honest, he had wanted to impress her.

Sigyn hummed in thought as her eyes swept the cave one last time. From the far wall that was mostly shadowed but still caught enough light bouncing off the crystals above to make the gems sparkle like brilliant multicolored stars. To the silver fall of water that was sending a fine cold mist over the cliff face and obscuring it. To the fantastic view of nebulae and distant stars that generally couldn't be seen due to Asgard's atmosphere. To the side of the cave that caught the light of the sun and shone like a work of pure art with its mix of colors and textures. Then she looked at Loki. "I love it," she told him before leaning over and pressing her lips to his.

Loki thought that his heart might explode but couldn't even think of pulling back. Instead, he closed his eyes and savored the feeling of her soft lips against his and her slender form cradled in his lap. The kiss remained chaste but lasted for several long minutes before Sigyn pulled back. Both of them were blushing and quiet. At least until Loki took the initiative and closed the small gap again to kiss her again.

Chapter End Notes

Sigyn as an Osprey- I wanted Loki to have an unusual nickname for Sigyn that both fit with her and didn't seem unbearably mushy and also fit with the sort of bird theme of Loki being a Magpie. So I picked an Osprey. Osprey, like Magpie, mate for life. Osprey are also fish hunting birds which I thought fit with the close association I've been building of Sigyn with water. Also also, Osprey females have a special defensive posture when defending the nest and will chase others off (the males will too but they don't have that special nest protecting posture). I also considered cranes as the bird to represent Sigyn as they appear more traditionally feminine and are surprisingly aggressive themselves, but Osprey won out over them due to the mating for life factor. Sigyn's main characteristic in myth was her loyalty to Loki, after all.

Flying- The art of insulting someone with poetry in a sort of verbal sparring. Loki has always been portrayed as particularly skilled with it and that was the focus of the poem Lokasenna that was all about our favorite trouble maker. I personally am terrible at poetry and so you won't get any examples of it here from me but be aware he does still do it in this story.

Loki's Eyes- This is my own little headcannon again about the Guise. I thought to myself, why would Odin pick green eyes for Loki when blue was far more likely given Odin and Frigga's coloration? Hodr already had black hair so that wasn't as odd but nobody else in the family had green. I decided he didn't have anything to do with how the guise actually looked and so couldn't have changed Loki's eyes to blue if he'd wanted to. That was Loki's magic shining through rather than the guise. (The black hair also wasn't picked by Odin if you were wondering as that is the color that Loki's
hair is without the guise too, as proven by when Loki is holding the Casket of Ancient Winters in Thor 1).

**Loki's Eyes as Emeralds** - Emeralds, despite being toted as the green gemstone, actually isn't all that green when you look at it. Well, not the super dark green that a lot of people think about when they say emerald. If you look up real emeralds they'll probably be either blue-er or yellow-er than you are imagining. Some are, of course (the extremely high quality once in a lifetime finds), but most aren't. Emerald itself is just a special color range of green of the stone Beryl. In fact, most fake Emeralds look more like what people expect an emerald to look like than real ones. (possibly because fake emeralds are a lot more common to see than real ones) Sort of the same thing for rubies actually. Some are that stereotypical red but most are a lot more pink or purple than you'd expect. The world of gemstones everybody!

**Loki and Sigyn in a cave** - Loki and Sigyn have been in caves before but for much less cute, romantic reasons. Sigyn was there to keep venom from dripping into Loki's eyes during his binding. And I thought I should let them have a much nicer reason to be in a cave in this story.
The Changes in Asgard

Chapter Summary

Thor and Loki take a closer look at how Asgard has changed since they've been gone.

Chapter Notes

This is a super long chapter! I'm going to try and aim for chapters this length from here on out. We'll see how well I do. Also, I'm working on a map of Asgard in this story and I'll embed it in the story when its done.

It was shocking, Thor thought, that there had been so many changes to Asgard so quickly. According to Sif, they had received a surprising number of trainees from the other realms. Mostly Vanir but some Alfr and even a dwarf from Nidavellir - the underground kingdom of Svartalfheim that so few ever were allowed entrance to. Thor assumed that all of the children that had been granted permission to come to Asgard to train were of some political importance through their parents. Probably his Father was seeking to strengthen the bonds with the other realms. Thor realized, upon looking back, that in his first life Odin had been trying the same thing, although notably on a far more minor scale. Only a few Vanir had ever trained with the Asgardian army - Hogun being the most notable- and just because they lived in Asgard all the time and such had dual citizenship. Asgard certainly hadn't agreed to train so many youngsters from other realms that they required an additional barracks and training grounds before.

The new trainee quarters weren't terribly large - only having enough room for about two dozen youths to bunk- and had their own training grounds right outside that bordered the pastures for the Asgardian war horses. Since the trainees usually had chores within the army stables, it was actually fairly convenient for them.

Thor realized that sometime between wandering through the market and when Sif paused to explain the new training barracks that his brother and Sigyn had disappeared. Part of him wanted to comment on their disappearance, but he resisted the urge if only because he didn't want the others to realize Loki and Sigyn were missing and decide to go looking for them. Thor doubted that they'd wandered somewhere easy to stumble across or that either of the two of them would appreciate it if somehow they did manage to be found.

Aside from additional barracks and training grounds, Sif also took Thor back into the city to show him a few new shops that had popped up within the two years they had been gone. A new butcher's shop that specialized in exotic meats caught Thor's eye, and he had to wonder which of his parents had created an incentive for such a business. Thor was sure that a certain venomous blue lizard was the primary reason any shop would have seal meat as -to Thor's knowledge- there had never been a particular desire for such things among the Asgardian population.

Thor decided to go ahead and introduce himself to the newest butcher in town since he had a
feeling Loki would drag him there at some point. Thor was very startled by the owner of the shop as it was a man that towered over all of them and had grey skin like some Svartalfhr only in a somewhat lighter complexion than Thor had seen before. It reminded him very much of Gerd's skin albeit with less of a blue undertone and without dynasty lines. His head was shaved completely bare, and every inch of the man was covered in slab-like muscles. Thor couldn't help but wonder if this man was like Gerd and half Jotnar or perhaps half Fjallverr. That would account both for his size and his skin -since Thor couldn't help but think the odds of any full-blooded descendant of Ymir willingly living in Asgard was slim. They wouldn't be terribly comfortable in the Golden Realm, Thor didn't think. Plus, though the butcher -Sigmund- was large he wasn't the towering twenty feet of a true Giant.

Though Sigmund was intimidating, he was polite and seemed almost soft-spoken, although that was hard to judge due to how his voice rumbled like a distant rockslide no matter what. Thor didn't linger in the shop too long, but he did poke around to see just what sort of stock the man had. Aside from seal meat, the shop was filled with various kinds of dangerous beasts from sharks to bilgesnipes to even some sea serpent delicacies -eyes in this case. Thor didn't have any idea who would want to eat sea serpent eyes, but he did find it impressive anyone would go hunting such game. Or, perhaps, whoever had slain the beast hadn't been able to come up with any other use for its eyes.

Sigmund's butcher shop was really the most interesting of the new stores in Asgard as the others included a weaver and a potter. Still, as they wandered Sif made sure to point them out to Thor. The young Thunderer was slightly surprised nobody had seemed to notice Loki and Sigyn missing even after nearly an hour. Then again, perhaps, like Thor, they had just opted to not mention the two lover's vanishing act. Surely, Thor couldn't be the only one to have noticed them making moon eyes at each other the whole time.

With the newest shops explored to the limit of Thor's interest -which was not particularly high- the group of youths wandered off. There wasn't much else to see that had been added to his home, or so Thor initially thought. As they were walking somewhat aimlessly and chattering about all that had happened since they'd last seen each other, Thor noticed an unfamiliar group of people going into Jarnsvindr. "What's going on there?" he asked with a nod of his head.

"Oh, those are the mercenaries," Dagr offered. "Your parents are apparently very annoyed that they're out there, but the craftsmen that they hired to build the barrier insisted on having protection at their work sites."

Thor frowned. "Why? We would protect those that we commissioned..." It wasn't as if Asgard was lacking in the size of its army.

"It was part of their arrangement they would not budge on," Fandral said with a shrug.

"Queen Frigga insisted they stay camped outside of the city, though," Hogun added. "So they have an encampment within Jarnsvindr somewhere."

"It isn't that far in," Sif said. "And supposedly this way they're closer to the sites where the craftsmen are working, and the mercenaries are meant to be protecting, so they are content with that."

"Father said there was an uproar over the contract negotiations," Dagr told Thor as they watched the last few figures disappear under the trees. "It took months, and all of the council was arguing about if they even needed to hire any craftsmen."

"We could have made the barrier ourselves," Astrild said. "My father even presented a plan to do
it... it just would have taken decades longer than these craftsmen promised. Father was quite annoyed about that. He says it's impossible how fast everything's come together but you can't deny results. But Father did get the consolation prize of being commissioned by Queen Frigga to construct that massive pen. Well, the door for it."

Thor looked over at Astrild in surprise. "You didn't mention that earlier."

Astrild shrugged. "It's not really that special. He's done things like that before. He made the centerpiece for Idunn's front courtyard too. He was quite proud of that one."

"Oh, yes, that fountain right?" Fandral asked. Astrild nodded. Astrild's Father was far from the most famous craftsman in Asgard, but he had apprenticed under a few Dwarven journeymen for decades in his youth in Vanaheim and had developed quite the skill in making intricate mechanical features. Thor should have realized that the door on Ofnir's pen had been one of the man's creations.

"Just the difference between all the anchor points for the barrier should be taking them ages to transport materials to," Astrild mused. "And yet they've all but completed it in nearly a year. Father was livid."

Thor hummed and thought about that for just a moment. "Your father works alone it would naturally take him longer," he finally said.

"I suppose. Honestly, I think Father was angrier that the one in charge of the operation wouldn't give him the time of day," Astrild said as they started heading back into the city. "He had questions and bits of advice he was willing to give about working in Asgard's wilds, but they wouldn't even meet with him."

"Oh, we heard about that," Dagr commented. Sif nodded in agreement. "Father said that yours and the chief spokesman of the group had a huge row about it. Odin had to step in to get them to stop."

Thor was almost sad to have missed seeing that. Astrild's father was generally easy to get along with and even-tempered. To see him so mad, he was actually having a public argument must have been something else. "Huh, well, I guess that these craftsmen won't be joining any guild then," Thor said. Astrild's father held sway in several guilds in the market including the Stone Carvers and Construct Builders.

Astrild shook his head. "Father would never allow it after that."

"Shot themselves in the foot on that one," Hogun commented. Everyone in the nine realms knew that one of the biggest boons was to be accepted into an Asgardian commerce guild whether that be the merchant's or any of the various crafts. It simply provided too many opportunities and opened many more trade routes. Thor figured these newcomers would very much regret angering a key member of one of the larger Asgardian guilds.

"Their loss," Dagr said casually. "Oh! They refurbished the public bathhouse, Thor. You know the one that we said looked the color of vomit?" The adolescents made their way towards the bathhouse in question to continue showing Thor all the things that had changed. There were still plenty of minor things they hadn't even touched on yet.

After the conclusion of Sif's impromptu tour, Thor realized that dinner was fast approaching and headed back to the palace. Certainly, his brother had returned at some point during the afternoon and just hadn't rejoined them.
Thor was really very surprised when, as he was coming out of his room freshly washed and changed, did he see Loki coming back still dressed in the clothes they'd worn out to the city but with a few added dirt stains and his hair a bit rumpled compared to when he'd left. "Are you just getting back?" he couldn't help but ask.


"You are!"

"Shut up, Thor!" Loki spat acerbically before rushing into his room and slamming the door closed.

Thor laughed. He had decided earlier to not tease Loki over his blossoming romance but if he was going to act like that Thor simply couldn't resist. Thor went to Loki's door and knocked. "Brother? Brother, don't be embarrassed!"

"I am not embarrassed!" Loki snapped as Thor heard the slamming of several drawers and Loki stomping around far louder than he normally would have.

"No? Well, that's good because it is adorable," Thor said loud enough to be easily heard.

There was a paused and then the door was wrenched open from the other side. "I am not adorable!" Loki hissed. "Say that again, and I'll turn you into a toad!"

"Well, that's not very creative," Thor commented with an unrepentant grin.

Loki narrowed his eyes at Thor. "Then I'll come up with something even more unpleasant to turn you into. How about a worm?" he asked before disappearing back into his room.

"I think Mother would be the most upset with that," Thor replied as he leaned his shoulder against Loki's door frame. "So how did your date go?" he asked.

"It wasn't a date!" came the immediate shout.

Thor's grin only widened. "Oh no? Then why does it look like you were rolling around in the dirt with someone?"

"It does not look that way!" Loki snapped.

"It does," Thor insisted. "Where did you take her anyway?"

"That's none of your business!" Loki's voice echoed as if he were shouting from within the bathroom.

Thor was reasonably sure that none of Loki's spells could actually affect him from that distance, and so he was safe from immediate retribution. Of course, that tended to mean more prolonged consequences later on. But that was a problem for later. Right now, he simply couldn't resist the urge to tease his brother further. "You had best not let Mother hear about this little excursion. She'll decide that you need a talking to about safe courting practices," Thor said, knowing from his first life how terribly awkward that talk was.

"Thor!"

Thor didn't bother trying to stifle his laughter, knowing that Loki would realize he was laughing even if he didn't hear it. Suddenly, Thor went flying across the hallway and slammed hard against
the other wall. He managed to get his hands up to protect his face from becoming entirely crushed, but his forehead slammed into the stone particularly hard. After hitting the wall, he fell down to the ground flat on his back. Thor groaned in pain and rubbed the spot with his hand. No doubt that would leave a knot later but he knew he'd probably deserved it.

After a moment, Thor heard the door to Loki's room open. He quickly spun around to face his brother. Loki was standing there red-faced but in clean clothes more appropriate for dinner. Instantly, Thor recoiled and found himself with his back to the wall he'd just introduced to his forehead. Loki's hands were clenched into fists and Thor could almost see his death approaching. Thor quickly held up his hands defensively, "Now, Brother, it was all in good fun..."

"Oh really?" Loki asked in a dangerous sounding tone. "Well, how's this for 'good fun'?" Green light curled around Loki's hands and Thor couldn't help but yelp and scramble to his feet. The entire hallway seemed to glow venomous green as Thor darted towards the dining hall. "Get back here, Thor!"

"Not a chance!" Thor yelled back before taking a corner so sharply that he skidded slightly and nearly stumbled. A few guards posted in the hall looked utterly bewildered, but Thor didn't pay them any attention. He was far too busy running for his life to care what they thought.

A bolt of green light rustled his hair and Thor swerved a bit too hard on instinct. His boot slid on the polished floor, and with a cry of surprise and a bit of frustration, Thor tumbled into a suit of armor. The bits and pieces of ancient heavy plated metal would no doubt leave bruises all over where they crashed against the young Prince. This particular style of shielding was never used anymore due to how heavy and inflexible it was, and so being buried in it was very uncomfortable. Thor had barely started pushing bits and pieces off of himself when the whole mass of him and the armor was wrapped in tendrils of green and gold. Thor cursed and tried to struggle out of the pile. Unfortunately, he couldn't manage to do so before all the pieces of golden plates floated up and reformed around him like a giant puzzle. He shouted for Loki to stop even as the loud clanks of the metal pieces slotting into place echoed through the hall. Finally, the metal helm, which was - unusually for Asgard- a full face mask, slammed over top of his own head and narrowed his vision to two narrow slits. "Loki!"

Loki's face appeared in Thor's vision with a perfectly pleasant smile. "Yes, Brother?"

"Let me out!" Thor demanded as he struggled and failed to move his arms and legs. He should have been able to knock the armor apart again without any trouble, but it was like trying to move a mountain with his pinky. The armor didn't so much as shift as he struggled more and more fervently. "Loki! What did you do?"

"Why nothing, Brother," Loki said innocently. "I simply cleaned up your mess is all."

Thor scowled even though Loki couldn't see it and then noticed that he still saw green magic seeping through the seams of the armor. "Loki! Stop that! Let me out!"

"I would, Thor, truly," Loki lied. "But I'd be late for dinner." And with that Loki walked off leaving Thor trapped in the statue-like encasement of metal.

Thor growled in frustration and struggled some more. Perhaps given some distance, he'd be able to overpower whatever spell Loki had used. Range was a crucial factor in how strong spells were, he knew. The metal still didn't shift, and Thor let his head fall back against the inside of the helmet. Being stuck inside the armor was already quite uncomfortable. Thor couldn't move much because it was designed for someone of a slighter build than he was. Someone more of Loki's proportions
would be more comfortable. Not helping matters at all was that Thor wasn't tall enough to actually stand in the plate mail. Instead, he was forced to hang there uncomfortably as the armor pinched and dug into him.

After a moment or two, another face came into Thor's minimal view. Judging by the edges of a golden helm on the man's face, Thor assumed this was the guard that he'd run past earlier. "Are you alright, my Prince?" the guard asked.

"Uncomfortable... but unharmed," Thor answered as he tried to tug his arm again.

"I will attempt to get you free," the guard said. Thor was only able to see part of what he was doing but judging from where his arms were, he assumed the guard had grabbed the front of the breastplate. The man began tugging at the armor, quickly beginning to grunt with the effort of trying to rip it off.

Thor tried squirming at the same time, but despite how hard they worked, they couldn't make the armor so much as budge. At one point the golden clad Einherjar even put his foot to the plate to try and pry a part off so that Thor could get out. Thor was beginning to think that he'd be stuck in the armor all night and miss breakfast when he heard heels on the stone floor. The guard clearly heard them as well as he quickly straightened and put his closed fist over his heart. "Majesty."

"I take it my son is in there?" Frigga asked, sounding far too amused for Thor's liking.

"Mother! Loki has spelled it shut!" Thor called.

The Einherjar stepped back and then Frigga was in front of Thor's makeshift prison. "Yes, he mentioned," Frigga said. "You really should not tease your brother so, Thor."

"I couldn't help it," Thor replied instantly. "He made it too easy."

"I'm sure he'll say the same thing when you find a girl you wish to sneak away with," Frigga replied. "But, seeing how you're late to the feast and I'm sure you're getting quite hungry-" Thor nodded inside the helmet even though she couldn't see it "-let me see what I can do."

"You're quite welcome," Frigga said before reaching out to fix some of Thor's disheveled hair. "Now, let's go to the feast. I'm sure you're quite hungry and your brother Baldr will be going back home come the morning."

"Yes, mother," Thor agreed and even permitted her another few moments of trying to fix his hair before ducking away.

When they arrived at the party, the meal was already in full swing with the long tables full of food and many trays of drinks being passed back and forth. A steady stream of new dishes was being
brought out of the kitchens, and a massive boar that was close to the size of the Midgardian Savannah creature called a hippo was roasting on a spit in the center of the room. Andhrimmir seemed to be in charge of the roasting as he usually was and was pouring some glaze -that appeared to have an alcoholic component to it if Thor's nose was to be believed- all over the beast's crispy and nearly red skin. Thor didn't hesitate to knock his shoulder into Loki's as he sat down in his seat. "That was not fair, Brother," he accused.

Loki hummed and popped a mushroom stuffed to overflowing with sausage and cheese into his mouth. Thor cast his brother a glare but then his stomach rumbled at all of the delicious smells, and he quickly gave up on the futile effort of trying to make a clearly unrepentant Loki respond. Thor powered through several helpings of all the dishes in front of him before the boar was even cut up and served and still took several thick slices of juicy meat when it was brought by. Loki too was more consumed with eating then chatting although he finished first. Geri and Freki were begging by Loki's feet again, and the Trickster blatantly ignored their mother's scolding to feed the wolves tables scraps.

Food continued to come and go along with tankards full of ales, beers, mead, a few wines, and some juices for the children still considered too young to drink straight alcohol. Of course, very few children that young were still up and at the feast after several hours. Thor had been drinking beer for several decades now as there was no 'drinking age' in Asgard as there was in Midgard. It was simply left to the discretion of the parents when to allow their children to begin tasting and then drinking. Thor had always thought that made much more sense than just giving an arbitrary number where it became 'okay' for someone to imbibe alcohol. He'd never understood it no matter how many times his mortal friends had tried to explain.

Music was playing raucously, but people weren't yet up and dancing when someone very unusual approached the royal table. Thor instantly noticed him because he was a bit shorter than a typical Asgardian with coppery tanned skin and long black hair pulled back from his face with two braids that were wrapped up with strips of leather. A band of blue paint across his eyes only made his black eyes -which were underlined with a thick band of black- seem even darker. His nose seemed just a shade too large but not so much as to make him unattractive. He was wearing a tattered black coat over a breastplate made of a bone white material Thor couldn't place and decorated with little blue carvings. He didn't wear shoes, which was also extremely odd, but he didn't seem to have any concern about possibly stepping on broken crockery or embers from the open fire the boar had roasted on. It was only when he gave a barely respectful half bow to Odin that Thor noticed the multitude of black feathers wove into his hair and decorating the shoulders of his jacket. "Odin. Apologies for the intrusion, I didn't realize you were having a party," the visitor said in a slightly deeper voice than Thor had been expecting.

"You knew full well what you were walking into, Chulyen," Odin replied immediately. "I'm more interested in why you're here. You don't particularly like coming to Asgard."

Chulyen lifted his chin just slightly. "I need Huginn and Muninn," he answered with the faintest of nods towards the two ravens perched on either side of Odin's throne. The two birds in question let out a few caws before flying off the chair to land on the ground in front of Chulyen. Pitch black shadows swept across the whole room like a wing that blocked out the moon for just moment.

When the shadow disappeared again, the two ravens were no longer there and instead two boys that looked about sixteen or seventeen Midgardian years old were kneeling there. Their black hair was mostly short save a single thick lock that was bound on one side of their young faces with leather and several black feathers tucked inside. They were wearing leather vests dyed blue and decorated with feathers along the back, black pants, and no shoes. Crouched down as they were, the two of them seemed like mirror images of each other. "King Chulyen," they murmured. Thor
couldn't quite help but glance at Loki to judge his brother's reaction. Loki seemed curious as he watched the scene playing out in front of them. Though Thor had heard rumors about Huginn and Muninn having more magic than was let on he'd never before seen them take a humanoid form. Then again, this didn't seem like magic that Odin would have bestowed, perhaps it came from this Chulyen.

"Might I ask why you need Huginn and Muninn?" Odin asked as he leaned forward to rest his elbow on the table.

Chulyen shrugged causing the feathers on his shoulders to rustle like wings. "Something is happening. Something I cannot yet place but strikes me as dangerous for all of us. I am calling back all of mine so that I can better discover what it is that tugs at my mind," he said. "And, if you'll remember, I'm well within my right to do so without giving you any such explanation."

Huginn and Muninn glanced at each other with matching amber eyes before looking back at Odin. Thor found them far too eerily similar. He'd never been able to tell them apart, but he'd always thought that was just because they were both Ravens, and Ravens have no real markings to tell one from another. At least, not any that Thor could discern. Odin sighed and waved his hand. "Very well, but I hope very much that you will not have them for long."

"I cannot imagine it would take more than a few weeks with all mine searching for what is off in the realms," Chulyen replied. "We are quite good at what we do, after all."

"I am very much aware," Odin said. His one eye settled on Huginn and Muninn where they were still kneeling. "Do be careful, I would hate for something to happen to either of you."

The twins inclined their heads slightly before disappearing in a flurry of shadow and dark feathers. When the veritable whirlwind died away, they were nothing but large Ravens again, sitting on either shoulder of Chulyen much like they had on Odin's throne. "As I said, it should not take long and then I will return them to your service," Chulyen said. "Enjoy your feast, Odin King." Chulyen didn't wait for Odin to say anything else and only turned on his bare heel to leave the room with Huginn and Muninn perched on his shoulders.

"Who was that?" Thor asked. He was somewhat surprised that so few other Asgardians seemed to have noticed what just happened and he couldn't help but wonder if perhaps some magic had been involved. Thor didn't know of many people that could have walked right up to the Royal Family's Table and just left again with Odin's Ravens on his shoulders. At the very least it should have gotten some murmuring. Not to mention the Einherjar didn't tend to let strangers just walk up to Odin like that.

"I think that was Raven," Loki murmured back. "Apparently, all the Ravens owe allegiance to him first even if they are the familiars of others. Rumor has it that they first came from the Forest of a Thousand Sorrows, but if they did, they left it so long ago, that nobody can prove it anymore."

Thor frowned as he pondered that. He wasn't very familiar with the more distant realms and dimensions, but if he remembered correctly, there was some nebulous link between the fae people of that forest and the Alfr. Thor also hadn't realized that Huginn and Muninn owed any allegiance to anyone but his father at all. He wasn't entirely sure what to make of that revelation. It certainly threw a new light on all of Thor's past interactions with the birds. Or boys. Whatever they actually were. "Do you think that was serious, Father?" he asked, leaning further over his plate so that he could see Odin better.

Odin picked up his goblet and stared down into the mead for a moment, obviously thinking. Thor waited as patiently as he could for his Father's answer. Odin drained his goblet with one long drink.
and then set it down again. "Chulyen is not foolish and possesses a minor ability of foresight. If something is bothering him then it is prudent to allow him to investigate it," he finally said. "Whether or not he truly needed Huginn and Muninn to assist him with it or if he was simply overly cautious, I cannot say. He has never been fond of allowing any of his flock to stray so far from him. But since he so rarely recalls them, trying to resist would only cause problems," Odin finally said. "As your Brother said, Huginn and Muninn owe allegiance to Chulyen first, which he delights in reminding me. I will not offend two of my most valued assets simply because Chulyen might not actually need them. But enough of this. Whatever is bothering the Raven is most likely a danger to his own people and not to Asgard. And we are meant to be having a feast not pondering politics."

Thor wasn't surprised at the topic change. If anything he was impressed that his father had shared as much as he had. Thor realized that asking anything else about what just happened wasn't likely to do anything more than annoy his father, so he turned his attention back to the feast. Odin was right, after all, very little that was a worry to other realms and kingdoms was something that could ever be a threat to Asgard.

The feasting in the hall slowly gave way to general revelry. There was a wide array of people at the feast that Thor had never met before. Quite a few Alfr and some Dwarves and some others that Thor assumed were from Vanaheim. "Who are all these people?" Thor finally asked Tyr after he spotted yet another man he'd never seen before in his life.

"Builders mostly," Tyr answered as he grabbed a fresh tankard from a serving woman that walked past. Only some of them are making a showing tonight but since there's still a week or so before the barrier is completed most are probably resting or working.

Thor nodded and made his way over to where Loki was standing by one balcony looking bored out of his mind. "Thinking of causing havoc, Brother?" Thor guessed as he leaned against the wall beside Loki.

"Always," Loki replied easily. Freki trotted over to them and panted up at Loki pleadingly. "Because we either need to do that or slip out. I'm deathly bored. None of these craftsmen seem in the least interesting. Most don't even seem to do much at all but haul things back and forth to the quarry. I was hoping at least one of them could shed some light on what this barrier involves but all seem to be hopelessly uninformed about it."

"We could go see it ourselves," Thor said impulsively.

Loki's eyes sparkled. "Why, Thor, what a terribly wonderful suggestion," he said. "Although we really must be careful. I doubt Mother and Father have yet lifted their ban about leaving the grounds."

Thor thought about that for a moment before shrugging. "I'm sure we could handle anything out there."

Loki hummed at that. "Well, we'll take Ofnir just to be safe. He could use the exercise anyway."

"We won't be able to sneak a wyvern out of his pen," Thor protested.

"Who said anything about sneaking him out?" Loki replied. "It's called 'a walk,' dear brother. And it's what you do with pets," he said as he started for the nearest set of doors. Freki followed for a few steps but then wandered off to go and beg food from someone else instead. Both him and Geri looked to be focusing on some Alfr lady who looked very caught off guard by two sets of big puppy eyes.
"Not all pets can be walked," Thor argued. "Or should be walked."

Loki waved that concern away as if it were nothing. "Come now, what's the worst that could happen? Ofnir eats some farmer's cow."

"I somehow don't believe that's the worst that could happen," Thor said although he followed along anyway. There weren't many their age at the feast, and they weren't yet expected to make friends with the various delegates and politicians that always attended.

The brothers made their way out to the wyvern's pen without incident, and when they entered, Ofnir was scratching long furrows in the tree he'd been provided. The wyvern stopped as soon as he spotted them and let out a low rumbling noise that sounded ominous, but Thor knew was actually friendly. "Hello, Ofnir," Loki greeted as the lizard unhooked his claws from the lumber and then crossed the enclosure. The spines on Ofnir's tail scraped along the stones of the pen as he walked in his distinctive swaying gait. "Do you want to go out for a bit?"

Ofnir let out another noise and pushed his snout against Loki's chest. Loki smiled widely and rubbed the wyvern along one eye ridge. Ofnir closed his eyes and tilted his head further into Loki's hand. "There's a good boy," Loki cooed as he scratched above Ofnir's eye a little more vigorously. "Let's go for a walk. Hmm?"

Ofnir followed behind Loki and Thor without hesitation. The giant reptile had grown quite used to such walks over their time in Vanaheim and knew that he needed to stay close. Loki had spent months training him to do so with bits of his favorite foods. Thor let his brother pick out where they were going since Ofnir would follow the sorcerer before he followed Thor. Loki made sure to pick the widest paths through the gardens so that the wyvern following behind them didn't tear into the planters or knock anything over as he walked. Ofnir was not the most graceful of creatures on the ground.

As they walked through the gardens, Thor told Loki what he'd missed while he was -not- on his date with Sigyn. Loki hummed and commented on occasion but let Thor do the talking for a good while until they reached the Northern most edge of the royal gardens. Beyond were a few scattered houses before a brief scattering of trees that were cloistered in groups intermixed between rolling foothills that transformed into untamed mountains. Further to the west the trees eventually became a real forest which was separated from the Jarnsvidr only by a river. "Where do you think this barrier is?" Thor asked as Loki climbed over the fence.

"Somewhere in the mountains, I would think," Loki said. "According to accounts from some of the scouts sent out by Bor, there are a large number of gaps and passages through Yggdrasil in mountain caves and crevices. If they want to block them all, it would be best to just put the barrier between us and where those passages are most numerous."

"I wonder why so many paths through Yggdrasil are held in the mountains," Thor mused as he jumped down from the top of the fence to land beside Loki.

Loki shrugged a little and glanced back to see Ofnir using the height off the top of the wall to try flying again. He flapped his wings frantically and tried to adjust his position as he fell, but Ofnir just went straight to the ground with a massive thud to land as a disgruntled pile. He hissed at nothing even as he righted himself and then shook his enormous body, raising his quills off his back and tail before they settled again. "It wasn't nearly tall enough for that, Ofnir," Loki said as the lizard sulkily rejoined them. "And as to the portals to the other realms, there have been dozens of theories as to why they show up where they do but none seem to fit with what we know entirely perfectly and chances are we'll never know. Some mysteries of Yggdrasil are just beyond even us."
"How unsatisfying," Thor commented.

"Oh, it is," Loki agreed fervently.

Loki made a large circle around any houses as they made their way into the foothills. The smatterings of wooded areas here were much less dangerous than Jarnsvíðr, and the hills served as decent pasture land for the hearty Asgardian breed of cows and large horses. Families here didn't hesitate to let their children play in these woods and wander off for entire uninterrupted days. Loki allowed Ofnir to walk a bit further apart than he had before as they got some distance from the houses where it was doubtful that they would run into any people.

The brothers had no real idea where the barrier would be constructed but found wandering around the wilds somewhat aimlessly far more entertaining than staying at the feast. Ofnir was amusing himself by leaving huge furrows in various trees that they passed and occasionally terrifying several animals by chasing them a few feet despite not seemingly interested in catching and eating them. The moon was bright in the sky, and the air was still chilly since spring hadn't entirely chased winter away yet. Neither brother minded the cold even though they hadn't brought anything even close to cloaks. The various stars and cosmological formations hung above them like a child's mobile and large enough Thor almost could swear they should be right within reach opposed to hundreds of thousands of light-years away. Thor paused on top of a hill and studied the star formations for several minutes. At first, Loki didn't notice Thor had stopped, but when he did, he too looked up. "What is it?" Loki asked curiously. The sky, as beautiful as it was, didn't look any different to the youngest son of Odin.

"I've missed this view," Thor said. "It's not the same stars as in Vanaheim." Not only that but it was almost the polar opposite of Midgard. Not only were the stars different but Midgard's atmosphere and light pollution blocked most of the more magnificent sights. Thor found the ice caps of Midgard quite remarkable for how much clearer the skies seemed to be there. He'd even found himself going there to think more than once in his previous life -an easy feat when he had Mjölnir to carry him.

Loki hummed at that, and his eyes roamed the sky. "I suppose that's true," he mused. "But Vanaheim's skies have their own charm... more nebulae not as many galaxies. Ah, there is the Hang Tree," Loki said, his eyes picking out the familiar constellation among the sea of stars. Thor's eyes darted back and forth across the sky for a moment until he spotted the familiar crooked line that forked into three branches near the end and had a single star cradled in the curve that represented the noose. Loki and Thor stared up at the sky for another few moments before Ofnir let out a low growl and jumped off the top of the hill, drawing their attention away. "Ofnir, what are you doing?"

A small goat bleated and ran as fast as its stubby legs could manage back towards the nearest house. Ofnir chased it a few feet before stopping to just watch, his tail swiping along the ground and leaving deep gashes in the hill. "I suppose at least he didn't eat it," Thor muttered.

"He's just entertaining himself," Loki said without bothering to conceal his amusement. Thor rolled his eyes but started walking again. Loki chuckled and followed with Ofnir prancing around them as if he were some tiny thing rather than a pachyderm-sized flying lizard. Ofnir's gallivanting caused little tremors in the ground, scaring critters out of their underground homes and just generally being a nuisance. Thor thought it very typical of Loki's spoiled dangerous pet.

They wandered through the foothills of the mountains in a wavering but generally westward direction until they eventually reached a road that most definitely hadn't been there before. The path was made of packed dirt and perhaps twenty feet wide and ran from the mountains down to
disappear into the woods off in the distance. "Well, that wasn't there before," Thor commented.

"It must have been made by the builders," Loki mused before starting to follow it.

"It is getting late, Loki," Thor said. "We might want to start heading back before Mother and Father worry."

Loki kept walking. "I don't imagine this road goes much further. We'll see where it ends and then head back," he replied. "I'm rather curious why they need such a huge road."

"I would assume it's because there's a lot of them," Thor said as he jogged a few steps to catch up with Loki.

"One shouldn't assume, Thor," Loki said. Thor rolled his eyes but recognized when it was pointless to try and talk his brother out of something. At the very least the road was large enough that Ofnir was able to follow them easily even when they made their way into the woods. "I imagine they're quarrying rocks from deep in the mountains. We don't use the mountains much anymore."

"That would make sense," Thor agreed. Asgard still had a few gold and precious gem mines in the mountains, but most of the biggest veins of such things had been tapped already. Asgard was, for all it's might, somewhat limited when it came to natural resources. Which was why King Bor had taken to conquering other realms in the first place, Thor supposed. Strong warriors were their most abundant natural resource and replenished, unlike their gold and treasures.

The road through the forest went for much longer than Thor and Loki had guessed it would. The wood was growing darker and wilder the further they walked, and as they crossed a large bridge over a river, Thor realized they must have entered Jarnsvidr proper. "Jarnsvidr is more dangerous at night, and neither of us is armed," he pointed out.

"We have Ofnir, which is like being armed," Loki said.

"Maybe for you, but he doesn't even like me that much."

"He likes you," Loki argued.

Thor gave his brother an exasperated look. "He's tried to eat me before, Loki."

"Only when you're annoying. Really, it is an understandable impulse," Loki replied simply. Thor shoved Loki, who only laughed unrepentantly.

The two Princes continued walking, not terribly worried about coming across anything dangerous or even all that concerned about if their parents were missing them or not. Wandering off and finding trouble was a favorite pastime of both of them, after all. Thor estimated they had followed the road for another half mile before it split. Loki picked the one leading more towards the East and thus, in theory at least, back towards the Palace. The road they were on wasn't straight nor as wide as the main road and even split off again after perhaps three-fourths of a mile further.

The night was getting very late by this point, and even Loki seemed to agree that whatever was on this road wasn't worth the time it was taking to reach it. Still, they were deep enough into Jarnsvidr that just walking off the path and cutting across in the shortest line possible back to civilization would be foolish. "Do you think they have a road that leads back to the city?" Loki mused. "I would think they would."

"I did see them earlier going into the woods from a distance, I didn't notice if they were on a path or not, however," Thor said.
"So, our choices are... go all the way back around or continue on and just hope that we're on the road that goes to town. If any go to town at all," Loki surmised. "Neither of those options sound very pleasant if I'm honest."

The two boys thought about that for a few minutes as Ofnir splashed in a nearby creek before settling in to drink from it. "Well, what all is in the woods anyway?" Thor finally asked. "Wolves, bears, the occasional troll or goblin. Nothing we can't handle. And this path is still heading closer to home. Maybe it'll get us close enough that we'll figure out where we are and can find our way back from there."

Loki considered that before sighing and nodding. "Very well, shortest distance it is. And if mother or father ask we most definitely took the long way back because it was safer and that is what took us so long to get back." Thor instantly agreed to the story since he didn't particularly feel like being punished for this excursion either.

The boys only had to hike along for another ten or so minutes when they actually discovered some civilization, albeit not the sort they were expecting. Instead of reaching the edge of Jarnsvidr and seeing farms in the distance, they came across a sudden clearing. A bunch of temporary houses had been set up in the clearing around a central firepit. Several horses were penned in off to the side under a few trees that had been left standing, and the creek that Ofnir had played in earlier seemed to have returned and was flowing past. The entire little settlement seemed quiet this late at night, but one man was acting as a lookout who got up when he noticed them. He looked like a laborer with rough spun and practical clothing, and a heavily muscled frame under suntanned skin. The guard was kind enough to tell them they'd actually stumbled across the camp for those working on the barrier and the mercenaries that protected them from beasts and bandits. Then he pointed them across the clearing to where the road they were on continued and told them that if they followed that road, they'd reach the city.

The Princes thanked him and wasted no time in continuing on -after Loki made sure that Ofnir didn't cause any havoc to the men sleeping in the camp. The road beyond the clearing was still wide enough for the wyvern to travel along without trouble although it had definitely narrowed again. Thor paused about three hundred yards down the path from the camp when he noticed another building tucked back behind several trees. This one was larger and much more beautiful than the others they'd just passed by. There was even what looked to be a small stable behind the house. "Must be whoever's in charge," Loki commented when he saw what had caught his brother's attention.

Thor made a face. "Looks like he's planning on being there a while," he observed. For some reason that really bothered him. Probably because this man had apparently not trusted the Asgardians to be able to protect his men while they worked, which was incredibly insulting.

"Part of his payment perhaps?" Loki suggested. "A bit of land to call his own? Not the best spot for it, though. What fool actually wants to live in Jarnsvidr?" Thor shrugged since he didn't have an answer for that and they continued on.

After longer than either boy wanted, they finally managed to get out of Jarnsvidr again and made a straight line back to the palace. No doubt they'd been missed by now. "Can you sneak us back into the palace?" Thor asked as they made their way through the silent streets of Asgard.

"Yes. Of course, I can," Loki replied, sounding affronted by the question. "We'll just have to be careful about it."

Thor nodded and allowed Loki to retake the lead. As they'd left Jarnsvidr, he'd pulled ahead a little but rushing around now was only going to get them caught for sure. Their first stop, however, was
to put Ofnir back in his pen. Ofnir didn't seem to want to go in at first, but Loki managed to cajole the giant lizard inside with promises of fresh seal the next day. Once inside, Ofnir went straight to his cave shelter and flopped down to go to sleep. Loki just shook his head and locked the door with his magic. "Now for us," he muttered as he eyed his and Thor's balconies that were easily in view from Ofnir's cage. "Right, let's go, Thor."

Thor was apprehensive but followed along for lack of any better ideas. Loki didn't head to the balcony like Thor thought he might. Instead, the youngest Prince went straight for the kitchens' entrance to the herb gardens. It wasn't by any means the closest way to get inside the palace, but when Thor saw how empty the kitchens were at this time of night, he supposed it was probably the best one to use when trying to sneak in. What followed after was a terribly nerve-wracking experience where Thor thought every shadow was one of his parents or his brothers coming out to catch them or every noise was ten times louder than it really was. Thor had no gift for stealth, he knew this already. But trying to sneak through the many many halls between the kitchens and his rooms would have proved it invariably to him if he'd had any doubts. Thor was positive that Loki had been laughing at him from how jumpy he was at every little noise, but at least he'd managed to keep the hysterics internal if only for the sake of them not getting caught.

When Thor finally reached his room -miraculously unhurt, uncaught, and unseen-, he was so relieved he flopped face first down in his bed and fell right to sleep. He had only barely thought far enough in advance to kick off his boots and nothing else.

**Chapter End Notes**

**Nidavellir** - The home of the Dwarves. While I appreciate that Thor: Ragnarok went to Nidavellir and the creativity of making it that neutron star thing, I'd already planned for it to be more like it's mythological counterpart. However, Nidavellir is also used interchangably with Svartalfheim. So, my solution was to make Svartalfheim the name of the realm itself since it fit with the other realm names better, having the 'heim' at the end. And Nidavellir is a massive underground kingdom on that planet. So, during Dark World, they went to Svartalfheim but not to Nidavellir. They were above Nidavellir.

**Dwarves** - To go along with Nidavellir, Dwarves have been mentioned a few times and again, while I found their depiction in Ragnarok creative and amusing, I'm sticking more with mythological roots here (partially because that's what I'd already been planning before that movie came out and so works better).

**Sigmund** - There are a few Sigmunds in mythology and this is my interpretation of one of them, although which one I'm not going to mention just yet.

**Jotnar Height** - In the movies, they are about 10 ft. But in the comics they range from 20-30 ft. on average. I decided to call it a middle ground and hit at 20 ft average. Cross breeding even between other giant types tends to result in shorter than that, however, like Gerd.

**Astrild's Father** - Astrild's Father is a commoner but that doesn't mean he isn't well known in his own circles. He's one of the very few non-Dwarves to have trained with them although as a note those Dwarves were in a way exiled from Nidavellir, so that might have something to do with their willingness to teach others. He's just sort of a
Drinking Ages- I didn't think it made sense for a culture like Asgard's that is so heavily influenced by (or of in canon) Norse Vikings that they would have any sort of concept of not being 'old enough' to drink. Especially since back then drinking Alcohol was actually probably safer than water in many cases. In this, both Thor and Loki have been drinking just fine for quite a while.

Chulyen- Raven, Chulyen, Hemaskas, Guguyni, Nankil'slas, Kwekwaxa'we, Txamem, We-Gyet, Yhel, and others, is the Native American Raven creator/trickster God. I wasn't actually planning on bringing him in this early at first but I needed Huginn and Muninn outta there for reasons. Ravens are actually all over mythology of so many different cultures. In this canon though Chulyen/Raven is the one in charge of all of them even if other Gods are known to be closely tied to Ravens like Odin. I can't really find a story on how Odin came to have his birds so I decided they're on loan from someone else.

The Ravens of Myth- In this verse, the Ravens scattered all over mythology are actually all connected and are shifters. Now, I'm basing them quite a bit on the trope in mythology of Swan Maidens where a woman can turn into a Swan or other sort of flying celestial type creature. The Ravens aren't Swan Maidens. More like cousins to them.

Forest of a Thousand Sorrows- In Marvel Comics, Avalon is a separate dimension 'along side' Britain and Ireland. This is a dimension populated by fairies and ruled by King Oberon. Forest of a Thousand Sorrows is a place within Avalon. And yes, there is some sort of debate on if the Alfr are related to fairies without really a clear answer.

Resources of the Aesir- In this, Asgard might be the golden realm but they have limited physical land and naturally occurring resources. So, they did what all large powers do and took to raiding and conquering to get what they needed/wanted. Vikings did lots of that too, after all.

More about Ofnir- Ofnir is a strange mix of creatures really. He's part cat, part puppy dog, part bat, and part Komodo Dragon. His walk in particular I imagine as being a cross between the crawling of seeing a bat 'walk' and the rocking gait of a Komodo Dragon.
Chapter Summary

The last day of winter is one of celebration

Chapter Notes

I wanted to get this chapter out before November because I wanted to let you all know I'll be participating in NaNoWriMo again this year. My subject for a story is actually related to Once More With Empathy as well. I've been using this fanfic to world build for other things. My NaNoWriMo project is currently going by the name Jormungandr and I think I might post it here under the original tag (which, yes, exists, i was glad to see.) If anyone's interested by all means you're welcome to read it when it goes up.

Thor soon found out that it was a mistake to assume that just because he and Loki reached their beds without being caught that they had gotten away with their late-night excursion. He was quickly disabused of that notion when he went to breakfast the next morning and saw his parents' faces. Loki didn't look surprised at all, but that made sense considering Loki had a little more practice being scolded than Thor did. Thor tried to pay attention to his Father's lecture and look contrite, but he was honestly not very invested or regretful. He'd enjoyed wandering with his brother far more than he'd been enjoying the party. Of course, Thor might have thought twice about it if he'd remembered that he already had a punishment from before their trip to Vanaheim and he'd just added to it by sneaking out of the palace. Just like that his year-long sentence of helping in the stables was given another two months. Loki was given his own punishment of dusting for the same amount of time, which made Thor's brother make a face, but that was it. Both sons of Odin knew better than to try and get out of punishment -because it would only ever earn them a worse one.

Thor figured he was lucky he just had his sentence extended rather than having a whole new punishment added on top of the old one. Although, it did make the next few days excruciatingly long. While Thor was plenty familiar with all the chores involved in tending to the stables, he didn't do it often enough to be truly efficient at them. Hours were spent shoveling and spreading hay and refilling water or food and then checking over equipment and horses. The royal stables' Master kept the building pristine and more often than not Thor had to go back and redo his work to meet the man's impossible standards.

Six days after their late-night wanderings, it was finally a day off from lessons, and Thor was able to catch up on some sleep. When the young God finally got around to getting up and starting his day, it was almost half over. From his window, Thor could see the streets of the city were again filled with merrymaking citizens. The festival had been going in spurts since Thor and Loki had returned and had eventually merged with the annual festival that celebrated the ending of winter. The biggest feast of the entire week would be that night to say goodbye to the last bit of winter and welcome in spring. The sister of Dellingr -Ostara- and Idunn would be presiding over the feast that
night rather than Odin since Asgard was entering the time of year where they held so much sway. Odin himself was off doing his last hunt of winter to provide the wild game for the tables of Asgard and would most likely be out all day.

Thor allowed himself to wander through the festival crazed streets for a little bit and had a breakfast that would have made his mother scold him for how unhealthy it was - breading laden with so much honey that it dripped off in huge globs and made a mess everywhere. Only after an hour or so did he start to wonder where his brother was. Loki hadn't been in his room that morning when Thor woke up, and a maid that Thor had asked as he left the Palace said the younger prince had headed out hours before. With that information, Thor had expected to run into Loki in the streets at some point. Knowing that they had just gotten in trouble for going into Jarnsvildr, Thor concentrated his search for his brother on other likely places within the limits of the city itself. After checking all of the hiding spots that Thor was aware of Loki having, he still hadn't found his little brother anywhere.

The answer suddenly came to him, and Thor felt like smacking himself for how obvious it should have been. Thor started along the curving road that led past the Palace while dodging various street performers and kids chasing one another. The crowds quickly thinned as most of the festival was being held along the two main roads that ran parallel to the Bifrost - Hreyystigata and Sigristigr- before then becoming the backbones of either side of the harbor. Several people greeted Thor as he made his way to the Eastern front of the Palace and past the more bustling areas of the city. After six or so large blocks of close quarters living, the houses and shops began to spread apart from each other more, and the town grew quieter. This was the very edge of the Estate district where all those that were rich enough to afford land had settled. The Estates grew larger with their own farmland and gardens as Thor travelled North East.

Estates full of gardens started to turn into those that had more working farmland, most of which was run by families in serfdom to the Lords and Ladies that lived in the larger mansions nearer the actual palace. Thor bypassed the front of the Estate owned by Gefjun - Sif and Dagr's Mother's Cousin, and Goddess of the Plow- but took the smaller road that ran along the side of the manor house to head back to the fields that were currently barren but would soon be filled with rows and rows of crops.

Thor followed the road until it crossed a small river and then hopped off the sun-bleached wooden bridge to walk the bank. The stream meandered through farmland for quite a while and Thor followed it right to the base of a familiar tree. The platform that had been built in the tree ages ago now served as the floor for a small -somewhat oddly shaped- shack. Thor used a nearby rope to climb up to the tree fort and poked his head through the open window. He was only slightly surprised to see that his brother wasn't alone. Sigyn was there as well using Loki's leg as a pillow as she read from a thick leather-bound book. Loki was using his own arm as a cushion for his head and was holding up his own book to read from up above him with his free hand. "Have you two been in here all morning?" Thor asked.

"Maybe," Loki replied without looking away from his reading.

Sigyn put down her book and gave Thor a smile. "We're just enjoying the quiet. Things are going to be quite hectic tonight what with the final night of the festival and all," she explained.

"Besides, if I had waited for you to get up I'd have starved to death," Loki drawled.

Thor rolled his eyes and disappeared from the window to walk around the three-foot-wide deck to the other side of the shack to where the door was located. He flopped down on a pile of pillows and quilts in the corner, "I was glad to sleep later than usual. I was up until the wee hours polishing
saddles in the stables. If I never see another, it shall be far too soon."

"I don't suggest riding bareback on a whim," Loki replied dryly.

"I guess that's why Sif has mentioned that you're not around hardly at all lately, despite being home," Sigyn commented. "Which reminds me, she was saying the other day that she would be looking for you at the festival."

"As did Amora," Loki commented. "And Lorelei. You're quite popular as usual, brother."

Thor bit back the urge to sigh heavily. Sif was a dear friend to him and always had been, but if she did what she had in his first life - following him around and trying to impress him continually - he would much rather her not. Thor found he liked women the most when they didn't work so hard to gain his attention. His dear Jane was like that. Thor had been able to tell that she was attracted to him (despite what Loki believed he wasn't actually oblivious to such things) but she had not fawned and tried to gain his favor through ploys. She had merely been herself, which was insanely attractive after centuries of women desperate to catch his eye.

"You don't look pleased," Sigyn noted.

"It would be nice if they would stop trying quite so hard," Thor admitted. "Their constant flirtations are tiring after a while."

Loki looked up from his book. "Perhaps then, you should actually tell them you do not like it," he said. "It's bound to get better results than simply ignoring their attempts to catch your eye."

"That is true. We've had entire discussions in classes about how you seem to miss attempts at flirting... mostly Amora's and Lorelei's as they can't stop complaining over it. Most simply assume you boys are too dense to catch their overtures," Sigyn volunteered.

"Too dense?" Loki echoed offended.

"Oh, you hardly count, my dear," Sigyn replied with a hand wave.

Loki looked unimpressed, "I hardly count? That does not seem very flattering either, Sigyn..."

"The point remains," Sigyn said to Thor as if Loki had said nothing, "that we just assume you've been missing their attempts. They're only going to become more blatant if you continue to ignore it."

Thor couldn't help the face that thought caused him to make. He could quite easily remember all of the things that all three of his most persistent admirers had done in his past life to try and win his favor. Ranging from tiny and harmless to near devastatingly large scale. Thor had hoped to avoid such things this time around, although he realized that might have been unrealistic of him. "Do you favor one over the others?" Sigyn asked. "All three are quite beautiful girls after all. Sif definitely has the best personality of them, though."

"You are by far the better of all three of them," Loki said looking down at where Sigyn's fair head was still pillowed on his leg.

Sigyn smiled up at him. "Flatterer."

"It is not a lack of favor," Thor said. "I simply am not interested in a serious relationship."

"I doubt Lorelei is interested in serious either," Loki drawled.
"If you want my opinion," Sigyn began, "just be honest and tell all three you are uninterested. Amora will most likely take it the hardest, and things might grow awkward with Sif for a while, but it would save you headaches later on."

"Or just be with Sif and be done with it," Loki said. "She's with you near every day already. Plus, she's probably the prettiest."

"Don't let Amora or Lorelei hear you say that," Sigyn warned. "Although it's quite true. Her personality makes her by far the most attractive even if she isn't the classic beauty of the sisters. Lorelei's hair is definitely the more impressive shade, however."

Thor glanced over at Sigyn and Loki. "Attractiveness is not actually my key concern," he said. He had always had that reputation, but he was also constantly surrounded by Gods and Goddesses. There weren't very many of those that weren't intensely beautiful.

"Well of course not," Sigyn said. "But it does always help."

"Sometimes you make me wonder if you find me inadequate, my Osprey..." Loki murmured.

Sigyn turned to look up at Loki more fully. "You've no need to think that, Loki. I find many people attractive, true enough, but you are by far the most beautiful."

"Boys are handsome, not beautiful," Loki said although he was smiling.

"You are both," Sigyn replied lightly.

Thor sighed and shook his head at the pair of them. He had forgotten how insufferable they could be since it had been so long since Thor was around his brother and his wife while they were truly happy. And right now, they were almost sickeningly content. "If you two are done fawning over each other..."

"We hardly 'fawn' over each other," Loki protested. "Besides, we were here first."

"And you could always go and find something else to do," Sigyn said as Thor let his head flop back to rest against the wall of the shack. "There were a lot of games being set up in the fairgrounds when we left them a while ago. They're probably going to be running all afternoon before the feast begins."

Thor grunted to acknowledge he'd heard her but he was finding he didn't want to move too much right then. As he stared up through the window above his head, Thor noticed a black and white bird fluttering down into the branches of the tree above them. "Loki, your birds are here," Thor said.

"My birds?" Loki echoed in confusion.

"The ones that nest above in the tree," Thor clarified.

"Ah, they've arrived a bit earlier than I would have thought," Loki mused as Thor continued to stare upwards. The second Magpie flew past the narrow view through the window just a moment later. "But I suppose they do need to make sure their nest is still suitable for them."

"There are birds nesting above us?" Sigyn asked.

Loki hummed a little to confirm. "A mated pair of Magpies. We'll have to be careful not to disturb them too much."
"Have you named them?" Sigyn wanted to know.

"No," Loki said. "They aren't actually my birds, so it seems silly to name them. They just nest here in the spring."

"They should be named Sigyn and Loki," Thor decided.

Loki gave a noise of pure exasperation. "You are not allowed to name anything, Thor. Remember?"

Thor frowned. "That's hardly fair."

"Why is Thor not allowed to name things?" Sigyn questioned.

"Because the last thing I let Thor name was a toy sailor figurine that he called Skipari like the terribly original person that he is," Loki drawled sarcastically.

Sigyn giggled a little even as Thor lifted his head to glare at Loki. "That was a long while ago," he pointed out. "Not a single kid in all the realms names anything well. I wouldn't do something like that again."

"You say that, but then you want to name a pair of birds after Sigyn and me," Loki replied.

"It's fitting," Thor defended. "You just don't know how much."

"I'm sure you think it is, Thor," Loki said indulgently. "But you're still not allowed to name anything."

Thor rolled his eyes at the less than fair decree. Loki acted as if he had never named anything childish before. Thor distinctly remembered a stuffed wolf that had a particularly misleading name of Bjorn that Loki had adored as a child and still probably had hidden away somewhere. Rather than bring up this point to his brother, Thor decided to change the subject entirely. "What are you two reading anyway?"

"Mm, just some basic spell primers," Loki said. "The basics of manipulating space in regards to transrealm teleportation for me."

"And I'm studying Aceso's Treatises on the Anatomy of Races," Sigyn answered. "Well... volume two of fourteen anyway..."

"There's fourteen of those?" Thor echoed. He couldn't imagine having that much to say about any single topic that it would take up fourteen individual textbooks.

Sigyn nodded a little and sighed. "Luckily, I'm not expected to memorize everything in all volumes, but Lady Eir wants me to have a good working knowledge of the first three as those dealing with the races most likely to be found in Asgard and Vanahem. Well, the first volume is more about what all would be found around Olympus as an Olympian wrote it, but so many terms are defined in the first volume you can't really skip it if you want to understand the rest."

"I don't suppose that they'll tell you how to keep a wyvern from making a racket at night would they?" Thor asked. "Because the last three nights your pet has been doing so, Loki." As if it hadn't been hard enough for Thor to get to sleep what with all of his chores and punishments keeping him out until the wee hours, Ofnir's very vocal complaints that were somewhere between yowls and roars always seemed to start up around two in the morning.
Loki sighed. "I know, but I don't know why he's doing that," he admitted. "Maybe it's just he doesn't like that he's in a new place. If he doesn't settle down, I'll see about changing Ofnir's pen or... something. Father already made mention of it to me twice since he started."

Thor was glad he wasn't the only one that had noticed his brother's pet's late-night noise making, but it was a little surprising that he was loud enough to wake the King and Queen at the other end of the rather long family wing. "Maybe you need to camp out there in the pen with him a few times like you did when you were first teaching him to sleep outside," Thor suggested.

"Mm, not a bad idea, I suppose," Loki said. "And with the nights not getting as cold with the seasons changing mother probably won't worry about it as much."

"Why would she worry?" Sigyn asked. "You're never cold."

"I think it's just written somewhere in the mother by-laws to worry about things that aren't even a concern," Loki said dryly.

"Either way, so long as I actually get some sleep here soon, I'd appreciate whatever you do," Thor said. "That's part of the reason I slept in so late this morning."

"Are you sure it wasn't just because you're lazy?" Loki asked sweetly.

Thor pulled a pillow out of the pile he was lounging on and tossed it at his brother. Judging by the noise and the muffled protest, Thor could assume he hit his target and smirked. "I am not lazy, and you well know it." Loki grumbled but put the pillow under his own head without an obvious retort.

The three youngsters lounged in the tree for another few hours before finally deciding (with Thor's pestering) to head back to the festival. Loki and Sigyn didn't seem terribly enthused by the idea, but Thor pointed out that due to the King still being out at the hunt that the dinner feast would be later than usual. Loki hid away the books they had been reading with a bit of magic, and then they started back for the fairgrounds.

The three of them hadn't been back for more than fifteen minutes when Sif and the others found them. Despite still munching on bits of roasted boar, Thor allowed himself to be dragged off to play some of the games that had been set up. Most were contests involving strength, and as such, he was particularly good at them. Thor even managed to coax Loki into the dagger throwing contest, which he, of course, excelled at. "You all are coming to the feast aren't you?" Thor asked as they paused for long enough to get some drinks from a vendor near where all the games were set up.

"Of course," Fandral said as he tore his eyes away from some passing girls with more than a little difficulty. "We wouldn't think to miss it."

"My parents have been looking forward to it," Hogun agreed. Astrild nodded in agreement as well, and, as children of a councilman, both Sif and Dagr were already guaranteed to be there.

Sigyn nodded as well, "Lady Eir will be escorting me since my parents are still in Vanaheim."

"Really? Lady Eir and not someone else?" Sif asked slyly with a glance at Loki.

Loki scowled darkly even though his cheeks took on a faint pink tinge. "You know very well why that is, Sif," he snapped. "Don't pretend to be more an idiot than you already are."

"Catty," Sif observed before taking a long drink from her tankard.
"Enough of that," Thor said. He didn't want his brother and Sif starting another of their epic fights right then. If Thor had his way they wouldn't be fighting ever again, but he also figured that was an unrealistic goal. "We are here to enjoy ourselves and not fight."

"Come, Loki," Sigyn said, tugging at the younger prince's wrist. "Let us see if there's any more of that honey candy. I would like to send some home to my parents." Loki looked like he was going to protest, but then, due to some magic that only Sigyn seemed to possess, he crumpled and allowed himself to be dragged off to do as she wished.

"I would like to know how she does that," Fandral mused as he watched the pair disappear into the crowd.

Thor let out a single laugh, "As would I, my friend."

"Ah, it seems as if Volstagg the Staggeringly Perfect," Fandral began with a little snort of humor at the most recent self-appointed title of Volstagg's, "is trying to woo Hildegund again." Thor looked over at where Fandral was pointing with his tankard. Sure enough, the red-bearded Asgardian was practically falling all over himself and his large stomach to try and charm the pretty and very curvy Hildegund where she was working filling large tankards full of mead.

Sif chuckled a little. "Do you think he'll ever win her over?"

"Yes," Thor said without hesitation. "I think she already likes him." Astrild nodded along with that assessment.

"Ah, playing hard to get is she?" Fandral guessed. "I should have known."

Sif rolled her eyes and kicked Fandral lightly in the ribs. "Not every girl is playing hard to get."

"Uh oh," Dagr said before Fandral could do more than open his mouth for a retort. "You might want to hide, Thor. The shrew sisters are heading this way."

Thor blanched immediately and ducked down under the table just before he heard the familiar and not at all welcome voice of Amora. She was complaining loudly to her sister about something or another but then obviously spotted Thor's friends still sitting there. "You! Have you seen Prince Thor?" she demanded.

"I think he went back to the palace," Sif replied with perfect nonchalance.

Amora huffed. "That man is just the hardest to pin down," she complained.

"If only our scrying spell were more accurate," Lorelei added.

"You know, you are truly limiting yourself by only focusing on Thor," Fandral said. "There are plenty of other dashing candidates that would love to give you the attention that you deserve."

"Is there really?" Amora asked before scoffing. "And I suppose you think yourself one of them? Fandral the Quite Plain."

Fandral flinched, and Thor could easily imagine the scowl that would be on his friend's face. He did hate that epitaph that the sisters had bestowed upon him. "You waste your time, Fandral," Astrild said. "These two would only sully you." Thor was mildly surprised to hear the usually easy going Astrild say something with such disdain.

Lorelei nearly shrieked, "How dare you! A little commoner with barely any skills, how you got
into Lord Tyr's advanced training class is beyond me! You're more suited to being a chore boy!"

Thor felt his temper rising as his friends were insulted and quickly started making his way to the far end of the table where he could slip out and then 'come across' the scene to give the girls a piece of his mind. "You shouldn't throw stones, Lorelei. I hear you're not well suited to your lessons either," Hogun said.

Lorelei scoffed, but before she could say anything else, Sif was speaking, "Just leave, Loserlei. Quite obviously Thor isn't here for you to drool all over like an infant."

"I wouldn't be so rude to my sister if I were you, Troll-girl," Amora said. "I could turn you into one for real." Thor felt a little bit of panic at the threat. Because, while Lorelei was a less than focused student of the arcane arts her elder sister was a different story altogether. The gap between Amora and Lorelei was even smaller than the age difference between Thor and Loki, leaving many to think the sisters were actually twins although two years separated them. The difference in skill and maturity, however, was disproportionately large. "My sister and I have just been accepted to the Academy of Ancient Arts in Nornheim at special request from Queen Karnilla herself. I wouldn't cross us if I were you."

"Then how about I cross you instead?"

Amora and Lorelei turned and saw that Loki, as well as Sigyn, had come up behind them. "Prince Loki," Amora greeted with far more respect than she had to Thor's friends. But then, Amora was more aware of Loki's skills and wasn't stupid. Thor couldn't say who would come out on top if the pair got into a magical duel but Thor knew he wouldn't want to be in the middle of it. Thor finally managed to get out from under the table and started making his way through the crowd that was milling about around the confrontation.

"Amora, Lorelei," Loki greeted politely enough although he looked less than amused. "I wouldn't have expected to see you here."

"Nor did I expect to see you, Prince," Amora said. "I did not think you were overfond of festivals."

Loki shrugged. "Not as such. But one makes exceptions. I am not, however, particularly interested in listening to you and your sister make threats today. Perhaps you can save it for later."

"Threats?" Lorelei echoed in a fair imitation of innocence. Loki was far better at it, Thor thought. "Whatever could you mean?"

Sigyn scoffed, "We are not deaf, Lorelei. Threatening to turn a councilman's daughter into a troll. Really, now, it would not please anyone in the palace to hear you'd done that."

There was an awkward moment as the full implications settled. "Perhaps we got a bit... carried away," Amora allowed. "Apologies for that. We would of course never truly do something like that. To anyone."

"Or Sif," Lorelei added sweetly.

"How comforting to hear," Thor said as he finally managed to get through the crowd.

Amora and Lorelei instantly swung around to him and Thor just barely suppressed the sigh. He missed Lady Jane so very much at times like this. "Prince Thor," Amora greeted.

"How good to see you," Lorelei added.
"I'm sure," Thor said flatly. "But I'm less pleased to see you. Especially after you made such threats to my friends."

"Only Sif," Lorelei said before Amora elbowed her in the ribs. "I mean, we were never serious, my Lord."

Dagr snorted in derision into his tankard of mead, which earned him a glare from Lorelei. "Glad to hear it, but you should probably still move along," Thor said as he brushed past them to take the seat he had slipped out of just a few minutes ago. "My mood towards you two is not particularly kind at the moment."

Lorelei was about to argue, but then Amora caught her arm. "We understand, Thor. Perhaps, by the time the feast begins your feelings will have mellowed. It will be the last feast we can attend in Asgard for many years, after all."

"Good," Sif said in a mutter that she didn't try very hard to keep at.

Amora cast Sif a glare but decided to not shoot back a retort and dragged her sister away. Loki scoffed after they left and retook his seat beside Thor. "I take it they were here to flirt with you, brother?"

"Of course," Thor grumbled. "And when they thought I wasn't here proceeded to insult our friends."

"Ah yes, the most logical way to earn your favor," Loki drawled. "Sometimes I wonder about the pair of them."

"What is this Academy they mentioned?" Hogun asked curiously.

Loki hummed a little and picked up his tankard that he'd abandoned earlier. "It is the school that Karnilla, Queen of the Norns, opened some centuries ago. They are very selective in who they accept and seeing how it is in Nornheim, the academy has access to all sorts of magical artifacts and books that simply don't exist anywhere else," Loki explained. "Going to the Academy of Ancient Arts is something many would brag about, not just those two."

"So why aren't you going there?" Sif asked.

Thor was afraid that his brother would take offense to that, but he didn't seem to, much to Thor's relief. Loki just scoffed. "I am an Odinson. Karnilla would much rather kill me than teach me, I expect."

"Why's that, brother?" Thor asked. The idea of someone wanting to hurt Loki was always alarming to him, but Karnilla hadn't been a person he'd considered a possible threat.

"Do you never listen to anything?" Loki asked in exasperation. Loki sighed heavily. "Very simply, Karnilla is -and has been for centuries- in love with Baldr. Seeing how he is currently married to someone other than Karnilla, I suppose you can see how she might be a little bitter about the subject."

"So why would she be mad at you?" Astrild asked.

Loki waved his hand. "Not me in particular. Anyone who has the name Odinson," Loki clarified. "I suppose she also very much hates Sister Nanna. And anyway, I don't think I've ever heard of a male that went to the Academy of Ancient Arts... that may be another strike against me ever going. Not that I mind... Nothing in Nornheim sounds all that appealing."
"Not even all the magical artifacts?" Sigyn asked.

"Well, alright there might be one or two I'd like to study closer," Loki admitted. "But there will be time for that later, I suppose." Thor filed that away for later. If any thefts occurred in Nornheim in the future, Thor'd have to make sure to check Loki's hiding places. Or, as many of them as Thor could, when he was sure he didn't know all of them.

After that, the conversation faded into less tense subjects while they finished their drinks. Thor participated in several more games including a bout of wrestling which earned him a black eye which Loki had to magic away before their mother got wind of it. Not in any particular hurry, the group of them paused on their way back to the palace to listen to a skald that was reciting the story of Mimir. The poem went on for a long while, as was typical, and afterwards, the group moved on to watch a race that was going on nearby. Unsurprisingly, Hermod was participating in the competition.

"Where are they racing to?" Loki asked someone who had been watching longer.

"Three laps around the palace," came the quick answer. Thor almost winced at the distance. With how the palace grounds were set up, the road that circled the palace also went around the gardens. Thor had never thought to measure the actual distance, but he wouldn't be surprised if three circuits would be well over five miles. Perhaps even ten. That distance wasn't hard to run per say, but it was awkward for a race. Too far for a quick sprint, but not far enough for it to test how well one paced themselves.

They leaned over the railing of the higher garden that the group of them had ended up on as they watched the runners getting ready to start. "Hermod is going to win," Dagr commented.

"He always wins," Hogun replied, unimpressed with the prediction.

There was a bang of a drum being slammed against, and the runners took off at once. Thor craned his head to watch. Even though the outcome was easy to predict he was still curious as to who would manage to win the second and third places. Cheers went up as the racers ran past with Hermod already in front of the pack. As the runners rounded the first circuit again, Thor joined in to cheer them on until they were well past the point where they would ever possibly notice him.

To absolutely nobodies surprise, Hermod easily won the race, but they cheered him on anyway and congratulated him for his show of skill. The second and third place winners got even more of a cheer since that had been more in question than who would come in first. Around that time, the sound of a horn rang out across Asgard. Thor and Loki instantly craned their heads to look at the Bifrost, which was a little above and in front of where they were currently.

The bright light of the Bifrost activating lit up all the colors of the Rainbow Road like thousands of stars crushed together. The horn rang out again, and two dozen massive warhorses came thundering down the bridge from Heimdall's Lookout. "Father's home," Thor said unnecessarily as the horses galloped closer.

"That was faster than I expected," Loki said as cheers went up from everyone at the return of their King.

Odin was, of course, in front of the hunting party. His mount was not clad in armor, but then they had been hunting beasts, so plating wasn't really needed. Behind the group, a cart piled high with several animals creaked and groaned. Thor was worried the wood was going to collapse, but it surprisingly held fast against the weight. Odin's hunt had evidently been quite successful. "We should return to the palace," Loki said. "He'll be vexed if we don't greet him."
Thor nodded, and they quickly said goodbye to the others before rushing back towards the palace. By the time the brothers reached the front steps of the castle, Odin's horse had been taken away, and Andhrimnir was overseeing the delivery of the meat that he was to be cooking that night to the feasting hall. Frigga was there as well and getting a kiss on the cheek by Tyr, who had joined their father on the hunt. "Ah, Loki, Thor, I was wondering where you two might be," Odin said as he saw them approach. "Have you been enjoying the festival?"

"Yes, Father," Thor answered. "Hermod makes races somewhat predictable, however."

Odin laughed at that. "Aye, he does, but that is why he is so good at his job."

"I see your hunt was quite a success," Loki said as he eyed the cart that was being awkwardly pushed and dragged up the stairs. "Where did you go this time?"

"Ah, all over really," Odin answered as he pulled his thick riding gloves off. "The biggest kill came from Midgard though. An elephant they call it. Never had one before. Should prove an interesting end of winter meal, at least."

"I'm sure," Frigga agreed. "But you need a bath before the feast, my love. You smell like that which you just killed."

Odin chuckled and kissed Frigga lightly. "As you wish. But first I should check with Ostara and see if she needs any help-"

"No," Frigga said firmly. "Bath. I have been helping Ostara and Idunn prepare for the feast, so you have no excuse. This is the feast we can let others handle, so please do so, my dearest."

Loki snorted a little but managed to mostly hide his amusement when Odin looked over at them. Odin narrowed his good eye but then sighed. "Determined to not let me get involved, I see. Very well, as you command. You most likely know best."

Frigga nodded and gave Odin another kiss before turning her attention to Thor and Loki. The brothers quickly straightened their posture as their mother eyed them. "And you two could use a bath as well. You look like you've been rolling around in the dirt."

"Mostly Thor," Loki muttered.

"Either way, go wash and then get dressed for the feast," Frigga ordered. "I've laid some clothes out for you to wear but if you'd like to pick your own at least pick something appropriate?"

"Yes, Mother," the two brothers said before hurrying up the stairs to the palace. They knew better than to argue against what their mother wanted. Frigga was not a force to ever cross.

Thor washed up quickly in his private bath and then found the clothes on his bed that he was meant to wear. Not particularly wanting to go through and put together his own outfit like Loki probably was doing, Thor just picked up the clothes and pulled them on. The pants were a light brown made of supple leather, and the shirt was the grey of a cloudy sky with embroidery of bright blue and green that stood out brilliantly. Thor pulled his good boots on and laced them tightly before heading down the hall to Loki's room. He knocked hard so that Loki would be able to hear from anywhere in the suite. "Loki! Are you dressed?"

"No! Don't you dare come in," Loki called back.

Thor sighed and rolled his eyes before turning to rest against the wall beside Loki's door. "You always take so long!" he complained loudly.
"Just because I care what I look like doesn't mean I take a 'long' time, Thor," Loki replied. "You just throw on whatever you're given without a thought."

"Mother picked it, so it's probably fine," Thor said. Better than anything Thor would have picked on his own, anyway. Thor was well aware that he didn't have much of an eye for fashion, nor did he particularly care about that.

The door beside him opened just a moment later. "You're hopeless," Loki said as he stepped out into the hallway. Thor noticed that Loki was dressed in his typical green although this shade was more of a spring to go with the reason behind this particular feast. "It'll still be a while before the main course is served," Loki pointed out as they started walking.

"True, but I'm hungry for something other than faire food," Thor said.

Loki shook his head. "As you say, brother."

The feast hall was decorated with the first blooms of spring and lots of evergreen sprigs. The spoils of the hunt were already being roasted but would be a while before they were served. Until then, the gleaming golden plates were filled with all manner of other dishes and Thor wasted no time before grabbing some for himself. Loki left Thor to it and went to greet a Sigyn dressed in pale blue who was already there with Lady Eir.

As the evening continued, more and more people appeared, some of which already looked very drunk to Thor. More dishes were brought out, and mead flowed in ever larger rivers. Thor noticed that there were a lot more people than he had expected to see at the feast. There were lots of celebrations going on around Asgard since the entire city could not all come to the one that Odin was sitting at, so Thor had expected to know everyone at the very least by sight if not name.

Eventually, Loki wandered back over to eat as well. The roasts were still not done, but Andhrimnir seemed to think it wouldn't be very much longer. "Who are all these people?" Thor asked as he swirled his mead in his tankard.

"Apparently," Loki said, "they are the builders and mercenaries that have been building the wall. Supposedly it will be finished tomorrow, so Father invited them to celebrate."

Thor grunted a little and then drained his mead. "Well, I suppose the more, the merrier?" he said although he wasn't entirely sure about that. He hadn't wanted this feast to devolve into politics, which it tended to do if there were lots of people he didn't know in attendance.

Loki grinned at that. "Don't look so sour, brother. People might think you don't like your mead." Thor gave his brother a shove, but it wasn't even hard enough to send the sorcerer off balance.

The brothers were of course given prime cuts of the roasts when they were finally declared finished. "I'm not sure how I feel about this elephant thing," Loki mused as he examined the meat at the end of his fork. "Ofnir would probably like it."

"It's alright," Thor said. "I think I prefer boar, though."

"Of course you do," Loki said with an eye roll. "You are the perfect Asgardian, after all."

Thor sighed. "Try not to sound like that is such a curse, brother."

"I'll try," Loki said with sincerity that Thor doubted extremely. Suddenly, something caused Loki to straighten. "Oh, your admirers are heading this way, Thor."
With a curse, Thor realized that Loki was right. Amora and Lorelei had their eyes on him and were already halfway across the crowded room. Thor grabbed Loki by the arm. "Let's go," he said before dragging Loki into the crowd.

"Such the brave warrior," Loki mocked with amusement.

"Shut up," Thor said without much heat.

Loki inclined his head and led the way through the mass of people with a confidence that came with centuries of doing something. Thor followed along, worried that they hadn't dodged the girls still after his attention. Thor wasn't sure where Loki was leading them, but they walked in what felt like circles for several minutes.

Eventually, the two of them stopped by a balcony opposite the high table where they had started, and the sisters were nowhere to be seen. "Where did they go?" Thor asked.

"They're currently following who they think is us back to the kitchens," Loki answered. "They should be distracted for a good twenty minutes."

"I do love you, brother," Thor said in relief.

"I know," Loki said with satisfaction.

A strange man stepped up from the crowd and gave a bow, "You are the sons of Odin, are you not? I am Flárekkr. It is good to meet you."

Flárekkr was a surprisingly tall man, even for an Asgardian. He was, to use the measurements of many of his mortal 'American' friends, around seven and a half feet by Thor's judgement and possessed many bulging muscles, especially on his upper body. His skin was dark mahogany, and twisted ropes of black hair ran in a thick strip down the center of his skull while the rest of his head was shaved, except for a thick beard and even that was kept trimmed short. He had on a bright blue tunic and laying prominently on top was a large silver amulet that gleamed in the light of the great hall. Flárekkr studied them with eyes the color of pitch and then smiled. "I've heard quite a lot about the two youngest Princes of Odin's house," he said. "Your Father is quite proud of you."

"He has mentioned you as well," Loki lied. "He says you have come to help against the raiders that have been plaguing us."

Flárekkr's smile grew, showing off slightly too large but bright white teeth. "I do what I can, little Prince. Asgard has been very kind to my men and me."

"Do you lead a band of warriors then?" Thor asked, glancing around for any sort of glimpse of other strangers.

"Some of them are, yes," Flárekkr answered.

Before Thor could ask anything else, they were joined by Tyr, boisterous and holding a tankard full of what was most likely strong mead. "Flárekkr! There you are! I was beginning to think you'd run off again, my friend! You work far too hard!"

"I have deadlines I must meet to receive my payment, Tyr," Flárekkr said, although he looked amused.

Tyr waved the comment away. "You are near done your task. Only a few weeks left before the magic of barrier is complete, they tell me. And the physical part is to be done tomorrow morning."
So relax." Tyr gestured then to Loki and Thor. "I see you met my little brothers!"

"How much have you had, Tyr?" Loki asked curiously. Usually, their eldest brother was not quite so loud even after several tankards. Thor also thought that he saw Tyr swaying just slightly.

"Hush, Loki. I am quite in control of myself," he said with a broad gesture that almost sloshed some of the amber mead out of his cup. Somehow, through some drunken magic that Thor didn't understand, Tyr managed to not spill a single drop.

"... I see that," Loki said blandly.

"I must say," Flárekkr mused. "I don't see very much resemblance between you two," he said gesturing between Thor and Loki. "You are as different as the moon and sun in the sky."

Loki stiffened beside Thor. "Genetics are funny that way..." Loki muttered uncomfortably.

"Come, Loki! I'm still hungry," Thor said before grabbing his brother by the arm. "It was nice to meet you, Flárekkr," he added just before dragging Loki away from the conversation before it could venture any further into topics that he knew would upset his brother. Flárekkr's observation wasn't the first time someone had pointed out how little Loki looked like the rest of the family. Or even compared the two brothers to the moon and sun (even though the celestial bodies in question had their own embodiments), but Thor didn't want to upset his brother with it when the evening had been going so well.

Loki gave Thor an odd look but didn't protest having been dragged away from the builder. Thor took them back to their seats to keep up his excuse for more food. "Are you really hungry still? You'll turn into Volstagg if you aren't careful."

Thor shrugged. "Not so hungry but I'd rather this than make small talk with yet another person I don't know."

"I doubt we'll get out of that, Brother," Loki said with amusement. Sure enough, another man that they didn't know was wandering closer. "They seek to get into the family's good graces anyway that they can. Because we are younger we are seen as the easiest way," Loki supplied.


Loki laughed at that even as the new man -yet another builder by the look of him- introduced himself as Rolfe. Rolfe proceeded to try and make small talk but was driven off by a tiny little prank by Loki where the man's mead turned into snakes. Thor couldn't help but be amused by it as the man fled like a child. It got their mother's attention and a few words of scolding, but neither Prince cared overmuch about it.

The feast lasted for several more hours, but finally, both Princes decided that they had had enough and retired for the night. Thor was tired of dodging his admirers and greeting so many new people. The party was no doubt still raging, and perhaps, if Thor weren't aware he'd have punishments starting the next day again, Thor would still be up and celebrating as well. As it was, however, Thor was tipsy and full and tired so he was more than happy to go to sleep in his own bed rather than passing out at a table. Loki said goodnight in the hall with a yawn barely stifled behind his fist before heading to his own room. Thor took a few minutes to clean up, but he'd barely hit the mattress before he was dead to the world asleep. Hopefully, Ofnir wouldn't wake him this time.

No moon was out in the sky, and the stars were half obscured by fluffy clouds. What was perhaps going to be the last frost of the season was clinging to every surface it could, encouraging everyone
to keep their windows firmly closed so that it could not creep inside. One distinct exception to that was one of the balcony doors of the palace. Loki had grown accustomed to keeping his balcony doors open while in Vanaheim. The cold of winter didn't bother him, the breeze was a blessing in the summer, and Ofnir was often calmer when there was no barrier between him and Loki. So, the frost was allowed in, but it did not get far due to the warmth of the rest of the castle.

Unfortunately, the open door was not unnoticed.

Ofnir was fast asleep in his pen after having eaten a particularly juicy bit of meat that he'd found near the back of his pen right by the fence. There would be no racket from him to disturb those sleeping in the palace that night.

A dark shadow crawled over the railing of the balcony and hovered there beside the workbench that had been littered with carved stones and plant cuttings. After a moment, the shape crossed the terrace silently to enter the bedchamber. The lack of moonlight only helped disguise the figure even more as it straightened fully to loom above the bed. A too white smile flashed in the dim room as the youngest son of Odin slept on.

Chapter End Notes

**Ostara v Idunn**- Now I wasn't sure who to make the Goddess of spring here because some give that to Idunn and some give it to Ostara who isn't strictly speaking Norse in origin. I ended up giving it to Ostara with Idunn still very involved in the whole spring process although Idunn is primarily goddess of youth.

**Odin's Hunt**- Is a reference to the Wild Hunt where a band of supernatural or ghostly hunters and tends to take place in winter.

**Hreystigata and Sigrstigr**- Names I smashed together from a list of Norse words. The second half of both names allude to street/road.

**Dellingr Family**- A lot of them are mentioned in this chapter. Yes, I have a family tree for them too. I'll get it posted in a bit.

**Skipari**- Means Sailor, hence why Loki is less than impressed with it as a name for a sailor toy.

**Sigyn's Sexuality**- As you might have cottoned onto this chapter, Sigyn isn't particularly shy about saying what she does or doesn't like. Thor didn't quite put it together here but Sigyn is bisexual making her even more perfect for Loki.

**Aceso**- Minor Greek Goddess of the Healing Process. All of her family has to do with healing actually.

**Volstagg the Staggeringly Perfect**- He really was called this apparently.

**Fandral the Quite Plain**- Also a real epitaph, I decided this was more of a mean teasing thing that others call Fandral and as such he changes it as quickly as he can get the fame to pick what he's called.
Karnilla - As mentioned in the chapter, she is the self appointed Queen of the Norns who is head-over-heels for Baldr. Because I followed myth and had Baldr marry Nanna, she's a little bitter.
Thor made his way through the crowd of people celebrating. The hall was decorated with flowers, and the fires were blazing every few feet keeping the cold night from seeping in through the wide-open doors and windows, but something that Thor couldn't for the life of him place seemed off about the entire scene. Thor continued walking, but the hall just kept going and he couldn't even see the other end. The crowds of people chatting and laughing were oddly muffled as Thor pushed through them. He was aware of looking for something, but he had no idea what that something actually was. Thor looked around and saw a sea of familiar faces that refused to really register in his brain. The noise in the hall was a murky cacophony that rose and fell like waves around Thor.

Fandral and Astrild were clustered near to each other by a pillar wrapped in garlands of red berries and evergreen branches. Thor paused for a moment to look at the two other blondes. There were dozens of girls clustered near them, but there was at least three feet distance between the girls and the two boys that were whispering to one another. Astrild leaned close and said something that made Fandral laugh, but strangely the sound never actually made it to Thor's ears, which the young Prince found mildly odd. He could see his friend throw his head back, but the actual noise was lost in the muffled crowd.

Tearing his eyes away from his friends as he somehow knew they were not what he was looking for, Thor continued on. Amid a cluster of round tables that were creaking with mountains of food, was Volstagg. He cheered the nearby minstrels with a tankard that sloshed amber mead onto the floor with every movement. The redheaded warrior should be long past empty of drink, and yet, no matter how much was tossed out, the level never lowered. The piles of meat on the table teetered back and forth but somehow didn't topple over. Andhrimnir carried several more platters of food over to drop onto the table in front of the wide Asgardian. Hildegund grinned and kissed Volstagg's red cheek as he merrily swayed in his seat out of time to the music.

Thor continued on again, still pushing through dozens of people he didn't know who were clustered much tighter than they usually were. Amora and Lorelei appeared through the crowd in the latest Vanaheim fashion and hair sparkling with jeweled ornaments and pins. Thor quickly ducked to the side and disappeared into the crowd. After only a moment, Thor stumbled across Hogun sitting at a table staring off into the distance. Hogun didn't seem to notice Thor at all and just gazed through a nearby window. "Hogun?" Thor asked.
The dark haired warrior didn't respond. Hogun didn't even move at Thor's voice and kept his eyes fixed at some point Thor couldn't begin to say. After a moment, Thor moved on.

Where was he? Shouldn't he have found him by now?

Thor pushed past yet another group of people that he was sure he didn't know or had ever seen before. Was the room repeating? Surely not. Then again, Thor was sure he'd passed that particular roasted boar decorated with holly several feet back. He kept walking and walking, still looking for something that he wasn't fully aware of.

A group of people moved out of the way, and Thor saw the Dellingr clan around a table. Sif and Dagr beside their mother with Dellingr on her other side. Oddly enough Heimdall was to Dellingr's right and not at his usual post. Seeing him at a festival was unusual considering his dedication to his duty. Slightly less surprising, but still a rare sight, beside Heimdall, were his three sons. The oldest, Thraell, looked very much like his father and was just about the age of Hodr and Baldr.

Karl was about a decade younger and had his mass of dark hair twisted into thick ropes that were held back by a silver clasp. Then there was Jarl who was twenty or so years Thor's junior and the lightest skinned of the boys with a complexion nearer to a tawny color than the richer chocolate of his brothers and father. Thor had never been close with any of Heimdall's sons as all three tended to obey their father's wishes to stay close to home. Thraell was the only one who routinely left, and that was because he was a Captain of the Einherjar. To see all of them together at a feast was startling and Thor had no idea why the entire family would be there. "You look lost, young Prince," Heimdall said.

"I'm looking for something," Thor answered.

"And what might that be?" Heimdall asked.

Thor opened his mouth, but no answer came forth. Movement out of the corner of Thor's eye caught his attention. A colossal wall of scales slid past, and the halls disappeared, the people within it turning to wisps of black smoke. The massive sable snake wrapped around what had been a room and Thor was left standing alone in the middle. Jormungand reared up and fixed Thor with deadly golden eyes. *Yes, Uncle, what do you search for?* the voice of Jormungand whispered along the edges of Thor's mind like feathers that left the sizzle of acid in their wake.

Thor gaped up at the snake as firelight bounced along his black opal scales. "Jormungand... why are you here?" Thor asked.

*Where else should I be?* Jormungand asked back silkily -half amused and half a challenge. *Are you going to kill me, Thor?*

Thor couldn't help but step back. "No! I would never."

*It is your destiny,* Jormungand pointed out as his massive body coiled tighter. The space that had been the grand hall shrunk and the golden ceiling went dark. Thor's heart jumped in his chest, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

After some effort, Thor managed to straighten his shoulders. "I am no pawn to destiny," he declared.

Jormungand hummed in Thor's head, sounding darkly amused. *Poor little Uncle,* he mocked. Fire sprung up from nowhere and caught at Jormungand's giant scales causing them to tarnish and crack. *You say that as if you have some choice. Fate is not so easily thwarted...*
Thor stepped back from the fire and felt himself bump into something. The Thunder God whipped around and felt the tension drain out quickly at the sight of familiar green and leather armor and black hair. "Loki," he breathed as he reached out to grab his brother by the shoulder.

Loki spun to face Thor and then there was a sudden searing pain under Thor's right ribs. Thor gasped and looked down to see a small dagger buried in his side. "L-Loki..." Blood that he shouldn't have been able to hear over the roar of the fire dripped down Loki's pale hand from Thor's own body.

"It's too late," Loki said.

Suddenly the dark around them resolved into a view of a city burning and hordes of Chitari swarming over crashed automobiles and invading skyscrapers through smashed windows. Thor tore his eyes back up to Loki and a new cry of horror escaped. Loki's face was twisted into a macabre version of itself with black stitches forcing a too wide grin upon him that bled in great streams. "Why, brother, you look like you've seen a ghost..." Loki said mockingly, each word straining the stitches and tearing his flesh. "Whatever could be the matter?"

"Loki..."

"Don't act like you care now," Loki hissed. Thor couldn't look away as his brother's face continued to bleed. "You've never cared about me."

"That's not true, Loki!" Thor managed to say through a throat constricted with emotion.

The stitches on Loki's face pulled harder, forcing the grin to tear apart wider to reveal that his gums were bleeding around each tooth. Thor could hear the threads tightening further and further. He could only watch as his brother's face slowly tore apart from the strain.

Thor woke up with a start and wordless shout. He sat in his bed for several moments as he slowly realized where he was and what had happened. Sweat clung to his skin, and his breaths were coming in short huffs that did nothing to slow his racing pulse. After a moment, Thor fell back against his bed with a groan. Perhaps that last honey cake before bed had caused such bizarre dreams. If so, Thor would have to remember to not do that any longer.

The sun was bright against the pale silver-grey walls of Thor's room, and judging by the shadows from the windows, Thor estimated it was not even mid-morning. Though he was still stuffed from the feast the night before, Thor knew that his mother would be wanting him up soon. Thor groaned as he rolled out of bed and then trudged into his bathing chamber to rinse off the sourness of his nightmare. The water helped shake the last of the cobwebs from Thor's mind.

Not in any particular hurry, Thor allowed himself to lounge in the tub for a while. His mind, though more awake than it had been, was still muddled from his most recent nightmare. In an effort to distract himself, Thor put a few more braids in his hair than he usually would have when there was no celebration that day. The action at least kept him busy and while his hair was still sopping wet wasn't even as difficult as it tended to be. The braids were probably crooked -as they often were- but Thor didn't care much about that.

After the bath, Thor dried, dressed, and made his way for the private dining hall. There was chattering at the far end of the table, but Thor didn't pay much attention as he reached for something to drink. The young again Prince did wish that Asgard had coffee. Not only did Thor find the taste quite pleasing but it had energized him like nothing else he'd experienced beyond foul potions made just for such a purpose.
Thor poked at his breakfast and drank tea and honeyed milk as his brain slowly returned to full wakefulness. He didn't like that his mind had brought forth such a bizarre dream last night. The thought of killing Jormungand was not pleasant to the Thunder God—it never had been. And yet, his dream version of his nephew was not exactly wrong. The Norns, Goddesses of Fate, were not ones that made weaves easy to escape. Nor did they enjoy others that made an attempt. To try and decide your path yourself would greatly offend them, and there were terrible stories of what happened to those that made enemies of the Goddesses that determined your destiny. Fates that were already less than favorable would continually worsen until one longed for the lives that they had tried to alter. Thor would have to be clever if he were to escape what had been foretold. Such a thing was more often Loki's role, but Thor thought he might manage now that he had a reason worthy of all his efforts.

"You do not look so chipper today, my son," Frigga noted with amusement.

Thor grunted some and took another sip of tea. His head was throbbing, if only just, from the drinking the night before. Thor hadn't thought he'd had that much, but the way his ocular nerves twinged under the light of the sun proved otherwise. "It is merely after feast melancholy, mother," Thor answered as he rubbed his eyes to try and wake a bit more. The day after a long feast was often more subdued throughout all of Asgard as hangovers and overfull stomachs recovered.

"You even went to bed early last night," Frigga commented. "Are you sure you're feeling alright, darling?"

"Yes, Mother. I was just tired," Thor said. "Luckily, Ofnir did not wake me yet again last night."

"That damnable beast better keep staying quiet at night," Odin grumbled into his cup.

Frigga sighed. "Now, don't take your ill disposition out on Loki's pet," she said. "It is a new environment and no doubt he is feeling insecure. He was silent last night." Odin grumbled again, but Thor didn't catch the actual words.

The door to the hall opened, and Tyr came trudging in looking very much like he had been dragged through Jarnsvidr before getting up that morning. "Tyr, darling, I see you enjoyed yourself last night," Frigga said. "There's something there by your seat that might help with that ache in your head."

"You are indeed a Goddess of Mercy, mother," Tyr murmured as he all but collapsed into the seat beside Odin.

"I didn't realize you stayed at the palace last night, brother," Thor said as Tyr emptied his tankard with several loud swallows.

Tyr drained the cup and near slammed it back down before taking several breaths that he'd denied himself in his effort to drink the potion as quickly as possible. "It had not been my plan but the mead last night was quite potent," he said. Tyr wiped his mouth and then took up another cup, this one filled with nothing but magically chilled water. "Heidrun outdid herself this time."

"And participating in no less than four drinking contests certainly had nothing to do with it," Frigga commented.

An expression very near to a pout crossed the God of War's face. "I did win all but the last one, Mother," he pointed out. "Perhaps the fourth was a little ambitious of me, but I couldn't allow Flárekkr to outperform a son of Odin, now could I?"
"You very well could have," Frigga said.

"Ah, leave the boy be, My Sweet," Odin said as he picked through his meal for something that would be easier on his own slightly queasy stomach. "No harm was done except to himself. I'm sure the results from his body this morn are justice enough."

Frigga sighed and shook her head. "I suppose," she conceded. There wasn't much else she could do about it anyway. Tyr was fully grown and very much a typical Asgardian man in his prime. Usually, her firstborn was more sensible than what that truth would imply, but asking Tyr to always be that way was probably unreasonable. Frigga gestured to the table. "Make sure you at least try to eat something, Tyr. That potion shouldn't be taken on an empty stomach, or it might come right back out."

"Yes, Mother," Tyr said as he picked through the serving trays. He eventually settled on a small cake and preserves.

After several more minutes of silently working through their plates, Frigga sighed. "It is late. Loki is usually up by now. Thor, please go and check on your brother, would you? Tell him to come and break his fast before it gets too late."

Thor grumbled a little but got up from his seat. "Yes, Mother." Chances were Loki was just buried in a book or was perhaps on his balcony working on one of his projects and had forgotten the time. Such things happened often enough. Luckily, Thor wasn't hungry so leaving the table to track his little brother down didn't bother him that much, although the tea had been soothing to his headache and he'd have to finish that when they got back to the table.

Even the palace itself seemed sluggish after such a boisterous party the night before with the guards in the halls not quite as straight and the servants shuffling along with stifled yawns. Thor was glad he wasn't the only one. He reached Loki's door and, despite his aching temples, pounded upon it hard. "Loki! Mother wants you to come and eat!"

There was no response, and Thor frowned. Loki did not tend to sleep in and even if he did he'd have woken from Thor's knock. Thor didn't think that it was time for Loki's... biology to kick in although he admittedly couldn't ever seem to figure out when that was supposed to happen. And Loki would probably still yell at him if that were the case. Perhaps his brother was in the bathroom and hadn't heard? Thor pounded on the door again, slightly harder this time. "Loki!"

Growing slightly more worried as the seconds ticked by and he was again not answered, Thor reached for the knob. He frowned when it wouldn't turn. Thor didn't know of any reason why it would be locked first thing in the morning. "Loki! Brother, open the door!" Thor demanded before taking his fist to the wood a few more times. Nothing but silence. "Loki!"

Thor was suddenly very alarmed at the lack of response. More on instinct than anything else, Thor threw all of his strength into his shoulder and slammed into the door. The lock had been first installed centuries ago and never updated since there was no real need. The latch splintered off of the wood from the force of Thor's body, and the door was flung open. Thor half expected Loki to come rushing him scolding him for breaking the door, but nothing happened. "Loki!"

Thor's eyes swept across the room quickly. He noted the open balcony doors and a few trinkets out of place but what was by far the most alarming thing was Loki's bed. The bedding was hanging barely on the mattress and looked to be torn, and there was a red mark in the center of what remained. A dark stain that appeared far too much like-
"Guards!" Thor roared even as he rushed into the room. He knew, even as he yelled again for guards and went to look for Loki in the bathing chamber, that his brother was gone. Fear rising up so fast and uncontrollable that he barely even noticed the guards had come running in at his screams. Thor ran to the balcony to check for any sign of where his brother might be after seeing nothing telling in the bath.

"My Prince?" one Guard asked, but Thor was far too preoccupied to answer.

Thor was trying his best to not panic and think, but he was failing. How could this have even happened?! They were in the palace of Asgard! 'Twas the safest place in all the Realms!

"What is going on here?"

Thor whipped around at his father's voice. He knew not which of the guards had called for the King, but Thor was glad since he hadn't been able to think clear enough to do it himself. "Father! Loki is gone! There is blood in his bed, and he is gone!"

Odin's eye widened and then flew to the bed in question. At the reddish brown stain spread across the fine white linens, Odin stiffened. "Heimdall!" he snapped. "My son is missing! Find him at once!" he ordered. The King turned to the guards that were still gathered from Thor's shouts. "Search the grounds immediately and prepare a party for when Heimdall finds Loki!"

The guards broke into instant motion to do as their King commanded. Off in the distance, there was a rumble, and the very ground of Asgard seemed to groan in strain. Odin took a slow breath in through his nose and held it for a few heartbeats. Asgard settled as Odin slowly exhaled and the King looked at Thor. "Did anything happen last night, Thor? Anything at all?"

Thor shook his head. "No, Father. We said goodnight in the hall and then went to bed. There was nothing wrong at all! I swear! I never would have left him if I thought there was something amiss!"

Odin put a hand to Thor's shoulder. "I know you wouldn't, Thor. We will find Loki," he assured although Thor didn't find his panic fading much.

"Odin? What's the matter?" Frigga's voice proceeded her into the room, and, though Odin tried to cross the space and catch her at the doorway, he had moved too far inside to manage it.

"Frigga-"

The Queen, already looking to see what had caused her Husband to rock the very planet beneath them, spotted the blood stain before Odin could hope to say anything more. Frigga screamed and rushed to the side of the bed before turning to Odin. "What has happened? Is Loki hurt!?"

Odin went to his wife and put his hands to her arms. "I do not know what has happened, Frigga, but I will find out."

"Odin, is Loki hurt? Is he with Eir?"

"I... do not know where Loki is," Odin managed to say.

Frigga's shock was apparent and then crumpled into disbelief. "What? How can you not know?" Her demeanor switched to anger so rapidly it made Thor's head spin. "Where is my son, Odin!?"

"I will find him, Frigga!" Odin said even as Thor noticed sparks of fiery magic exploding from his mother's fingertips and her golden hair as it floated and twisted in a wave of sudden heat. Thor had never seen his mother so angry. She was a corona of pink and white and yellow, and Thor suddenly
realized why his Father called Frigga his lovely sun. Even her eyes were white with the power of her anger, glowing like supernovas with a worrying intensity. "Even now I have men searching the grounds and Heimdall looking for him. We will find Loki," Odin swore.

Though it seemed to take a great deal of effort on her part, Frigga reigned her seidr inside of herself. "His bed is bloodied, Odin. He is somewhere hurt. You must find him at once!"

"We will," Odin promised instantly. "I shall search all of the Realms for him if I must."

Frigga slumped into Odin's arms, and Thor had to look away as he heard her start to sob. He hated it when his mother cried, though it so rarely happened. "Tyr," Odin said although his voice was hoarse and strangled.

"I'm here, Father," Tyr said from the doorway. Thor gave a start of surprise as he hadn't noticed his eldest brother had come with their mother. The look on his face was one of pure black fury, and Thor was rather disturbed by it for the strangeness it caused. "Tell me what I can do."

"Find Loki," Odin said instantly. "Though I cannot say he has not run off on his own... he did not injure himself. Find him and if there is someone there that has laid one hand on your brother... you bring him to me."

Tyr didn't look terribly happy. "If there is a person that has harmed my brother and I find such a person... I will bring him to you, Father. I make no claims to his status when I do, however."

"Alive is all I require," Odin said. "Maim them as much as you wish, but I will deal out my own punishment to those who harm my sons."

Tyr bowed with his fist over his heart. "Then you shall have his broken body delivered to your justice swiftly, Father." Tyr turned his attention to Frigga who had finally lifted her wet face from Odin's shoulder. "Mother. I will find Loki. I swear it."

Frigga gave a short nod. "Go," she croaked. Tyr gave one last nod of his own before turning on his heel and stalking out of Loki's room. Frigga watched him before turning to Odin. "Odin, I cannot lose him. Not our Loki. Not again. Who would have possibly taken him?"

"I don't know," Odin muttered. "But rest assured we will find him whole and alive, my dearest. And whoever has taken him from us will learn as others have why you do not harm a child of Odin."

Thor wasn't entirely sure what they were talking about but didn't think about it too much. He was far too worried about his brother to parse out what his parents meant by 'again' or 'learning as others have.' "Father," Thor said as he stepped closer. "What can I do?"

Odin looked over at Thor and gave a sorry attempt to smile. "My son, you I would have stay here where you are safe," he said before resting a hand on Thor's head. "I will post more guards to your room and to be nearby you until we have found out what has happened."

"Father, I want to help find Loki! He's my brother! I can't just sit here in the palace and do nothing!" Thor argued.

"And I need to know that you are safe," Odin argued.

"I can help search!"

"Thor," Frigga said before Odin could deny him again. She moved away from her husband to go to
her second youngest. "I know you can help and search, but please... I would rather you here with me," she said before brushing some loose strands of his hair behind his ear.

Thor stared at his mother's tear-stained face in anguish. She was asking him to stay and yet... he needed to find Loki. None of this was supposed to have happened. Loki had never gone missing in the night before. His bed had never been discovered one morning with blood staining it. Something terrible had gone wrong, and this was the very reason Thor was here. To make sure nothing happened to Loki.

"You can still aid us, Thor," Odin said softly.

Thor's attention snapped to his Father. "How? I'll do whatever I can!"

"Tell us where Loki goes when he wants to hide," Odin prompted. "He is a clever boy... if he got away from his attacker he might have gone to one of those places."

Thor supposed that made sense, but he didn't know all of Loki's hiding places. "I will tell you the ones I know of... but I know that he kept some secret from me as well." Thor thought a moment and then realized there was another person that might know more. "He might have told or shown Sigyn some others, though."

"Sigyn?" Odin questioned.

"Isn't that Eir's newest apprentice?" Frigga asked.

Thor supposed he shouldn't have been surprised that Loki hadn't spoken to their parents about his interest in Sigyn, but he still thought his brother might have at least told their mother she existed. Thor nodded. "They have been striking up a friendship of late," he said.

"Then we shall ask her as well," Odin agreed. "Frigga..."

"Go. Find him," she said. "I will make sure that Eir is kept apprised and the council is kept quiet."

Odin gave just the slightest smile before kissing her cheek and giving Thor's shoulder a squeeze. "I will be back soon," he promised.

Thor watched with mixed feelings as his father left the room with a swirl of his golden cape. The young Thunderer was still certain he could be of more help than just telling his parents of his brother's favorite hiding spots. He could be out searching for Loki. Thor did not at all like being forced to wait for others.

Frigga straightened and wiped her face. "Come, dearest. We should see Eir and this young lady first, I think."

Thor nodded in agreement. The amount of blood on Loki's bed was worrying. Eir would need to be aware that most likely Loki was injured in some way although hopefully not severely. Thor tried his best to think positively. With how genius his brother was, Loki most likely had done as Odin had suggested and gotten away to hide somewhere. Why he wouldn't call for help from the guards, Thor didn't know. But surely there was some reason. Once they found Loki, he'd no doubt explain. Thor kept repeating that to himself as he followed Frigga through the corridors. Loki was fine -or he would be soon enough- because he just had to be.

They arrived at the Halls of Healing and Frigga immediately went to speak with Eir. Thor found himself staring at nothing in particular, still wracking his brain for anything that he may have missed the night before. Nothing unusual was sticking out in his mind other than the fact that so
many people he hadn't know had spoken with them during the feast. But, as Loki pointed out the
night before, many -if not all- had just been trying to curry favor with the royal family in some
way. They wouldn't have hurt Loki, as that would be the exact opposite of their goals. What could
have possibly happened? And how could Thor have been so oblivious?

Thor's room was just beside Loki's. True, the walls were thick, and Thor's bathing chamber was
between the two bedrooms, but how could he have not heard anything at all? Surely Loki would
have made noise or fought back if he were attacked. Even if Thor hadn't heard anything, there were
guards in the hall. They shouldn't have had the same problem of walls and distance that Thor might
have. And they would have been awake. Or, they should have been. If Thor found out that they'd
abandoned their posts or been sleeping while they should have been on guard, he'd bash them apart
himself. Off in the distance thunder rolled across the mountains threateningly.

"Thor, dear, please contain yourself," Frigga said. Thor looked over instantly. "A storm will only
make it harder for them to find your brother."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I'm just... worried," Thor said as he tried to tamp his anger down so that he
didn't call upon a storm. He could feel the static building in his body, but Thor would do his best to
keep it there and not let it escape into the atmosphere.

"I know. I am as well," Frigga said. "But your Father will find him."

Thor nodded in agreement. He knew that Odin would hold to his word to search all of the Realms
for Loki if it came to that. Odin and Loki's relationship had been much improved since Loki had
been able to talk with Gerd and reach some semblance of peace with what he was. There were still
issues that were in need of hammering out, but Thor at least knew for certain that Odin loved Loki.

"Are we certain that Loki is not merely hiding?" Eir asked.

Frigga's eyes flashed. "There was blood all over his bed, Eir!"

Eir bowed her head slightly. "I understand that, My Queen, but if I am not mistaken that is not
something that has never happened before." Thor was confused by that for a moment, but then his
mind caught up to what Eir was subtly implying, and his face went red. That was precisely what he
never wanted to think about when thinking about his brother.

"That is not what this is," Frigga insisted. "Loki would have cleaned the bed before leaving if that
were the cause. Others knowing about that greatly upsets him, nor would it make him flee without
a word. If he didn't run from us before he knew the cause he certainly wouldn't do so now!"

Eir bowed her head again. "Of course, I merely wished to be certain we evaluated all options. I will
find Sigyn since you mentioned you wished to speak with her," she said before hurrying off.

Frigga sighed heavily. "Mother?" Thor asked uncertainly. He hadn't ever seen Frigga snap quite
like that before, although it wasn't hard to see why she might.

"I am alright, darling," Frigga said. "We will find your brother, never you fear," she said while
brushing her fingers across his head.

Thor nodded. "I know we will, Mother." Frigga attempted a smile, but it wasn't terribly
convincing. Thor felt a deep need to comfort her somehow but wasn't sure how to go about doing
so. Just telling her everything would be well wasn't all that convincing. Odin already had, and those
words hadn't eased Thor's fears at all. He doubted it had been any more helpful to Frigga's.

A solution so obvious occurred to Thor after a moment, and he didn't hesitate to follow through.
He wrapped his arms around his Mother's waist in a tight hug. Frigga melted into the embrace and returned it just as fiercely. "Oh my, Darling... it's alright," she said. "Loki will be just fine, you'll see." Thor had a feeling she was trying to convince herself more than him.

"I know, Mother," he whispered back. His Father might have wanted him to stay in the palace, but if they did not find Loki quickly, Thor wasn't going to be locked away for his 'safety' either. Thor wasn't ignorant of the dangers of the world and would not allow not being full grown stop him from facing them for Loki's sake.

"My Queen?" Eir called.

Frigga turned back to the healer instantly. "Yes, Eir?"

"This is Sigyn. The apprentice you wanted to speak with," Eir said with a gesture to the girl standing beside her. Sigyn was in the white dress that denoted a healer with her long hair twisted back and out of her way.

"Sigyn, I have something very important to ask you," Frigga said with a strained smile.

"Of course, your Majesty," Sigyn replied. "Anything I can do, I'd be glad to."

Frigga nodded and then took a moment to gather herself. "My son, Loki, I understand you've been spending some time with him?" Sigyn's eyes widened, but then she hesitantly nodded. "Has he told you of any of his hiding places he might not have told his brother?"

Sigyn looked startled. "Hiding places?" she echoed. "He has many... I couldn't say if he shared any with me that he hadn't with Thor, however."

"Well, just tell me of the ones that you do know of," Frigga prompted. "It's imperative you tell us what you know, Sigyn."

"Has something happened?" Sigyn asked. "We felt the All-Father's anger earlier..."

"Loki is missing, Sigyn," Thor blurted out. "We need to find him because he might be hurt."

Sigyn very nearly gasped aloud. "Hurt? How?"

"We don't know, that is why we must find him, Sigyn," Frigga pressed.

"Of course," Sigyn agreed. "I... I will write down all of the places he's shown me for you now."

She hurried over to a desk and picked up a pen and sheet of paper to start scrawling out directions. Thor hoped that between the two of them they knew all of Loki's hiding places. Surely, his brother couldn't have so many that there was any nobody knew of. Surely...

Sigyn was only writing for a few moments and then came back over with the parchment. Thor caught a glimpse of it and was saddened to see so few places notated. Then again, Loki and Sigyn had only had a little over a week together back in Asgard, perhaps it made sense she would not know of many of Loki's hiding places. Thor was still bitterly disappointed about it. Thor reached out and took the list from Sigyn. "I will add what places I know of, Mother."

"Thank you, Thor," Frigga said. "Eir, as soon as we find Loki I will make sure you are informed so that you can attend him."

"Very good, Queen Frigga. I will prepare and await news," Eir agreed.
Frigga nodded to both the healer and Sigyn before leading the way out of the Halls of Healing. Thor was just a step behind her with the list still in his hand. "Perhaps they have already found Loki," Thor said as cheerfully as he could manage.

"Perhaps," Frigga said although her tone made it clear that she didn't believe it. Thor didn't either as that would have brought Odin rushing back, but he was glad that Frigga hadn't pointed it out. "We will wait in my sitting room, Thor, for news. And I must write instructions for the council. They were set to meet today, and obviously, that will be postponed."

Thor nodded in agreement and followed his mother to her sitting room where the Queen's loom was set up along with several chairs and bookshelves and other bits of Frigga's hobbies. Thor sat himself at the low table beside a couch that was littered with bits of fabric still only half embroidered. He had to search around for a pen, but once he'd found one, he started adding to the list that Sigyn had started. Thor was glad that the few places Sigyn did seem to know about were indeed not ones that Thor had, aside from one.

Thor only half listened as Frigga gave instructions to Fulla and several other handmaidens that would then be passed on to others. Nothing about it seemed more than telling others to handle the running of the palace while they looked for Loki, but his mother gave complete instructions anyway. Once Fulla left, Frigga sat down at her desk and started writing something out. The tension in the room was uncomfortable, but Thor knew of no way to ease it aside from getting news that Loki had been found.

To keep himself busy, Thor tried to wrack his brain as much as he could for as many details and hiding places that he knew of. Occupying himself that way seemed the only solution to his own anxiety save disobeying his father and going to look for Loki himself. Thor still might, but he would at least attempt to do as Odin commanded for a while. The door to the sitting room opened, and Thor looked up to see Fulla had returned. Several of the woman's wheat blonde curls had escaped the band holding it back, but she didn't seem to notice as she hurried past Thor to go to Frigga. "My Queen."

"Fulla," Frigga said with only a short glance up from what she was furiously writing. "Have you given out my instructions."

"Yes, My Lady."

Frigga nodded and wrote just a moment more before putting the pen down and handing the parchment to Fulla. "Give this to the council. It details all they need to know and what they are to do," she said. "The King and I will be far too busy searching for our son to deal with them today."

Fulla nodded and carefully folded the paper to put it in her pocket. "Of course, My Queen."

Thor watched the woman leave before turning back to his list. No matter how hard he wracked his brain, Thor couldn't think of anything he had left out although he still felt as if he wasn't doing enough. With a sigh, Thor got up and took his paper over to his Mother. "These are all the places I know of, Mother," he said.

"Thank you, Darling. I'm sure this will be very helpful," she assured him before glancing over the list quickly.

Frigga stood up still looking the list over carefully. She went to the door and called for one of her handmaidens. In just a few minutes she had sent the woman off to deliver the list to Odin wherever he was. Thor shifted his weight from side to side anxiously. "Might I go look for Loki, Mother?" he asked. "Please, I do not want to wait here..."
"I know," Frigga said as she went to Thor's side. "But you must stay here where you are safe. Someone may be targeting the Heirs to the Throne, and so you'd be in danger."

"If they were targeting Asgard's heirs wouldn't they have gone for me first, though?" Thor asked. He was older and the actual crowned prince. There was little reason to go after Loki first. Even if they had only decided on a whim to target the younger brother first, why would they not take both him and Loki? The villains had managed to steal away his brother without alerting anyone. If they had wanted Thor as well, they had the perfect opportunity.

Frigga shook her head. "Do not ask me to understand any who would hurt my children, Thor. I cannot."

Thor still wasn't satisfied by that. "I feel like I'm not doing enough."

"Believe me, Thor. I understand, but Heimdall and your Father are both searching everywhere for your brother. We must stay here while they do so," Frigga said brushing Thor's hair back. "They will find him quickly. We must have faith in that."

Thor nodded. "I will try my best, Mother."

"Good boy." Frigga kissed his forehead and tucked a braid back behind Thor's ear. "Now, let us sit and find something to distract ourselves with, hm?" Thor agreed without enthusiasm. The thunderer doubted very much that he would find anything to distract him from what was going on, but for his Mother's sake, he would try.

Together they sat on one of Frigga's couches, and Thor pretended to read some random book that he found laying on a table while Frigga worked on an embroidery. Judging by how many stitches she removed shortly after putting them in, Thor doubted she was having much more success in distracting herself than he was. Fulla returned after a little while and Frigga went to discuss something with her that Thor barely listened to. It sounded as if something had happened in the kitchen and that was not remotely something that Thor had the energy to worry about.

Just as Fulla was leaving to go pass along Frigga's instructions, a familiar old councilman with a limp came barging in. "Councilman Arngrim, this is my private sitting room," Frigga said in annoyance. "I did not give you leave to enter."

"I need to speak with you, All-Mother," Arngrim said, ignoring Frigga's obvious dislike. "There are things that simply must be dealt with! The barrier needs the All-Father so that it can be finished! The security of Asgard depends on it."

"Our son is missing!" Frigga snapped. "A Prince of Asgard or have you forgotten? We will deal with the barrier when he is found and not a moment before!"

"We could be attacked! Clearly, this is just a distraction!" Arngrim argued.

Thunder rolled across Asgard and clouds could be seen swirling darkly through nearby windows. Frigga's hair sparked with seidr like live wires. "Then they chose a perfect one! I warn you, Arngrim, if you voice even one more implication that my son is worth less than a Norn-damned wall I will personally ensure you are cursed with the greatest misfortunes I can think of for the rest of your days!"

Arngrim took a half step back -as if he had only just then remembered that the Queen of Asgard was a powerful Seidkona and offending her might not be the smartest thing to do. Another chorus of thunder from the sky echoed Thor's own rage. "Of course," Arngrim said as politely as he was
able, which Thor thought was still not very. "However, if the barrier is not completed then the kidnappers could flee Asgard," he tried.

"If these criminals flee Asgard we will simply hunt them down," Frigga hissed. "If we cannot even protect a prince and heir to the throne then a barrier is the least of our problems, Arngrim! Now leave. I will hear no more of this while my son is missing!"

Thor couldn't help but be satisfied as Arngrim went several shades paler than he had been initially. Arngrim seemed to try and gather himself, but then one look at Frigga's stormy countenance had him visibly reconsidering whatever he had been about to do or say. Instead, he bowed low to her. "I shall pray for the Prince's swift recovery and take my leave, your Highness."

"Good day," Frigga said although there wasn't a hint of genuine well wishes in the words. Arngrim was quick to flee and then when the door closed Frigga let out an angry huff. "The nerve of that man! Acting as if a wall was the most important thing to worry about!"

"I would have hit him, but I did not think you would have let me," Thor admitted.

Frigga sighed. "We cannot hit our councilmen, Thor. No matter how much they irk us or deserve it. A true pity sometimes," she said as she glared once more at the door and then looked to Thor. "How could he think we would be concerned about the barrier now of all times?" Thor demanded. Another roll of thunder from the sky and Thor made a concerted effort to tamp down his anger.

"Because he is an old fool that sees no problem as long as there is still one heir to the throne," Frigga said. "Try not to let him bother you, Darling. There are more important things to concern ourselves with right now."

Thor nodded. He would still very much prefer to be out looking for Loki himself. There was a soft knock on the door and Frigga called for whoever it was to enter. Fulla came into the sitting room already bowed. Thor figured that his and his Mother's ire had not been missed. "King Odin sends word that he has dispatched men to search the places you listed, All-Mother."

"Thank you, Fulla," Frigga said as she went to go sit down in the chair she had abandoned when Arngrim had burst in. "Now, if you'd be so kind as to bring me some tea? I have a need for something soothing for my nerves, lest I banish someone to another dimension."

"Of course, My Lady," Fulla said, not seemingly as startled as Thor was by that statement. He had no idea his Mother could do things like that. Then again, perhaps it was an attempt at a joke... Either way, Thor endeavoured to be more careful around Frigga from now on. To be safe.

Thor wasn't sure what to say or even if there was anything that he could say in this situation. This wasn't like when Loki fell from the Bifrost. There was no battle to describe or try to explain to her. Loki was not thought dead -no kidnapper would kill an heir to a throne, Thor was certain. Loki was somewhere, most likely somewhere nearby, and they just had to find him.

After some time of sitting in silence, Fulla returned with a tray of tea in one of Frigga's favorite pots that was decorated with elegant golden cranes that had been a gift from some other realm. Fulla asked if there was anything else, and when Frigga said no she excused herself. Thor didn't protest being handed a teacup even though he would much rather partake of something stronger. Thor knew that his Mother, more than anything, was simply looking for something to do. And so, Thor sipped at the flowery drink sweetened with honey and tried to think of some way that he could convince his parents to allow him to search for Loki. There had to be some argument that he could use.
Frigga sighed after several sips of tea and glanced at her embroidery work but didn't bother picking it back up. She traced a finger along the ridge of a purple Sky Lily that she had stitched into a border of her current project. "Loki is clever and strong," she murmured more to herself than to Thor. "He will come back to us."

Thor put his cup to the side and took his Mother's free hand with his own. "He will," he agreed. "Loki will be just fine, Mother. He is too stubborn to not." Thor had to believe that. Loki had escaped death and capture too many times for Thor to not believe it, though he very much doubted if sharing that knowledge would help his Mother currently. Thor would simply have to be strong for her and find Loki himself if it came to that.

Chapter End Notes

**Sons of Heimdall** - In myth Heimdall has 4 sons... all with different women (other people's wives actually) and it is from there the different 'creeds' of men come. Thralls, Common Free Men, Lords, and Kings. (To simplify, of course). So this family tree is just... a complete mess with pretty much everyone having multiple kids with multiple spouses. This is the third marriage for both Dellingr and his current wife Nott (Sif and Dagrs mom)... their family be driving me nuts! Also, full disclosure... I meant to intro the three sons here last chapter and forgot so I had to work them into the dream... my bad.

**Rage of The Royals** - I am of the opinion that the title Gods wasn't just because of propaganda and superior technology. There's a bit of truth to it and you do NOT want to get Gods angry. Seriously... they don't mess around in any culture.

**Again** - There's a little reference here to something happening 'again' curious as to how many of you know what comic story line I'm referencing...

**Fulla** - Frigga's Handmaiden. She was apparently important enough that a dead Baldr sent her a gift along after he was killed. He sent other things too but she was the only not family member to get something.
Searching for Loki when you're not allowed to is frustrating.

The palace was searched top to bottom three times, and the surrounding grounds were done five in the effort to locate Loki. Thor was finding it more and more difficult to do as his parents commanded and not go out looking himself. Incredibly worrying was the fact that, as the night set in, there was no indication whatsoever as to where the youngest Prince of Asgard could be. Heimdall turned his full attention to looking through the distant mountains, plains, marshes, and forests where the Einherjar had yet to reach even while groups of men and women went searching on foot.

Thor had assumed that Heimdall would quickly find his brother as very little could blind their watchman, but that was proving to either not be as accurate as Thor always had thought or whoever had taken Loki was far more powerful than anyone expected. Thor wasn't sure which option would be the better or worse in this case.

With no sign of Loki being found and night quickly setting in, Frigga was getting more and more frantic. She organized yet another search of the palace and grounds, this time with detection spells which would clue into any signs of Loki or his kidnapper even if they were obscured by magic. With the detection spells it quickly became apparent why Ofnir had slept so soundly the night before -and still was for that matter- despite how close he was to Loki's balcony. Someone had bespelled the young Wyvern with a potent sleeping charm, though how they had managed that was unclear as very few people aside from Loki could get near Ofnir without the beast reacting quite vocally. But then Thor realized after thinking about it that with how Ofnir had been roaring so much at night previously, they probably wouldn't have thought much of him creating a racket that night either.

Frigga contemplated releasing Ofnir from the sleeping charm placed on him but then realized that, without Loki, the Wyvern would most likely be very agitated. They had found during their testing before returning to Asgard that Ofnir disliked being charmed or bespelled in any way -apparently, something most Draconic species disliked they later discovered. Therefore, Frigga elected to allow Ofnir to wake up from the charm in his own time so he would not be as confused or ill-tempered. The decision was not guaranteed to help, but it certainly couldn't hurt.

As the sun finished setting, it became much more difficult to perform the search for Loki, but Odin didn't allow things to pause until morning. Tyr had called in every warrior he had at his disposal to help in the search, and all the citizens were told to keep a lookout for the missing Prince. Frigga insisted on Thor staying with her in the King and Queen's suite of rooms that night while the search continued.

Thor wanted to protest, but with how agitated his mother appeared, he thought better of it. Since his parents were refusing to allow him to participate in the search, keeping his mother company was at least mildly useful. Not useful enough by half but better than being forced to wait in his
own rooms with nothing to do. "Come morning your father will have no doubt found Loki," Frigga said from where she was standing by and staring out of one of the two balconies on either side of the sitting room. "Whoever had stolen him away could not have gotten that far."

"I'm sure, Mother," Thor agreed although he was worrying more and more as the minutes ticked by. Thor kept wracking his brain for any bit of information he could dredge up, but he was utterly failing. No matter how hard Thor thought back, he simply couldn't think of one person that came up to him and his brother during the party that would want to hurt them. And neither could Thor recall even a whisper of someone attempting to kidnap either himself or Loki. Thor supposed that it was possible his father wouldn't have told him if such a thing were thwarted in his past life, but he also would expect even plotting to kidnap a prince of Asgard would earn whoever attempted it a very public execution.

Eventually, Frigga sent Thor to bed, though he protested. He was far too worried to be appropriately tired. "Please, Darling. Staying up all night will not help your brother nor will it make any news come any faster," Frigga had said. Thor thought about pointing out that she definitely be up all night waiting for news he couldn't bring himself to do so when she was so visibly distraught. Thor retreated to the actual bedroom just as Frigga was ordering guards to be positioned all around the royal wing and specifically, the King and Queen's rooms -a somewhat unnecessary precaution as Thor wasn't about to be caught off guard since he wouldn't be sleeping.

Thor laid spread eagle in the middle of his parent's huge round bed and tried hard to think up some clue that he might have missed. His mother had sent him to bed an hour ago already, but Thor certainly wasn't in the most restful mood. He hadn't even closed his eyes since lying down. Perhaps, Thor thought, he could slip out and look for Loki without his parents finding out. But no, that would only worry his mother more. And -perhaps more importantly- there were guards posted on both the balconies of the royal chambers and in the hall so there was very little chance that Thor would be able to actually sneak out of the rooms without notice.

Beyond the door in his parent's sitting room, Thor could hear his mother pacing back and forth still. Occasionally Fulla spoke up to try and reassure the Queen, but that hadn't happened for some time so, Thor figured the handmaiden had either given up or been dismissed. Probably the latter, Thor thought, as Frigga had been getting increasingly less receptive to Fulla's attempts as the day had worn on.

Thor sat up and ran his hands through his hair. How in Asgaedia's sake could this even be happening? The whole reason he had done this was to protect his brother, and yet Thor had just allowed Loki to go missing! Nothing like this was supposed to happen. Thor had thought that, at most, some bullying might need to be dealt with, not being kidnapped from one's own bed!

The door between the sitting room and the bedchamber was a slab of Asgardian Elm that had to be at least three inches thick that Thor had left cracked open just wide enough that he could hear what was going on in the other room. So, when he heard his mother call out to Odin, Thor was on his feet in an instant. Knowing that his parents wouldn't likely tell him anything, Thor pressed his ear to the door and listened instead. Eavesdropping wasn't what one would call honorable, and Thor had often derided others for such tactics in the past, but Thor also needed to know what his father had found. "-ing to call Huginn and Muninn back to help in the search," Odin was saying.

"Heimdall still has not seen him?" Frigga asked. Her voice was anxious, and Thor could imagine how her face was twisted up from worry far too easily just by that alone.

"I'm afraid not," Odin murmured almost too low for Thor to hear. Frigga let out a cry, but it was muffled. "We will find him, Frigga. Even if we must tear every inch of Asgard asunder, I promise
"Has there been any sign of him at all?" Frigga asked desperately. "He was bleeding Odin, surely there was a trail or something!"

"I tried to have Geri and Freki track him, but they lost the scent shortly after leaving the gardens," Odin explained. "I know not how this villain or villains might have managed to do such a thing when all that was around was nothing save hills and farmland, but never fear, my lovely Sun, there are other methods we might try. I am not giving up."

"You already have Heimdall using his gaze to try and find Loki, and that has not given any further answers. We have searched everywhere on the grounds and in the palace to no avail, and even my scrying has turned up no hints. What more can we do?" Frigga demanded.

"I shall use Hlidskjalf," Odin stated -as if that were a simple task. Thor knew, however, that it wasn't. Using Hlidskjalf to see was a terrible strain and it took all of his father's concentration to direct the golden seat's powers properly.

There was a moment of silence, and Thor pressed closer to the door anxiously. "... using Hlidskjalf is very draining, Odin. It may send you back to sleep sooner than we expected," Frigga said.

"That is a risk I'm willing to take," Odin replied. "So long as I have a chance to tell someone what I see before falling to sleep then it is fine."

"And if you don't get that chance?" Frigga asked.

"What other option do we have?" Odin asked back. "I will call Huginn and Muninn back before sitting upon Hlidskalf, but there is little else that I personally can do to find our son."

Thor wanted to scream that he needed to do something too. That waiting for others to search for his brother was killing him, but that would let his parents know he was listening to their conversation. "Have there been any messengers?" Odin asked. There was no answer so Frigga must have made some motion. Odin sighed heavily. "I feared as much."

"But we could still get one," Frigga pointed out, sounding desperate.

"True, but I rather doubt that. If we haven't received demands by now it doesn't seem likely that we will be getting them at all," Odin murmured. "Whoever took Loki clearly has no interest in returning him to us."

Frigga let out a distressed noise. "But why? There are no active declarations of war nor has anyone issued threats against our family in ages."

"That may be, but we'll always have enemies within and without, Frigga. You know this." Thor didn't quite give credence to that idea. In his past life, only those who wanted to destroy all of Asgard or take the throne for themselves had disliked Thor. Very few common people had been against Odin's rule, and Thor was convinced that there was a way to be an effective leader and not always have enemies on all sides at the same time. Challenging, perhaps, but certainly possible, Thor thought.

"Is it against us?" Frigga asked. "Or is this against Loki himself? There are still so many who would hurt him just because of his birth. What if someone found out that he was Jotnar?"

Thor jerked in surprise and found himself dreading that idea. He knew perfectly well why Loki's species had been kept so quiet, even if everyone in the family would like to pretend otherwise. So
many warriors had come back from the years of battles with Jotunheim terrible injured physically, mentally, and emotionally, and even those that had not been hurt themselves most definitely knew those that had been. Thor also knew that vengeance was a seductive thing that few were able to truly resist the call of.

"It is unlikely anyone outside of the family will know of Loki's true race, Frigga. We should try our very best to not panic," Odin said. Thor shifted to peek through the crack of the door. He could only see a sliver of the room beyond, but that was enough for Thor to see part of where his parents were standing. Frigga had her head tucked against Odin's shoulder and neck, and Odin was doing his best to comfort her.

Frigga lifted her head. "My baby is missing, Odin. Do not tell me not to panic!" she snapped. "He could already be dead!"

Thor felt his heart leap into his throat and choke the very life from him. Loki simply could not be dead. Thor's heart stuttered into an almost painfully fast pace as he did his best to not panic. He knew that his brother couldn't be dead. There was far too much yet for him to do. Despite this, an insidious voice that sounded far too much like an older Loki whispered in his mind, Thor had already changed so much just by being here in the past. Who was to say this was not Loki's new fate? Thor pushed those thoughts away angrily. That just wasn't the case. Thor could not have done so much in so little time to lead to his brother being murdered as a child!

"He is not dead, Frigga," Odin murmured as he rubbed her back. "They would not dare to do such a thing."

"That is what you said before!" Frigga hissed as she pulled away and out of Thor's slim line of sight. "You said they wouldn't dare follow through with their threats, and they did, Odin!"

Odin's whole body flinched. "I know you blame me for that... but this is not the same situation. No sane being would risk my rage like that again."

"Who is to say these kidnappers are sane?" Frigga demanded.

Before Odin could answer, there was a knock on the door to the royal suite. Odin closed his eye for a few seconds before straightening his shoulders and back as if both were made with steel. "Come in!"

Thor couldn't see the door, but he recognized Tyr's heavy gait even before his brother spoke. "I would like permission to conduct searches of the city, Father," Tyr said. "Perhaps they have Loki hidden away in a house or a cellar."

Odin was silent but then nodded. "Search wherever you feel is necessary, Tyr. I will deal with the fallout from the people if they feel their privacy invaded afterwards," Odin said.

"Has there been no sign at all then?" Frigga asked.

"Not yet, but we will find something," Tyr promised. Thor shifted and saw Tyr had come to stand slightly behind Odin. Thor was vaguely startled to see that Tyr's eyes had gone blood red - the only outward sign that he was tapping into all of his abilities as God of War. Thor had rarely seen Tyr in his 'War Mode' as others had taken to calling it and never before had he used it while not in the midst of a battle. "Thraell will handle the search of the city, since he is one of my best captains, while I take my best trackers and continue to scour the wilds."

Odin nodded. "Good. Keep your mother apprised. I will be using Hlidskalf."
The red of Tyr's eyes faded back to blue as he regarded Odin carefully. "I would ask if you were sure, but I doubt you would be saying that to me if you weren't... I just ask that you try to not overexert yourself, Father."

"I can make no promise to that end," Odin answered.

"Do you think this is an attack from another realm?" Tyr asked. "It would be a devastating first blow to a war."

Odin scowled. "It is too soon to be able to tell. Though, if it is, I have destroyed more for less provocation in the past."

"Of course." Tyr's voice was very carefully neutral. "If I might point out, however, I do not think Yggdrasil can survive another cataclysm like the last one in its current state." There was no response from Odin, which Thor found far more unsettling than anything that he could have said. Tyr seemed to also find the lack of answer disturbing and bowed lower than usual. "I will return to my search," he murmured before quickly leaving the room.

Thor decided that his brother had the correct idea and slowly backed away from the door to go sit on the bed again. There was a bit more muttering in the other room but only for a couple of minutes. Frigga came in after that and gave Thor a strained attempt at a smile. "Thor. It is late. You should be sleeping."

"I can't sleep when I'm so worried," Thor told her honestly.

"Have you even tried?" Frigga asked as she sat down beside Thor.

"... no," Thor admitted. "But I can't even begin to think about it when Loki is in danger." Thor knew himself well enough to realize that much.

Frigga reached up to tuck a few loose strands of Thor's hair back. "I understand, Thor, but you're a growing boy and need your rest no matter how difficult that might be."

"I'm not a boy," Thor grumbled.

Frigga didn't argue, but Thor had the distinct feeling she didn't believe him. The thought occurred to Thor that he should tell Frigga the truth, but he dismissed it quickly. Finding Loki was by far what deserved the most attention right then and revealing what he'd done would only distract. "How about you at least try to rest before the night is over?" Frigga suggested. "Perhaps you'll surprise yourself."

Thor very seriously doubted that but agreed to try if only to ease some of the tension that his mother was holding. Frigga stayed with him for quite a while, but Thor was left lying there no closer to sleep than he had been before. The night seemed to take forever to pass, but with Frigga there beside him, Thor couldn't do anything to even make it appear to move faster. Thoughts chased each other in endless circles within Thor's mind as he waited for each second to meander past much too slowly.

After an agonizingly long and sleepless night, finally, Frigga allowed them both to get up. Judging by how the faintest rays of the sun were just peaking over the distant peaks of the mountains, Thor thought it was entirely possible that she had known Thor wasn't sleeping. And Thor didn't even entertain the notion that she might have.

Frigga had Fulla bring them breakfast in her sitting room. Thor forced himself to eat even though he honestly was paying so little attention to the food he couldn't actually say what the meal
consisted of. Thor was far more interested in the various things that Frigga was doing. Writing and reading letters, sending Fulla and other servants to deliver messages and bring people to her, and constantly looking out of the window. "I want you to stay inside today, Thor," Frigga said as she continued to organize search parties and glance over painfully short reports that had come in while they had been attempting fruitlessly to rest.

"Mother, I would much rather help look for Loki," Thor said.

"It is too dangerous, Thor," Frigga said instantly.

Thor huffed in frustration. "What if I was with Tyr?" he tried. Surely his Mother couldn't claim something was too dangerous if he was accompanied by his elder brother, the actual God of War!

"He will be investigating the Barrows today," Frigga said. "That is not a place I would like you to be."

"I am not afraid of tombs, Mother," Thor argued. The dead did not disturb him, although the idea of his brother being held in one of the underground rooms meant for no living person was somewhat unsettling. Especially as no person would venture there on a regular basis under normal circumstances so to hide someone there, would be akin to being buried alive. The idea made Thor's skin crawl. "Please. If I stay in here much longer, I may be driven mad."

Frigga frowned and Thor could tell she wasn't in the least convinced. "It is not safe," she said. "Not all of the Barrows are in the best condition." Most were pristinely cared for, but some of the older Barrows had fallen into disrepair when the families of those buried there either died themselves or fell upon hard times financially.

"I have explored more dangerous places than that," Thor said.

"That is hardly a way to convince me, Thor," Frigga replied.

Before Thor could try to say something else, there was a familiar roar from the garden. Ofnir had woken up from his magically induced sleep. The noise sent shivers down Thor's spine, and he couldn't help but stiffen. Ofnir's roar was one of the most frightening sounds Thor had ever been subject to. Perhaps it was just because Thor knew Ofnir -his temper and how dangerous he was- but the giant reptile's unsettlingly shrill roar that sounded more like someone being gruesomely murdered than an animal call was the worst noise ever.

"We need to calm him before he causes panic," Frigga said as she hurried out of the room and down the hall. Thor was right behind her, worried about how the wyvern would react when he was already agitated, and Loki wasn't there to calm him.

The two of them only managed to get about halfway down the hall before the sound of something large and heavy slamming into solid walls echoed through the palace. The guards posted throughout the family wing started shouting back and forth and readying weapons. Ofnir shrieked again, sounding ten times louder and much much closer than he had the first time. "Oh dear..." Frigga breathed.

Thor ran past his mother as the sound of something scraping over metal and stone echoed. Thor's spine wanted to curl up from how unpleasant the noise was. Ofnir was still making a racket and when Thor threw the door to Loki's room -the one with the best view of Ofnir's pen- open he was brought almost face to face with the wyvern.

Ofnir snarled from where he was half perched on and half clinging to Loki's balcony, his spines
raised dangerously like the fur on the scruff of a furious cat. The pupils of Ofnir's blue eyes had narrowed until it was just a line and his irises near the shade of lightning or cold fire. The wyvern's claws were digging into the stone of the balcony, and dozens of cracks had formed where the beast was resting his weight. The ear-splitting scrapes echoed again, and Thor realized that the noise was caused by the spikes on Ofnir's tail as they tore into the side of the palace. "Ofnir. Down," Thor commanded, trying his best to sound like Loki. As far as Thor was aware Ofnir had never done this sort of thing before. Ofnir hissed with his mouth opened wide enough to show every one of his sword-sharp teeth.

"Ofnir," Thor said in warning. "Get back down." The Wyvern hissed again and shifted as if trying to haul himself up higher. "No!"

Frigga came into the room and sent out waves of her seidr. Ofnir snarled and recoiled from the rose and gold tinted energy. "Back, Ofnir," Frigga commanded.

The Wyvern hissed again but crouched down lower. The dawn-colored magic wafted closer, and Ofnir snapped at the light, causing sparks to rain down across the golden stone floor. "Behave yourself, Ofnir," Frigga said. "Get down on the ground. The palace is not your personal mountain to climb."

A low growl built in Ofnir's throat and snapped at the Queen's magic again. More sparks showered across the floor, but it seemed to be an unpleasant feeling, and Ofnir shook his head with a snort. Frigga sent another wave of energy at the beast, and Ofnir hissed his displeasure. The wyvern nipped at the light, and little pops exploded around his mouth as he did so. Ofnir screeched making Thor have to fight the urge to clamp his hands over his ears. "You will do as I say, Ofnir," Frigga declared. "Now."

Ofnir continued to hiss and growl in displeasure but slowly moved lower. He didn't fully climb down until Frigga sent another wave of magic towards him.

Ofnir landed on the ground beneath the balcony with an earth-shaking thud and was still loudly protesting. Thor carefully moved to the door of the terrace though he didn't dare step onto it with how many cracks it now had from holding up Ofnir's weight. The entire area no longer looked structurally sound, and Thor wasn't about to risk being the reason all of the stone fell. Even without stepping onto the balcony, Thor could see Ofnir prowling beneath it.

Thor looked back at Frigga. "He is looking for Loki, isn't he?"

"I think that would be a safe assumption, yes," Frigga agreed.

"Do you think he could track Loki then?" Thor asked.

Frigga shook her head. "I doubt it, Thor. Wyverns hunt mostly by sight from the air. Though they have a good sense of smell as well, they are no bloodhound. Plus, Ofnir is still quite unpredictable. I would not consider it wise to let him loose."

"He'd never hurt Loki," Thor pointed out. Ofnir adored Thor's brother with a gleam almost like that of a child and parent.

"Yes, but look at what he did to the balcony," Frigga said with a gesture to the tilted and cracked stone patio. "He would do far more damage to other structures that are smaller than the palace in his search."

Thor scowled but supposed that, as much as he hated to admit it, his mother had a point. Tearing
Asgard apart wasn't ideal. "Come," Frigga said. "You can help me get Ofnir back into his pen, and then we can check in with Tyr to see what he has found."

Getting Ofnir back to where he should have been was much easier said than done. Even with Frigga's magic being used to herd the beast around, the two of them struggled with the headstrong wyvern for the better part of two hours before he finally went into his cave. A lot of the garden was torn up after from where Ofnir clawed at the ground or swiped his tail back and forth, but at least no people had been foolish enough to try and help them. The would have only gotten hurt.

Ofnir still was grumbling and hissing at them as he curled up and Thor imagined that was the wyvern version of pouting. The slit pupils of Ofnir's eyes had widened back to nearly round where he was hunkered down in the dark of the cave and Thor could hear scratching and crunching of the wyvern's claws mindlessly decimating the stones beneath him. Thor commiserated with the reptile as Thor also would much rather be out and looking for Loki. Although he sort of doubted that Ofnir knew that Loki was in danger. More likely Ofnir just didn't like being apart from his owner.

Thor was thinking of trying to slip away and look for Loki himself, but Frigga was watching him far too carefully. She didn't go so far as to take hold of him but Thor wouldn't be shocked if she had been thinking about it.

They ended up back in Frigga's sitting room waiting for news. The entire situation was driving Thor straight up the wall. Thor was hoping for something to distract Frigga so that he could slip out and begin his own search. "All of the hiding places that were on the list have been checked," Fulla reported. "There was no sign that any had been disturbed recently though."

"And Lady Eir?"

"She has said she is prepared to see Prince Loki the moment he is found and brought back to the palace," Fulla said.

"Good," Frigga said as she fiddled a small crystal that usually sat on the side table next to her favorite chair.

Thor watched as his Mother paced the room several times before going to the table where she had set up everything that she had received about the situation as it currently stood. A map of Asgard was rolled out across the low table with little marks drawn in where they had already searched for Loki and found nothing. Reports in the form of short notes were littered where they had been dropped after their contents were recorded on the aforementioned map.
Though they had been searching since the night before, there was still far too much of Asgard that they simply hadn't been able to look at yet. Heimdall and now Odin were both using their own methods of searching, but neither was particularly fast. They still had to search just like the Einherjar that were scouring the foothills and fields beyond the city limits. The beaches on either side of the port had been combed, and nothing had been found. No ships had been permitted to leave and were being checked over from bow to stern -which took time as some of them were designed to carry over a hundred men.

Overall, the search was taking much too long. Thor knew that if they just let him search he would be able to find Loki faster than this! There had to be some kind of clue that he was missing. Something that he hadn't thought of.

Thor folded his arms across his chest and racked his brain until it felt as if a vise made of pure Uru metal was squeezing his skull. "Nobody has been able to find anyone that saw anything unusual last night, my Queen," Fulla reported.
"And all of the guests were questioned?" Frigga demanded.

"We are still tracking down some of them, your Highness," Fulla admitted. "Some did not return to their own homes last night, and quite a few were from other realms or were workers that are camping in Jarnsvidr."

"Make sure every single one is questioned before the day is done," Frigga insisted. Fulla nodded and gave a bow before hurrying off to pass along her Mistress' wishes.

Thor wasn't sure that would be enough but didn't know how to voice that without agitating his mother further. If Thor were in charge, he wouldn't bother asking them nicely if they'd seen Loki or anyone suspicious the night before. He would make absolutely sure that they didn't, although he was a little lacking in the how of that. Thor didn't want to hurt anyone that hadn't done anything wrong, but this was too important to just leave to the alcohol hazy memories of those who didn't care about Loki in the first place.

Plus, there had to be someone who knew something about what had happened. Thor was sure of it. Sneaking into the palace and then fleeing with an injured Prince of Asgard was not something that could be done with absolute secrecy! And it wasn't as if the Palace was in the middle of nowhere. There were always people milling about or coming to and fro. Especially as Loki's room faced the west, and the entrance most servants used was also on the west side of the Palace. Thor just had to figure out how to figure out who would know what he needed.

Thor pondered the question another few minutes when the answer popped into his head. The solution was so simple that Thor wanted to smack himself for not having thought of it sooner. There was indeed someone who knew exactly what had happened. Both where Loki was and who had taken him. What's more, Thor had a way of reaching him.

King Loki would know damn well what was going on.

Thor would have to go to sleep to get his answers, but that was an easy enough hurdle to clear. His mother would no doubt be glad to help him get some sleep, despite the fact that he still felt as if he'd just channeled an entire storm through his veins for hours on end. Though, Frigga would no doubt be suspicious if he tried to go to sleep before night had even set.

Waiting for it to be late enough to go to bed without raising any eyebrows was perhaps the hardest thing Thor had ever had to do. Thor had never been a very patient person and was even less of one when anxious. Loki being missing meant he was more than just slightly worked up.

Thor spent most of the afternoon staring either at the position of the sun against the walls and floor or watching the clocks refuse to move. He never really understood how long a minute was until there were just too many of them in his way.

Finally, after taking far too long and making Thor want to pull his hair out, the sun had fully set behind the mountains. Frigga had dinner brought to them, but Thor made an excuse of being tired. "I'm not surprised with how little you slept last night," she said. "But eat a little something anyway. Then you can go to bed."

Thor huffed in frustration but ate the stew and bread that had been prepared as quickly as possible. He didn't even bother taking seconds or thirds like he normally would have. Once done, Thor jumped to his feet and gave his mother a speedy peck on the cheek before leaving the room. Frigga seemed too preoccupied to notice his odd behavior; otherwise, Thor was sure she would have questioned him further about his eagerness.
Thor knew himself well enough to realize that just lying in bed wanting to fall asleep was unlikely to work. He was far too worked up to manage natural rest. So, Thor made a quick line for the Healer's Wing. Several guards were tailing him, but Thor paid them very little attention. So long as Thor didn't try to leave the palace, he doubted very much that they'd try to stop him.

"Lady Eir!" Thor called even before the door was fully opened.

Eir came rushing from her rooms at the far end of the wing. "Did they find Prince Loki?" she demanded. Several nurses -including Sigyn, Thor noticed- straightened and turned to see his answer. No doubt they had already been briefed by Eir as to what would be expected of them.

"No, not yet. But they will," Thor assured her. Of course, by 'they' Thor really meant himself, but Eir didn't need to be told that. "I was actually hoping for your help."

The nurses and assistant healers quickly turned away, and Eir relaxed just slightly. "Help with what, Prince Thor? Is this important because I really should be staying ready for when they find your brother."

"It will only take a moment," Thor promised.

"Very well, continue," Eir agreed.

"Mother wants me to rest, and I'm quite tired myself," Thor began only slightly lying, "but I do not think I can get any when I am so worried about Loki. Do you have something that can help me sleep for a few hours?"

"I really shouldn't," Eir said. "Sleeping-draughts are only meant to be used for real medical reasons..."

Thor had worried that might be her response, but luckily, he'd been spending much more time with Loki than he had in his first life and had picked up a few of his more subtle ploys. "I don't want anything powerful. I just didn't get to sleep last night at all so I was hoping if I had something to get me there everything else would take care of itself."

Eir still didn't look entirely convinced by that but after several moments of studying Thor carefully sighed. "I suppose a watered down draught should be able to do that. But we won't be making a habit of this, Prince Thor. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Lady Eir," Thor agreed instantly.

The Royal Healer hummed. "Wait here. It shouldn't take me but a moment to weaken one for you," she said before turning to walk into the apothecary that was attached to the healing wing.

As Thor waited, he noticed Sigyn edging closer to where he was standing. Once it became clear that Eir was indeed busy, Sigyn crossed the room entirely, "Have they found anything at all?"

"Not yet," Thor answered. "But I just know that they will shortly."

Sigyn brought up one hand to bite at her nail nervously. "I'm just so worried, Thor. Who would want to hurt Loki? He's such a sweet boy."

"He is," Thor agreed although he knew plenty of people young and old that would greatly disagree with that assessment. "And I don't know who would want to hurt him. They won't get away with it, though."
"And... is what Eir said true?"

"What did she say?" Thor asked warily.

"That there was blood found in his bed?" Sigyn asked.

Thor swallowed hard. The question brought forth the memory, and that made him feel queasy. "...yes," he answered. He wouldn't lie to his one-day sister-in-law. Sigyn was just as worried as Thor was, probably more as she didn't have Thor's knowledge of the future to take comfort in. Sigyn didn't know all the myriade of things Loki had yet to do in his life. "But all will be well."

Sigyn didn't look convinced, but before she could question Thor further, Eir returned with a small bottle of pale yellow potion. Thor gave Sigyn what he hoped was a reassuring smile as she hurried off. Eir gave Sigyn a glance but otherwise didn't question what they'd been talking about. Thor took the potion that he was handed. "Now, give it a decent chance to work before you come running back here," Eir told him firmly. "I might have weakened it, but I doubt I made it entirely ineffective."

"Yes, Lady Eir. Thank you for the help," Thor said with a slight bow. Eir didn't look happy. Thor didn't give her a chance to issue more warnings or anything of the sort and just rushed from the hall.

The guards had been waiting for him outside and rejoined him the moment he stepped out of the room. Thor paid them as little attention as he had the first time and just ran to his bedroom. No doubt his mother would have wanted him back in her bedroom which was ringed in all sorts of protective magic, but Thor didn't dare risk any of that getting in the way of however he reached King Loki.

Thor barely waited long enough to shed his boots before he uncorked the bottle with his teeth. The young again Prince jumped onto his bed and downed the potion in one quick motion. He barely even tasted enough of the liquid to realize it had an oddly fruity tinge. Thor flopped down against his pillows and hoped that the draught would be fast acting.

Thor closed his eyes and thought hard about the talisman that King Loki had given him when they had met. If ever there was a time where trusting the ancient trickster was worth the risk, it was now. The potion seemed to take forever to actually lull Thor off to sleep, though Thor knew that the sleeping-draught usually took effect in ten to fifteen minutes at most. The single thought that Thor kept chiefly in mind as he waited to sleep was how much he needed to reach that other Loki. There was nobody else as uniquely qualified to answer the riddle of where Loki had been taken but him.

Slowly, Thor became aware that he was dreaming. In his fist was a hard metal disk and Thor brought it up in front of him to study. Somehow the golden medallion with Loki's helm engraved on it was there in his palm faintly glowing. Had it worked then? Thor had to admit part of him had worried that it wouldn't, and he would get no help at all.

The talisman started glowing brighter until it was so intense that Thor had to close his eyes against the rays. He even instinctively raised an arm to block the golden light from his face. The medallion was suddenly gone from his hand, and Thor cautiously reopened his eyes and lowered his arm to see nothing but black around him. Then he saw the distant glow of a fire and felt an icy gale cut through him to his very bones, and Thor knew he had made it to the proper place.

He was full grown like the last time he had been in this odd dream-like realm of destroyed Asgard, but Thor didn't pause to examine if anything else had changed. Thor had come for a reason, and if
this visit were like the last time, King Loki would be in front of the fire. Sitting on his decimated throne.

Thor walked through the dark, ignoring the cold wind tugging at his cloak and trying to work his braids free. Ice crunched under his boots overly loudly as he stalked forward. The Thunderer was on a mission, and Thor's eyes were fixed on the glow of the fire up ahead of him. Thor swore he heard growling from the dark, but this world seemed so dead that he was sure it was his imagination. Finally, the frozen crystals that were being crushed by his feet disappeared, and Thor was walking through the golden throne room that was a sickening glimpse of what could be.

King Loki was still sitting where he'd been the last time Thor was there although the elder God was slumped back with his eyes closed as if dozing. "Loki!" Thor roared as he stopped beside the skull wreathed fire. Dark lashes lifted only halfway, and Loki looked Thor over curiously.

"How pleasantly surprising... I must admit, I thought you would not be returning," King Loki said as he straightened just slightly. There was a pause of only a few scant seconds. "You look quite angry."

"Loki is missing," Thor said as he tried his best to not let his anger run wild. If this Loki were anything like the Loki that he'd fought against so much in his first life, Thor's wrath wouldn't help get him any answers.

Loki hummed thoughtfully. "I had nothing to do with it if that is what you're so angry about," he finally said.

"We cannot find him," Thor said, ignoring King Loki's defensive comment, "tell me where he is!"

There was a long moment of silence as Loki's green eyes wandered over Thor's face in an appraising manner. "I'm not so sure I should intervene... you may explode a blood vessel."

"Just tell me!" Thor demanded, and thunder rolled in the distant mountains.


"Do not tell me to have peace!" Thor snapped. "There was blood. All over. His. Bed!"

Loki's face clearly showed something had clicked for him. "Ah... is it that already? I must admit that I cannot keep track of time across dimensions as well as I would like. I can only get glimpses of your path, you see."

Thor ignored the last part of what Loki said for when he actually had time to worry about such things. "What is 'that'?" Thor asked the terrible feeling that he'd been having since Loki failed to answer his door growing to even higher levels.

Loki tilted his head to the side slightly and seemed to be considering Thor carefully. "Nothing good, but I think you already were aware of that," he said. "But, I will ease at least some of your worries. Loki is in no danger of death."

"But he is hurt," Thor stated. King Loki nodded so shallowly that Thor almost thought he hadn't moved at all. "Then you must tell me where he is. Please, Loki," Thor urged. Nobody in Asgard had any clue to where the young Loki was, and it was taking too long to search for him by foot.

Loki closed his eyes and held still for a few moments. "Mm, to direct you to the correct place with just verbal directions would be difficult... luckily for you, I can see that you already know the place where my younger self is."
"What?" Thor demanded. "I am sure that I would remember if I already knew of where my brother was being held!" he snapped.

There was a sigh full of exasperation, and Loki opened his eyes again. "If you would but let me finish?" Thor forced himself to settle and lowered his fists that had come up without his conscious thought. "It was not long ago, you and my younger self both were in Jarnsvindr for some reason at night. I believe you even commented about-"

"Him looking to stay a while," Thor finished as the cabin he'd all but forgotten about rapidly returned to his thoughts.

"Jarnsvindr is large and dangerous. It would take many days for the Einherjar to search the woods enough to come across the cabin," King Loki pointed out. "And... for other reasons, he feels himself quite safe from being discovered with my younger self."

Thor was staring at the elder Loki, slightly disbelieving and unsettled. Why was this seemingly familiar when he was absolutely positive that this hadn't happened before? Something tugged at the back of his mind, but Thor didn't want to examine it too closely. "Loki-"

"You should hurry, Thor. Tell Odin, and he will no doubt send Tyr to retrieve young Loki," the elder version of Thor's brother said in a tone that was very firm but not as harsh as Thor had been expecting. "This man is very dangerous. He could very easily get the best of you at in your current body so do not attempt anything alone," Loki warned.

"He must be powerful to be able to hide you from Heimdall and Father," Thor spat out bitterly, although he was more upset at the situation than the old version of his brother.

Loki shrugged. "Not actually."

Thor's attention snapped back to Loki in disbelief. "But to cloak something from Heim-"

"It does not necessarily take power to hide something from sight, Thor," Loki interrupted. "All it truly takes is craftiness. Something I excel at... and so does the one that holds my younger self."

"You said he was dangerous."

"To you as you are currently, yes," Loki agreed. "Even but a few centuries older and I doubt I'd say the same. Now go and tell Mother or Odin or even Tyr."

"How will I explain knowing this to them?" Thor asked. "I cannot just say that you told me!"

Loki sighed, "Just tell them the truth, Thor. Isn't that what you're always on me to do? Maybe it is time to explain to them why you have done what you have, although I highly doubt the All-Father will be happy with you for it."

"It is not Father's anger that worries me, but what telling them might do to the future," Thor admitted. Though he had come back to the past to change things he didn't want to be reckless about it either. Well... anymore reckless than he already had been.

"I don't know what to tell you, Thor. You've never been particularly good at lying..." King Loki pointed out. "And I doubt you can keep this secret forever. At least telling them now -in order to save your brother- would show your intentions, while misguided as always, were good."

Thor wasn't sure if he should trust Loki about that or not. Telling his family about what he'd done seemed like something that could quite easily backfire with repercussions Thor couldn't begin to
guess at. While Thor believed that King Loki didn't seek to hurt his younger self, Thor had been burned too many times for his trust in Loki to do so now. "What is important right now is Loki. Nothing else," Thor said. "Now send me back so I can save him."

King Loki eyed Thor for several moments and then sighed. Thor thought that he sounded oddly disappointed, which was ridiculous because really. Why would Thor simply blurt out something like that only on his recommendation? Such a truth could cause no small amount of chaos and damage. "Very well, Thor. I cannot force you to believe me," he said before gesturing with one hand. "But I do hope you find him before things get worse."

"Get worse?" Thor asked.

King Loki didn't answer, and Thor found himself waking up in his room feeling hung over and slightly confused. Several minutes passed before Thor could force the fog in his mind to dissipate - an unfortunate side effect of having used a sleeping-draught to get to sleep in the first place. As soon as his thoughts caught up, Thor leapt out of bed. Thor knew where his brother was now and he needed to save Loki.

Chapter End Notes

**Huginn and Muninn**- This is the reason that I needed Huginn and Muninn outta Asgard. They can fly over an entire planet in a day... they'd be able to cross Asgard in a fraction of that time.

**Thor**- Thor is a bit naive still. He's not nearly as bad as he was in the beginning of Thor 1, but he still doesn't fully grasp the challenges of providing for your people as a leader and dealing with other nations. He'll get there eventually.

**Power of the Gods**- It is my intention for every important God/Goddess to have their own ability. Thor and Loki are easy. So is Baldr and Hodr. Tyr is the problem child in this as neither in Marvel or the Prose Edda gave Tyr any real... feats so much. The biggest thing anyone remembers was his hand got ate. Not much of a power there. So, I think I finally found something for him to do but I'm keeping it under my cap until a little while later when he's in an actual fight.

**Protective Frigga**- She's a mother bear really. There's no way she'd let Thor go out and search for Loki. Probably not even if she did know that Thor was a time traveller.

**My Map-sterpiece!**- I have no idea why the map is blurry... I swear it was fine before. Maybe it's just because of how many times I've had to post it just to get it embedded. The places actually identified that you might not be able to see is: Borson Barrow right above the palace. Asemattr which is that Henge on the other side of the mountains. Everything else I think is big enough but if you have questions feel free to ask. I also wasn't going to go into huge detail with the city though I wanted the approximate size mapped out. **The map is easier to view on my Tumblr account which is bfaymiller**
Several minutes passed before Thor could force the fog in his mind to dissipate - an unfortunate side effect of having used a sleeping-draught to get to sleep in the first place. As soon as his thoughts caught up, Thor leapt out of bed. Thor knew where his brother was now, and he needed to save Loki. Thor barely took the time to throw clothes on and shove his boots onto his feet before rushing from his room. He still had no idea how he was going to explain any of this, but he'd worry about that later. Thor wished as he ran, that he'd gone to bed in his parent's room. Then he'd be able to tell his Mother what he'd found sooner, but Thor doubted she would have let him take the draught in the first place.

Suddenly, Thor's foot was brought short midway through the air, and he felt a tug from under its mate. He'd stepped on his untied laces. A harsh curse escaped even as Thor hit the ground hard and slid perhaps a foot. The impact and subsequent slide stung his hands and knees. Thor forced himself up and ignored the guards that were already approaching as if to help. There wasn't time to worry about a little fall like that.

The door to Frigga's sitting room slammed into the wall as Thor burst in, "Mother!" He didn't see Frigga in the room, but he did see Fulla. Thor turned his full attention to the handmaid. "Fulla, where is the Queen?"

Fulla had been startled at Thor's abrupt entry and had dropped the tray she was carrying. A pitcher of water smashed across the floor and the cups that went with it shattered into dozens of shards. Fulla bent down to quickly pick up the scattered pieces of crockery and put a cloth over the spilled liquid so that it would soak up. "Your mother is questioning the few visitors that Asgard hosted that had already returned to their own realms about your brother's disappearance, my Prince. She will be done in an hour or two," Fulla supplied.

"But I needed to talk to her now!" Thor hissed. He might not know much about magic but he knew a spell to speak across realms would be complex indeed, which meant his mother had most likely retreated to her private lab - which Thor hadn't the skill to get into. Only Odin would be able to get past Frigga's wards. Well, and Loki when he was older, but that helped very little here.

"If I had the skill to interrupt her spell casting, I would," Fulla said. "Unfortunately I am not nearly
as gifted as the Queen in seidr wielding."

Thor cursed again and spun on his heel. Perhaps he could draw his father's attention from his search then. "My Prince, what is the matter?" Fulla called, but Thor was only distantly aware of it as he ran for the throne room. Normally Frigga was the only one who could draw Odin's eye back to the present and the world around him before he was done using Hildskjalf. But Thor was hopeful that he too could get Odin's attention -even if it would probably take more effort. At the very least, Thor could reach Odin. That was better than simply sitting around and waiting.

The guards watched curiously as Thor ran through the expansive throne room to where his father was sitting. A few made an aborted motion as if to stop him as he climbed the steps. "Father!" Thor threw himself to his knees at the last moment as he recalled that he should be showing the King sitting on the throne more deference than he actually was. The motion sent him practically colliding with Odin's knee, but Thor didn't care. If anything that would help return Odin's mind to his body. "Father! Please, I need to tell you something!"

Odin's blue eye remained fixed into the distance somewhere over top of Thor's head. There was a faint glow among Odin's iris, causing the blue to shimmer oddly with power that sent chills down Thor's spine. The young Thunder God pushed the disquiet to the side to grab Odin's knee and shake his leg too and fro. "Father, it's very important, please!"

What King Loki had said frightened Thor on a primal level, and he didn't want to wait and risk Loki being hurt more. "Father! It is about Loki," Thor hissed urgently as he shook Odin's knee harder. Odin's gaze continued to be distant.

Thor let out a noise of frustration but kept trying to rouse the King for a quarter of an hour. Maybe he should go and try to get through his mother's wards even though Thor knew it wasn't at all possible he'd be able to do so. Trying to access the Queen's lab might alert her that Thor wanted to speak with her, although Thor had to admit he wasn't at all sure about that. He'd never before even thought to enter the lab, much less when Frigga was busy with something.

Thor tried once more to get his Father to wake and then turned to run back down the stairs when it too proved futile. A thought occurred to Thor as he ran down the throne room again and he slid to a stop, nearly tumbling over himself once more in the process. The guards were eyeing him uncertainly but Tyr's centuries of training regimes kept them rigidly at attention. These Einherjar were some of, if not, the best if they were on guard in the Throne Room. "Is General Tyr in the palace?" Thor asked the nearest Asgardian.

"No, my Prince," the Einherjar said. "The General and all the Captains are currently scouring the countryside looking for Prince Loki."

Thor let out another noise of pure frustration and didn't even bother to thank the guard before whirling away to go and try again to reach his mother. Someone had to be around that Thor could tell. At the very least his mother should be done soon, Thor tried to assure himself as he ran. Then she could contact Tyr, and then he'd go and get Loki, and then everything would be alright - because it just had to be alright!

Frigga's lab was not somewhere Thor went on a regular basis as he'd never had much interest in magic, much to Loki's continued annoyance, but he recalled that it was in one of the Eastern spires all by itself. The lab was at the top of a tightly spiraling set of stairs with each stone step having been carved and inlaid with bits of gold, and the railing was of something that looked like spun glass but was much sturdier.

Thor had only just reached the hall that led to that particular tower when something caught his
attention out of the corner of his eye. Thor slid to a stop and stared out of the large open veranda he had been running past. The sky above Asgard was... purple. Thor hurried to the rail of the balcony that was large enough to have an entire high table sitting comfortably in the middle and twisted to look up at the sky more fully. The top of Valaskjalfr was glimmering with different colors reflected off of the gold and silver plating almost as if it were the Bifrost. He recognized the colors of a sunset to the West where Thor couldn't see it. "It is that late?" he breathed to nobody.

The sleeping-draught had made Thor slumber the day away. He'd never actually used the draught before and hadn't realized it would affect him so strongly. Eir probably hadn't realized it either, or she would have watered the potion down even further. Or, perhaps, Thor had just been far more exhausted than he'd realized and his treacherous body had kept him asleep even after the draught had worn off. Either way, that meant that Loki had been held captive almost an entire other day.

No.

That wasn't acceptable.

First instinct had Thor rushing for the stables, but then King Loki's words returned to him. The man is very dangerous. He could very easily get the best of you in your current body. Loki could be exaggerating about that, Thor figured, but he rather doubted it. And even if he were, it would be far better to be safe than sorry. Thor turned on his heel and ran back to his room with all the speed the young prince could muster. He nearly tripped again but caught himself. The guards looked alarmed, and a few tried to call out to him, but Thor ignored every attempt. He couldn't wait to get his parents involved. Thor had to act. Now.

Thor wished desperately he had Mjolnir, but since the hammer was still locked in the vault, he settled for grabbing his best sword from where it was sitting on top of Thor's dresser. Forcing himself to pause a moment to actually tie his shoes and pull on his training gear for whatever minimal protection it would offer was harder than Thor thought it should be, but he knew it was vital. The training gear was little more than hardened leather with a few bits of metal sewn onto the largest open areas of his chest and back. None of his current equipment was meant for more than the force of a blunted weapon and would be gradually increased as he got older.

Once Thor was kitted out as best he could be, he hurried from his room down to the stables. Thor couldn't afford to take the time to run to that cottage. The idea came to him to take Ofnir, but then Thor discarded that. Ofnir, while an ambush predator, was not particularly stealthy on the ground due to his mass. Oh, he had his moments, but with how agitated Ofnir already was Thor doubted he'd be able to get to the cabin without alerting whoever had taken Loki. Thor couldn't risk that so he would ride a horse. He had no idea which horse as Thor didn't have his own as of yet, but he was confident that he'd find one willing to take him.

Stable hands were mucking out stalls and brushing down horses when Thor arrived, but none of them paid him much attention. They were quite used to Thor being in the stables lately what with his extra chores, although if they'd looked closer, they might have noticed the oddity of his dress and that he was armed. Thor wandered through the stalls, mentally debating with himself which horse would be the best option. Some were faster than others while others were easier to handle. And yet other horses were so particular they wouldn't allow anyone but their owners ride them, so they were all definitely out. Audun, the buckskin stallion his father favored, was staring at Thor from over the top of his stall door.

"Audun... I need your help," Thor said as he went to the horse.

Audun snorted, Help with what, young Odinson?
"I know where Loki is, but there isn't time to spare. My parents are unavailable, and I cannot wait," Thor whispered. "Can you take me there and then go and find Tyr?"

You should not go wherever it is on your own, Audun argued.

"Please, Audun. If I do not stop this... I simply must."

Audun blinked his large warm eyes and was quiet for a long moment. Why do you not simply go to Tyr then? It would be safer.

"I am not concerned with my safety," Thor replied. "If you will not take me then simply say so and I will ask another."

There was a snort of annoyance from the stallion and Audun tossed his dark mane. I did not say that I wouldn't. I simply worry you have not thought this through. Thor supposed that he might not have, but he wasn't going to admit to that. Audun was quiet for another moment before snorting yet again. Very well. But only because you seem as if you will go even if I deny you.

"I would," Thor confirmed.

Audun sighed heavily. Get my saddle, then, he commanded.

Thor rushed to do as the stallion ordered. Audun's tack was mostly polished black leather with golden medallions of the royal house fastened to it in several key places such as the breastplate and also echoed on the cheek straps and noseband of the bridle. Though it was awkward to saddle the warhorse by himself, Thor managed and then climbed up with the help of a small step stool. Audun was a horse for a grown Asgardian and Thor hadn't yet managed to get the length of leg required to climb up without help. I still say this is a bad idea, Audun commented before beginning a comfortable but fast walk out of the yard and onto the streets of Asgard.

"Bad idea or not, it must be done," Thor said as he guided Audun to the road that would be most direct in getting them out of the city.

Where are we going? Audun asked as he obediently slipped into a tölt to travel down the street like Thor was indicating.

"Jarnsvidr," Thor supplied. "There is a cottage there."

Jarnsvidr? You said nothing about Jarnsvidr. You should not go there alone, Audun said.

"I will have you," Thor pointed out.

Audun snorted and shook his head. You know very well what I mean. Do not play at coyness. This idea is getting worse and worse all the time, he grumbled. I should take you straight to Tyr instead.

"Audun, please! I do not even know for certain where Tyr is other than out searching the wilds," Thor said. "I cannot bear to leave my brother a prisoner even a second longer than I must."

It is a danger.

"I can look after myself," Thor declared.

That is highly debatable, Audun said although he continued to go where Thor guided. Audun still had reservations about this idea, and it was an Asgardian Royal Steed's duty to ensure their rider's safety if at all possible. That was a source of great pride from them. Audun could quite easily take
Thor someplace else entirely, or throw the Prince from his back and refuse to take him anywhere, but Audun had also been trained since birth not to. The stallion would not impress his own will upon the situation unless he was absolutely certain that was the only option for making sure his rider was safe, and he was not entirely convinced yet that that was the case. Are you sure that Odin could not be reached?

"Yes, I'm sure," Thor said in exasperation. "I went to him first! Father was too deep in Hlidskjalf's thrall to even hear me."

And Queen Frigga?

"Locked away in her lab where I cannot reach," Thor said. "Believe me, Audun, I did try to search for someone else to do this and if I had any way of knowing how fast I could find Tyr I would do that instead." Even as he said that, though, Thor couldn't be entirely certain he was telling the truth. His patience was already stretched much too thin by being forced to sit in the Palace and simply wait for others to find his little brother.

I am a steed of Odin, I could most likely find Tyr for you, Audun pointed out.

"Then do so after you drop me off," Thor said, trying his best to not snap and feeling as if he were failing.

Audun tossed his head again but didn't say anything for a little while. The sky was getting steadily darker as the sun set behind the mountains, and the lights of Asgard's buildings were beginning to fade behind them. You did tell someone that you were going did you not, Prince Thor?

"I told you, there was nobody to tell," Thor said. "I meant anyone at all that you were leaving the palace, Audun clarified. Your parents will worry if they find you just missing without a trace. Your brother already is."

"I-of course I did!" Thor said perhaps a shade too quickly. Audun turned his head to look back at Thor with one big eye. Thor felt the blood of his cheeks heating and cleared his throat. "I did," he insisted.

... you are a terrible liar, little Prince.

Thor sighed heavily at that. "I know..." He honestly had no idea how Loki managed to lie through his teeth so often and so effectively. Lying was difficult to do... not to mention exhausting.

There were very few roads to Jarnsvidr and only one that cut through it entirely, which followed the Amsvartnir river to go through the like-named pass. Those heading to Folkvangr, the home of the Valkyrie, and the villages near it used the pass so that they did not have to traverse as many rugged cliffs in the process and were thus safer. Therefore, there weren't really any turns to take from Asgard to the Iron Wood and Thor could turn his attention away from the road.

Thor knew that this was a stupid idea, but, on the other hand, he didn't think that he could do anything other than this. Loki needed him, and Thor wasn't going to let a little thing like 'permission' or 'danger' get in the way of saving his brother. Though now that Audun had mentioned it, Thor did wish he'd mentioned to someone that he was leaving the palace grounds. His mother would be beside herself with worry over him. An oversight he shouldn't have made but had been too caught up in getting someone to save Loki to really consider. Thor vowed to be better about that in the future. He hated when his mother cried.

Audun paused at the edge of Jarnsvidr and peered back at Thor. You're positive you don't want to
"Go find Tyr instead? he asked.

"Yes, Audun. I am positive," Thor said firmly. "Besides, we're already halfway there."

"It's the next half that worries me," Audun muttered as he started walking again.

"Do not be a donkey, Audun," Thor said.

Respect your mount, young Prince, Audun replied. Unless you want to find yourself dragged off to a place you know not where. Thor scowled but decided to not test his luck. Audun was one of the more level-headed horses in the stables - especially considering he was a stallion - but it wouldn't be impossible for him to lose his temper by any means. Thor just nudged his heels into Audun's sides. The buckskin horse snorted and tossed his head before starting to walk forward. Thor heard Audun grumbling about what a terrible idea this was, but it wasn't at all clear, so Thor didn't bother with paying much attention to the complaints.

The sun was no longer even slightly visible, and the purple of the sky was getting darker by the second. Travelling under the shade of the trees of Jarnsvidr made the darkness of falling night even worse. The dimness of the surroundings only ramped up Thor's nerves. He found it very odd that he'd never felt particularly unsettled by Jarnsvidr before, but now Thor swore that he was wandering someplace far more sinister and dangerous than just some forest. Thor almost felt as if someone or something was watching from the shadows of the trees just waiting for him to make a wrong move. That was ridiculous, of course, Audun would react if anything dangerous were that near. Even a well-trained horse with higher than average intelligence was still a horse and had a more insistent flight over fight response. But that didn't help Thor from imagining danger lurking nearby.

Thor focused all of his attention on where they were going. Loki was in these woods being held against his will if King Loki was to be believed. Now was hardly the time to be cowardly.

I have rarely been in Jarnsvidr before, Audun muttered. I dislike it... even if the road is comfortably wide.

"I find I don't much like it right now, either, Audun," Thor agreed. "But we must continue on."

This is foolish... Thor didn't bother to respond to that comment from the horse. Foolish was probably accurate, but Thor was well known for doing foolish things.

Light, which was now silvery from the moon rather than golden from the sun, was struggling to reach through the canopy of trees more and more as they followed the road. Thor figured that his mother would have noticed him missing and started searching for him by now and he had half a mind to turn back for that alone but refused to allow himself to do so. Plus, it wasn't as if he had sneaked out of the castle, Thor reasoned. Plenty of people had seen him saddle Audun and leave though they had probably assumed that he had gotten permission beforehand. Perhaps Frigga would have even managed to rouse Odin to come after him. That would be very good. Thor would still get in trouble, but at least he could then show his father where Loki was being held. That was perhaps not the ideal way of getting Odin involved, but Thor was doing the best he could with not even really much of a plan.

Everything looked different in the forest compared to the last time that Thor had travelled through it. He had been going the opposite way last time and hadn't even been paying very much attention to the landscape they were walking through. Thor had been utterly at ease with his brother by his side and a fearsome mostly grown wyvern stalking behind them. Perhaps he really should have brought Ofnir despite how much attention he would have attracted. Thor wasn't even sure why he
felt compelled to keep his approach so secretive other than he didn't know what would happen to his brother if the kidnapper was spooked by the approach of a search party.

Audun's ears were flicking back and forth nervously as they moved, but the stallion seemed in control of his nerves. Thor was grateful for that as he had too much on his mind to concentrate fully on horsemanship.

Finally, after what felt like days of following the road, Thor spotted the cabin from before. "There it is," he hissed to Audun as he pulled lightly on the reins. Audun snorted but stopped. Thor slid out of the saddle without taking his eyes from the small building. Someone was clearly home as there was smoke coming from the chimney and lights in the windows. "Go and find Tyr or my father, Audun."

*I am not sure I should leave you alone,* Audun said, pawing at the ground with one hoof nervously. *Everything in me tells me this place is dangerous. I do not like it here.*

"All the more reason to go and get help," Thor shot back. "I will be careful, but I want to see if I can spot where he's keeping Loki."

*This is not wise!*

"Shh, Audun," Thor hissed. Though to those not gifted with All-Speak the stallion would sound no different from any other, a vehemently protesting horse would still draw attention that Thor couldn't afford.

*You will not step foot inside that building,* Audun commanded. *Your father would turn me to glue and stew."

"I wouldn't let him."

*You couldn't stop him if you were dead,* Audun replied. *I'll not leave without your word, young Prince."

Thor sighed and glanced up at the horse. Audun was staring at him with an intensity that was wholly unnatural for a horse. Thor decided it would be better *not* to test Audun's resolve about this. And despite his brave face, Thor also didn't like this area at all. The cottage loomed unpleasantly and made Thor's skin crawl. He wanted someone else -preferably someone else with a much larger weapon- to be there with him. "Very well. I promise I won't go inside. Now, will you go and get Tyr or Father?"

Audun studied him another moment before snorting. *Very well. But remember your promise. I would prefer you stay on the road, but I doubt I can garner that so stay out of sight instead.*

Thor nodded and watched as Audun turned and walked back the way they'd come. Audun wasn't yet out of sight but was well out of hearing range when he suddenly broke into a gallop and flew down the road at speed. Thor was rather impressed by just how fast the horse was but no doubt Audun would have to slow back down before he even got to the edge of Jarnsvídr to conserve his own stamina.

Thor turned back to look at the cottage and let out a low breath. No matter how unpleasant a feeling he was getting from the house, he had to press forward. Loki was counting on him, and Thor would not let his baby brother down.

Most of the trees around the cottage had been felled -probably so that they could be used for the construction- so silvery moonlight spilled over the grass and turned it an odd blue-grey color. A
well that Thor hadn't noticed before then was sitting several dozen feet from the road, and the house was even further back than that. Luckily, the clearing had not been removed of all underbrush so Thor thought that he could still sneak closer to the building without being spotted. Even more hopefully, nobody would look through the windows at the wrong time. Thor probably shouldn't be counting on luck and hope, but he would take them gladly in this instance.

Thor couldn't help but be nervous as he slipped through the ramshackle wooden gate to the wall builder's yard. The entrance looked temporary and the fence -which Thor didn't recall seeing upon his first time here- did not even fully enclose the clearing the building was in yet. Thor made sure to skirt around the light spilling out from the windows of the cottage so that he didn't accidentally get spotted. Thor had no actual proof whatsoever that his brother was here. He had no way to explain why he had come to search this house since he couldn’t think of a way to tell anyone that an older version of Loki had told him to look here. He wasn’t even sure that he believed King Loki when he got right down to it. But his Loki was missing, and Thor would not take any chances. Plus, though Thor had thought about things during the ride on Audun's back, he was struggling to come up with a reason why King Loki would lie about this.

On the back side of the house, there was a small shed that looked as if it housed a few horse stalls and shared a wall with the main house. Beside the barn, an alternate entrance to the main cabin that Thor had not seen from his vantage point at the road could be seen by how light shone through the crack at the top of the door. Thor was glad there was a second entrance as he had still didn't have a solid plan for sneaking into the building if he really had to. He might have promised Audun but if Thor caught sight of his brother in that house he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep that promise.

Thor figured that the back was most definitely the smarter way to enter than the front door if it came to that and gripped his sword tighter as he slowly approached. Thor wasn't yet planning on going inside, but perhaps he could find a gap to peer through. The young Thunderer could hear the man inside the house moving around -judging by the clanks and bangs Thor could hear- most likely doing something in the kitchen. However, Thor wasn't going to take that on face value and wanted to glance inside to see if he could spot where the man was. Unfortunately, though the gap between the door and the frame was enough to let light and probably a draft in through, it wasn't wide enough for the prince to spy with. Thor ducked low to avoid a window and then rounded the corner.

The next window was covered with some sort of thick fabric but pulled to the side enough that Thor could still glance into the cottage. He could just see Flárekkr's back in the reflection off a polished shield hanging off the wall. The man's dark skin and toned muscles were broken by long, straight scars that stood out like silver streaks. The man had been whipped at some point. Thor thought he most likely deserved it and would beg for a whip if it turned out Loki truly had been taken by him. Flárekkr seemed entirely consumed by what he was doing so Thor risked a more extended look into the building.

The cottage looked to be just a single room from what Thor could tell, and most of that was dedicated to a large bed piled high with bear furs left in a tangled mess. Thor didn't spot Loki inside the cottage, but he couldn't see every corner of the room from his particular vantage point. A glint of something shiny under the bed caught Thor's attention. It was something metal. A blade it looked like. Small enough to be a dagger but Thor was much too far away to tell any details of it. Loki would no doubt summon a blade to defend himself, but Thor would have to actually go in to look at it closer to know if it was Loki's. Thor still didn't really want to do that yet. He had promised and all...

Thor sneaked back around the house and slowly made his way past the door again. There were other windows on the other side of the cottage that Thor could use to get a more complete picture
without having to break his word. Suddenly, as he had just past the door to the barn, Thor heard thrashing and a horse screaming from inside the stable. The builder shouted for the animal to be quiet from inside the house and the movement of a latch somewhere nearby caught Thor's attention. The back door!

Not having any other choice unless he wanted to be spotted, Thor quickly ducked into the stalls to hide behind a barrel. The stable door reopened a moment later to show the nearly eight-foot-tall dark-skinned Aes. Flárekkr smelled of booze even from a distance and was not wearing boots but seemed far more savage than Thor had expected - though he had apparently put on a rumpled shirt before coming out. He stormed inside, and Thor watched as the builder went straight up to the only horse in the stalls and slapped it hard across the rump. "I told you to shut up!" the builder yelled. "Don't make me whip you again!"

Thor winced at the sound of flesh being hit again and peered over the edge of the barrel to what was going on nearby. Thor was surprised to see not the black stallion he was expecting - the one he vaguely remembered with the builders from his first life - but a blue roan mare that had a full cloth mask on over her bridle and was chained to the two posts on either side, standing in the middle of the room. Bloody whip marks were along the poor thing's back and rump, none of which seemed to have been appropriately treated. The mare screamed, and though Thor could understand most animals through All-Speak, her screams were pure pain and no words.

Flárekkr smacked the horse hard on the backside again before going towards her head and yanking the bridle she was wearing. The horse's head was wrenched down, and Thor winced again as bloody foam dripped down from the mare's mouth from the front where the mask was partially open to allow the horse to breathe. The builder whispered something in the horse's laid-back ear and then patted her thick neck almost gently.

Realization started building in Thor as he watched Flárekkr continue to pet the mare's neck with a very uncomfortable gleam in his eye. The horse shied away but could not move far due to the chains. An unsettling smile began to form on the dark Aes' face. Thor had never seen his brother shift into a horse. Horses were the one form Loki absolutely never took. He said it was because of the 'utterly ridiculous rumors' about Sleipnir. But as Thor watched the mare shy away from the man that was starting to pull off his own shirt, the young Thunderer began to realize what he was actually seeing. Flárekkr tossed his shirt to the side, leaving his chest bare again save for a thick silver necklace that caught the faint light.

Fury began to build until Thor was shaking. Of course, Loki would deny until his dying breath being violated, especially in the form of an animal. Who wouldn't deny it? As the builder reached for the fastenings of his pants, Thor exploded.

The sword in his hand flew across the small stable and sliced deep into Flárekkr's shoulder where it stuck. The builder screamed even as Thor rushed forward. The young God tackled the larger man to the ground and twisted his sword ruthlessly. There was another scream from Flárekkr before a massive fist slammed into Thor's temple. The young Thunder God tumbled off to the side as his vision swum. Thor heard the scream of a horse again as he tried to roll back to his feet. Thor's head was throbbing, and his vision still wouldn't resolve from how hard he'd been punched. Hooves slammed into the ground beside Thor, and the young Prince rolled away to avoid being trampled.

Thor managed to get his feet under him and swayed as he looked around for his opponent. A foot slammed hard into Thor's gut and ribs, and he hit the wall hard before sliding back down with a groan. Thor hadn't expected to be so much slower and weaker than his opponent. He'd never fought someone seriously while this young before. King Loki had been right. That was irritating. Thor pushed himself up from the ground and looked up to see the builder looming there. Thor's
sword was tossed to the far side of the stables and disappeared into a pile of hay. Blood was oozing from the man's shoulder wound, but Thor noticed greyish jelly-like pus oozing out along with it. What was this man?

"Well, well, Prince Thor. You grace me with your presence," Flárekkr said with a sneer. "If I had known you'd willingly come to my stables I'd have just invited you outright."

Thor grit his teeth and thunder rumbled in the distance. "Run now before my Father catches up to you," Thor spat. "That will be your only chance of survival."

"He'd have to find me first," Flárekkr said without much concern. "And I am very good at hiding."

"So a coward then. Not surprising," Thor spat. His vision was still slightly off, but a few fast blinks were helping to mitigate the issue at least a little.

"I am not a coward," Flárekkr replied. "I just know what I want and am skilled enough to get it."

Thor felt the tingle of electricity building in his muscles. "Where is the other horse?" Thor asked. If Thor's assumption was correct that this man trapped young boys as animals and then... it was stomach churning to think about, but that meant that the horse Thor remembered was yet another victim.

Flárekkr tilted his head to the side as if confused. "Other horse?" he echoed. "Oh! I see. There is no other horse, little prince." Thor was now confused. He distinctly recalled a black stallion helping construct the wall. The horse had been distinctive because of how unusually strong and regal it was. Odin had even considered buying it at one point if Thor recalled correctly.

"I don't like blondes as much," Flárekkr was saying suddenly as he pulled his belt free from his pants. "But your brother's fun and you're about the same size as him... and I must admit, I was originally thinking that having both the golden sun and pale moon of Odin’s sons in my stables would be quite poetic..."

Thor felt rage building again at the confirmation that the 'mare' was indeed Loki. He'd all but known it before Flárekkr had made the taunt, but confirmation was almost worse somehow. Thor had no idea how this monster had forced his brother to keep that form, but Thor also didn't care. "I will kill you for touching him," he hissed as he pushed himself to his feet. His vision had finally realigned, and his breathing was short now from rage rather than pain.

"You're awfully young to talk about killing people, little prince," he said, seemingly entirely unconcerned.

"Age didn't stop you from touching my brother!" Thor clenched his fist together.

The man -the monster- shrugged. "What can I say? He's a beauty. You'd have to be dead below the waist to not want him." Thor heard a distant but familiar ringing that resolved into a song he hadn't heard in years. "For the first time in a long time, I can't decide if I like him better like this or how he was when I took him from his princely bed. As a horse he is so warm and welcoming... but he was so sweet in that royal virginal bed of his too... He cried so prettily..."

Thor felt the rage bubbling over. Trees were being torn apart by wind outside, and lightning cracked relentlessly above. The song growing in his mind was roaring in strength now. Thor automatically stuck his hand out and a moment later caught the handle of Mjolnir as she crashed through the wooden wall of the stable. Flárekkr took a step back with wide eyes, obviously recognizing the ancient hammer and justly frightened of it. The storm was already building to mythic levels
overhead and Thor, though his arm shook from the now unfamiliar weight of the hammer, brought Mjolnir around.

"How do you have that?" Loki's kidnapper demanded.

"Because she knows you need to die too," Thor said as lightning split the sky and thunder rolled over the mountains. "And I will be more than happy to grant us all that wish!" Flárekkr took a step back, and Thor jabbed Mjolnir's head towards him, using the enchanted metal much like a lightning rod to focus his seidr. Lightning slammed through the roof of the stable with deafening force. Loki screamed and reared as much as the chains would allow though it could barely be heard over the thunder.

When the light finally faded, and Thor could blink his vision back, he could see the half-charred body of his opponent groaning on the ground. Thor had missed killing the beast with the lightning, but the hit was devastating anyway. Half the roof of the stable had been obliterated, and parts were smoldering. Hay on the ground was burning, but the rain was already pouring down from the angry sky, and Thor had more pressing concerns besides.

Thor crossed the room and brought Mjolnir up above his head. With all of his strength behind it, Thor brought the massive hammer down against the builder's head. A sound similar to a foot going through a gourd echoed in the wrecked room as the Uru head of Mjolnir flattened the skull of Svadilfari -for that was who Flárekkr had to truly be Thor now realized. Thor had not known that the builder had been some form of shifter himself, but that was the only explanation. Red and pink gore splattered across the hay-strewn ground, and Thor let go of his hammer where it sat embedded in a deep dent in the floor.

Thor stepped back, trying to catch his breath. He was unprepared for how much effort using Mjolnir so early would take. As he stared at Svadilfari's corpse, Thor's eyes widened as he saw his dark skin's hue shift into a blue color. He was... a Jotunn was building their wall?

Thor shook his head to get rid of the shock and unimportant thoughts. The monster’s true nature was of no real concern, especially now that he was dead. Thor left Mjolnir where she lay and grabbed the mask over Loki's head. "Loki! It's alright, brother. I'm here now."

Loki screamed again and pulled away. Thor cursed some but managed to pull the mask off. Immediately, he could see that the horse was definitely Loki. Horses didn't have emerald green eyes. But Loki jerked back and fought to get away with more wordless screams. "Loki!" The whites of Loki's eyes were visible as he struggled in the tight chains. "Loki! It's Thor!"

Thor had never seen Loki like this, utterly mindless with terror, and it was frightening. Thor grabbed the bridle around Loki's head and fought to pull his brother back down so that he could hopefully calm him. Loki screamed and thrashed his head, fighting against the pull of the bridle with animalistic panic.

The bloody bit came loose, and Thor was suddenly pulling the thick leather straps free. Thor fell back with a thud and pushed himself up quickly so as to not be trampled. The horse's screams slowly morphed as Loki's body almost melted. Suddenly, Loki was back although bloody, naked, and still screaming.

Thor threw the bridle -which was rippling in his hand, he distantly noted- away and grabbed his brother in a tight hug. "Shh, I'm here. You're safe!" Thor pulled Loki's head into his chest and ran his fingers over slightly grimy black locks. "He will never touch you again, brother. Never again!"

Slowly the ear-rending screams from his brother faded into sobs, and Loki grabbed Thor tightly.
Thor kept Loki against his chest and gently rocked him as he cried. The rain was pouring and coming in from where the lightning had split the roof of the stable. Pink water trickled down Loki's back as the rain quickly soaked both boys to their bones. Thor slowly picked up his trembling brother and carried him over to where the roof was still intact. "Thor..."

"I'm here," he responded instantly as he continued to brush his fingers over Loki's hair.

Loki didn't say anything else and buried his face in Thor's shoulder. Thor knew that he should ask Loki how badly he was hurt so that Thor could pass the information along to Eir when they got back to the palace, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. The whip marks across Loki's back had been bad enough when he was a horse, but now on his own pale skin, it was horrific.

Very slowly Loki managed to regain some small amount of composure and looked up. "H-how did you find me?" Loki asked in a voice ruined from screaming and crying.

Thor tried to smile, but it was hard when blood was coming down Loki's chin from his cut up mouth, and his eyes were bright red from crying. Thor wiped the blood from Loki's chin as best he could. "I'm not sure. I just had this feeling I should check here... he was the only one that had come to Asgard lately and seemed like he was planning to stay."

Loki studied Thor for a moment before leaning forward to bury his face in his brother's chest again. Thor instantly wrapped Loki in a hug and held him. He knew they'd have to go home soon, but Loki wasn't in any shape to do so. "We should find you some clothes," Thor murmured after several minutes. Loki nodded but didn't move from his spot on Thor's lap to allow that to happen. As Thor sat there with Loki, the younger prince slowly broke down again into sobs, and all Thor could do was try his best to comfort his brother.

Thor could taste and smell blood and belatedly realized that his nose was bleeding a great stream of red that the rain was only partially washing away - probably broken if the pain was anything to judge by. His face also throbbed, and Thor had a feeling his eye was swelling up with a bruise from Svadilfari's fist. Thor's stomach and side were also throbbing, but nothing felt broken aside from his nose.

They were still sitting there nearly half an hour later when the door to the stable was kicked in. Loki flinched down lower into Thor's arms, and Thor whipped his head around. Tyr came into the barn with his sword already drawn. Right behind him was Odin with his hair plastered to his head from the rain. Odin's one eye scanned the room quickly and then focused on his sons. "Thor, Loki! What happened?" He stepped over the body of Svadilfari to kneel down beside where Thor was sitting with Loki.

"He was hurting Loki, Father. I had to stop him," Thor replied as Loki's fingers dug almost painfully into his bicep and fresh sobs escaped the Trickster.

Out of the corner of his eye, Thor saw Tyr kick Svadilfari's leg like trash on the street. Fitting, Thor thought. "How did you summon Mjolnir, Thor?" Tyr asked as he eyed the hammer.

Thor shrugged. "I lost my sword, and I needed a weapon. She just came to me," he answered. There was a moment's silence, and then Odin straightened.

"A question for another time," the King of Asgard said as he reached up to undo his cloak. "We must get Loki to the palace and have Lady Eir tend to him," Odin said as he wrapped his cloak around his naked son. The long red cape was soaked through, but it was better than nothing at all.

Odin reached down to take Loki from Thor's lap, but Loki flinched away so hard the cloak fell
from his shoulder. Odin drew back instantly and hurt flashed through his eye before it was swallowed up by anger. Thor knew it wasn't directed at Loki -who was still crying and his knuckles had turned pure white from the strength of his own grip. "I'll carry him, Father," Thor promised. Odin looked conflicted but then nodded.

Tyr kicked at the body again with disgust. "I will stay here and see what I can find about this... beast," he said to Odin. They both winced however when that word only drew a pained noise half like a gasp and half a sob from Loki's throat.

"I have you, brother," Thor murmured as he reached up to brush his fingers over the wet strands of black hair. He paused to clasp the back of Loki's neck, but even that barely seemed to slow Loki's crying.

Odin looked over at them and hesitantly reached out to pull the cloak back over Loki's shoulder. The youngest prince shuddered and choked but didn't flinch as severely this time. Odin eyed Loki with anguish before looking to Thor. "Can you carry him, Thor?"

Thor nodded immediately. "Of course, Father." He'd already promised he would. All the way back to Asgard if he must.

"Then let us go. Frigga is worried sick," Odin said. Loki flinched, and a little noise of distress escaped and Thor squeezed the back of Loki's neck just a little in an attempt to be comforting. He couldn't possibly imagine what Loki was trying to process right then.

Getting to his feet was difficult with Loki in his arms and clinging so tightly, but Thor didn't let that hinder him overmuch. The storm was still raging up above. Thor didn't bother trying to contain it, nor did Odin ask him to do so. Perhaps he knew it would be pointless. Loki still had his face buried into Thor's shoulder. As Thor got closer to the road, he realized that Audun had returned and with the horse was Gisl, Sinir, and Falhofnir.

Loki suddenly made a choking noise before flailing wildly. Thor tried to hold on, but his brother was in a panic and managed to escape his grasp. Loki was screaming and scrambling back, and Thor was about to ask what was wrong when he realized that Loki was staring with utter terror at the horses. Of course. "Loki!"

Odin took two steps forward and put his hand to Loki's head even though the prince was thrashing and shrieking. Tyr had run out of the stable, but Odin was already muttering something. Gold and silver seidr seeped into Loki's head. Loki abruptly fell limp, although Odin managed to catch him before he hit the ground. Thor could only stare in horror as Odin picked up the now blissfully unconscious Loki in his arms. Odin glanced over his shoulder at Tyr. "When you are done here... burn the house. You know what to do with the corpse." Tyr's face was grim, but he nodded instantly. "Come, Thor, your brother needs to see a healer."

Chapter End Notes

**Valaskjalfr** - This is what I’ve decided the palace of Asgard is called. It is the name of the mythical hall that houses Hlidskjalf; hence I thought it most appropriate even if in myth it was described as having a silver roof rather than a golden one. Gladshheim was the other possible one I was considering as that is where all the Gods have their high seats, but I eventually decided to make Gladshheim a separate meeting hall within the actual palace of Valaskjalfr sort of like the council chambers.
Tölt- A tölt is a specific gait that only Icelandic horses have and is under the heading of an ‘ambling gait.’ It is a great trail riding pace as it is very fluid and can be much faster than a regular old trot (it has a variable speed anywhere from a fast walk to a canter). It is actually a hereditary thing so while other horses can be trained to get close to a tölt, it isn’t actually one. Only Icelandic horses or horses mixed with Icelandic breeds do a tölt. I could get into more detail here, but I’ll spare you the horse nerd-dom.

Amsvartnir- I didn’t identify this on the map in the last chapter because it would have been so small as to be hard to read but there is a lake just above Jarnsvidr on the other side of the mountain, and that is Amsvartnir. In the lake is the island Lyngvi where Fenrir was bound.

Folkvangr- Translates roughly to Field of the Host and is technically ruled by Freya. Since Freya has also been depicted in the past as a Valkyrie, I decided that all the Valkyrie stay there.

Sun and Moon- In the original myth the builder (never actually named) wanted Freya’s hand in marriage and the sun and moon. I’ve used the idea of a sun and moon here as him subtly saying he wanted to take both princes even though in the myth it was quite literally the sun and moon he wanted.

Svadilfari and Loki- I have obviously adjusted a few things in the telling of this myth but have kept a fair bit as well. In the original telling, for instance, the colors of the horse were grey and chestnut. Loki was the Chestnut probably because in the original myths Loki and Thor both were described as being redheads. Take that Natasha. And in the original myth, Loki was deliberately tempting Svadilfari away by being a mare in heat, and it went a little sour for him. Also, Svadilfari wasn’t a shapeshifter, but a very strong horse and his owner was indeed a Jotunn in disguise. Thor killed the wall builder for the deception and when he got mad that his horse had been lured away, preventing him from building the wall in time to get the Sun, Moon, and Freya’s hand in marriage. In this telling, I made the two characters of Svadilfari and his owner into one and made it so that he’d been after Loki from the beginning because he was a very perverted individual. I also adjusted a few other things about Svadilfari, which will come out later. Let’s see if anyone of you guesses from the clues I left.

Loki’s Lie- So, obviously, Loki lied to Thor about what happened in the first time with Svadilfari but I think that’s entirely understandable. He is just a kid and was just through an incredibly traumatic experience. He spent his whole life hiding that it ever happened. How anyone found out about it enough to spread the truth as a rumor is anyone’s guess at this point and Loki spent not an insignificant amount of time trying to find who did and show them his disapproval. He spent a lot of time and effort making sure that his story about magically creating Sleipnir was believed and hated that the truth was even a rumor being spread around.
Riding back to Asgard continued to be a tense but hurried ordeal. Just getting free of the forest felt like it took much too long, and after that, they still had too far to go. Loki was cradled in Odin's lap with the King's cloak wrapped around him to shelter the young prince from the rain that was still tipping down in buckets. Thor was trying to pull back his emotions to allow the storm to wane - it was only making the trip back to Idavoll's city limits all the more difficult - but he just couldn't do that. Thankfully, Odin didn't bother trying to order Thor to halt his storm either because he didn't care overmuch himself or he knew that Thor would be unable to follow that order.

The rain made it near impossible to see beyond the nose of the horses they were riding on, and lightning regularly flashed through the black clouds to be followed by furious thunder. Thor barely registered it at all except for when a lightning strike too near would terrify the horses and force Thor and his father to slow in order to control them. The very last thing that they needed was to be thrown from the back of their mounts. Thor tried again to tamp down his rage and sorrow, but he only succeeded in lightening the rainfall marginally.

The streets of Idavoll were looking closer to raging rivers and citizens were frantically pulling things inside their homes to protect from the rain or any potential floods that might occur while others were sloppily barricading their doors and windows to protect from the gales and any tossed storm debris. Thor barely noticed the chaos and just wiped the water pouring down his face off with one hand as he followed the King. If tears were mixed in with the rain, well, Thor couldn't find it in him to care about that either.
Odin rode at a pace that was much too reckless considering the inch or so of water flowing over the stone flagstones and pooling in any slight dip in the road like lakes. The royal steeds were sure-footed beasts, however, and did not slip even on the sharpest curves and corners. They took the horses all the way to the front gates of the palace and up the many stairs before Odin got down. He didn't even wait for his mount to come to a complete stop as he swung himself off. Thor scrambled to follow.

They had not gotten more than two steps past the door when Thor heard his mother. "Odin!"

"I have him Frigga," Odin rumbled as Frigga rushed to them, her dress snapping behind her from how quickly she'd run. "I have them both. But Loki must be taken to Eir immediately."

Frigga let out an anguished cry when she saw her son's battered face tucked against Odin's shoulder. "Loki! Oh, Darling!" Tears were already falling down her cheeks as she ducked low to her son in Odin's arms. "My sweet baby, I was so worried!"

"I had to put him to sleep, for now, Frigga," Odin said as he started walking. Frigga managed to get beside her husband to keep pace while Thor rushed to follow. The servants struggled to close the door against the raging storm, but the wind made it difficult. Eventually, Thor was sure that they would manage. The young prince could not bring himself to be overly concerned about that.

"Put him to sleep?" Frigga echoed.

"He was frenzied," Odin said. Thor recognized the tone as being the one his Father used when trying his best to keep his temper. Off in the distance, the ground of Asgard groaned with Odin's fury. "Beyond reason in his terror. I could not let him stay in that state."

Frigga looked even more stricken but nodded in understanding. "We will have to wake him to try and discover the full extent of his injuries..." she murmured although she sounded as if that was the last thing that she really wanted to do. "The monster who did this?" Frigga asked suddenly. "What of that, Odin?"

Odin glanced over his shoulder at Thor ever so briefly. "The beast is dead, Frigga," Odin told her. "Thor avenged his brother... although it was a far kinder death than the villain deserved, he will not torment another soul again." Thor thought he heard a flicker of pride in Odin's voice, but Thor himself couldn't find satisfaction in his own actions. Thor should have been there sooner. Loki had been so hurt... Thor could have stopped it from happening. If only he'd noticed something amiss that night. There had to have been something that beast had said! Some clue when he came up to the Princes at the feast! Thor had failed no matter if he killed Svadilfari after the fact.

Eir was waiting for them when they arrived in the healing wing with Loki. Instantly there was a flurry of activity, and Eir quickly dismissed nearly all of her assistants after a few hushed words with Odin. Only the most experienced of Eir's helpers stayed as Odin laid Loki down on a Soul Forge that had already been made ready in a private room right by Eir's quarters. It was the same room that all the members of the royal family were treated in. Thor hung back, not sure what to do with himself but unable to leave either. He had to stay and make sure Loki was well tended to. That his little brother was going to recover even despite how horrible a state he was in.

Thor knew, logically, that his brother was in the best of hands. However, Thor couldn't bring himself to leave. An irrational fear in him that said if he were not in the room that Loki would be hurt further kept Thor rooted in his place. A dry blanket was quickly fetched to cover the Prince's dignity, and the King's cloak was tossed to the side for someone to deal with later. Thor couldn't quite help but stare at the discarded cloth. He was oddly grateful that the fabric was red as it hid just how much blood his brother had lost.
As the golden images of Loki's body rose up above the Soul Forge several people's breaths caught. Thor couldn't decipher anything on it aside from some obvious things such as Loki's broken right arm. There was clearly something unpleasant being displayed though since Frigga cried out and bent closer to Loki's unconscious form. She murmured something Thor couldn't hear against Loki's shoulder and neck as she hugged him. Odin's face went stony, and he turned harshly on his heel. "I will expect a full report when you are done, Eir," he commanded as he stormed away. The door to the healing wing slammed so hard Thor felt it reverberate in his chest. Thor felt Asgard groan again from strain and he didn't dare ask what had angered his father so much about Loki's readings. Thor knew he wouldn't want to know.

"My Queen," Eir said hesitantly. "I must speak with Prince Loki. There are things not even the Soul Forge can tell us that we must know."

Frigga looked up with tears on her face. "Can you not simply treat him for what you see already?" she demanded even though she herself had admitted to something similar just before.

"I can," Eir confirmed. "But if he has not eaten or been allowed to drink anything in three days we must know that now so we can begin treating that as well. Or... if he was bespelled in some lingering way that might interfere with our treatments." The Queen and the Royal Healer stared at each other for several long moments, and Thor shifted uncomfortably. Rarely did the two women butt heads but this was not the ordinary situation.

"Stand back," Frigga said, and Eir did as she was commanded. Frigga quickly wiped the tears from her face before laying her hand gently across Loki's forehead. "Loki. My Darling, wake up now," she murmured as her rosy seidr flowed from her hand.

At first, it seemed as if Loki would not wake, but Frigga just called for him again. Thor craned his head and moved forward a few steps without realizing it. Loki's face twisted slightly, and a tiny noise escaped before he slowly seemed to come around. "M... mama?"

"I'm here, darling," Frigga said instantly. "Oh my sweet, you're safe now."

Tears built in Loki's slightly unfocused eyes. "He... it hurts..." he whined.

"Shh, I know," Frigga said as she stroked his hair back. "I know it hurts, my darling. We'll make it stop hurting." Loki's eyes screwed shut so tightly the tears were forced from his eyes as he turned into Frigga's arms. "Oh, Loki, I'm here," Frigga murmured as she wrapped her arms firmly yet gently around his battered body.

Thor wasn't sure what to do. He wanted to rush to Loki's side, but Thor didn't think he was the one Loki needed to see right then. He heard little-muffled sobs from where his brother had buried his face, and each one cut into Thor's soul far worse than any vicious words that Loki had ever spat. Thor waited a moment but then couldn't take it any longer and moved forward to put an arm around his brother's shoulders.

Loki stiffened and peeked up just over Frigga's arm. "I'm here, brother," Thor whispered to him. "I promise you, you're safe now." Loki studied Thor for a long moment before turning back into Frigga and letting out more cries. Thor longed to do more but had no idea what he could even attempt.

After several minutes, Loki's tears had quieted but not entirely stopped. Frigga rocked him gently and murmured soothing things, and that seemed to help, but only just. Thor thought it a minor miracle that Loki could calm even as much as he had with such a fresh trauma upon him. Eir must have realized, like Thor, that it was as calm as Loki would likely get so soon after his kidnapping.
and stepped closer to the Soul Forge. She cleared her throat softly, but the noise still made Loki flinch and then stiffen in Frigga's arm.

Eir cringed but then buried the reaction. "My Prince... I know you do not wish to speak of what happened... but I'm afraid I must ask you some questions if you can," she said gently.

Loki turned and just slightly looked up again, still mostly sheltered in Frigga's arms but able to see Eir nearby. Eir tried to smile, but it was very strained. Thor was amazed she could even manage that. "Just nod your head, alright?" Eir suggested. Loki stared at her for several minutes before giving the slightest dip of his chin in an approximation of a nod.

"Very good. Thank you, My Prince," Eir said with a slightly more genuine smile. "Did... did the one who kidnapped you, did he feed you anything?"

Loki shook and clung tighter to Frigga. After a long moment, Loki shook his head. Eir didn't seem surprised from the small nod she gave. "Have you drank anything?" Again a long pause before Loki shook his head. "Alright, you're doing very good, Prince Loki," Eir said as Frigga attempted to soothe the still shaking younger Prince.

Eir waited until Loki seemed to have regained at least a little composure as the trembling eased a little. "Prince Loki... this is a little harder. If you don't know, that's fine, alright?" Loki inclined his head just slightly. "Did... did he use a spell on you at all?"

Loki let out a soft keen and burrowed closer to Frigga. "Shh, my darling, it's alright," Frigga said as she rocked him. She sent Eir a glare, but the Healer straightened her shoulders. Frigga relented first and kissed the top of Loki's head. "There, there, I'm here, my love." Loki was sobbing again, and Thor gently rubbed his fingers against the nape of his brother's neck. It was a poor attempt at comfort, but it was all Thor could think to do that wouldn't hurt Loki further. His poor body was already littered with cuts and bruises.

"Prince Loki..." Eir reached out in an attempt at comfort and placed a gentle hand on Loki's calf. Instantly, Loki shrieked and recoiled.

"Loki!" The Prince was screaming and thrashing so hard that Frigga could not hold onto him.

"Brother! Calm yourself!" Thor called as he tried to hold Loki so that he wasn't hurt or in danger of falling from the Soul Forge. Loki didn't seem to hear him at all and just screamed and flailed like a desperate animal.

There was chaos that Thor was mostly unaware of as he tried to call to Loki again. His brother's pupils were blown wide with terror and blood from his wounds was smearing across the bright blue surface. "Loki! Brother!"

Rose and gold seidr swept over Loki, and he quickly stopped struggling. His panicked eyes fell shut, and he went limp. Thor hesitated for a moment before releasing Loki's wrists. He looked up just as Frigga returned to Loki's side. "Oh, my Darling," she said as she brushed his again mussed hair back from his bruised face.

Thor looked up and just in time to see the grim look on Eir's face. The Royal Healer looked at Loki another moment before turning to her assistants. "We will need none of you for now. I will attend the Prince alone. I will call upon you if needed. Until then, return to your other duties," she murmured. The other Healers bowed and then hurried away.

There were several minutes as Frigga murmured to the again unconscious Loki. Thor didn't know
if his brother could hear her or not, but he hoped something of it got through and soothed him. "... My Queen?" Eir called hesitantly.

"I will not wake him again," Frigga said instantly.

"I do not suggest it," Eir assured her. "But I must tend to his wounds now."

Frigga pursed her lips but then took a deep breath and nodded. "Very well," she agreed as she reluctantly straightened. Eir moved forward to do something with the Soul Forge, and Frigga stared at the golden lines of light that were Loki's badly beaten body. More things that Thor couldn't understand were being displayed, and Frigga quickly looked away to wipe tears from her face.

When she had cleared her vision, she let out a little noise. "Thor! You have been hurt as well!" she quickly bent down to take his chin in hand and forced his head back and forth to examine his broken nose and swollen eye. "That brute struck you didn't he?"

"I'm fine, Mother," Thor assured her. Compared to Loki he wouldn't consider himself hurt in the least.

"You have a broken nose, darling," Frigga said as she gently prodded at the edges of Thor's black eye. "Come, we will get this fixed while Eir finishes her exam of your brother."

Thor hesitated but allowed himself to be pulled from the private room so that one of the other healers could fix his minor injuries. Frigga returned to the private chamber before Thor was finished being treated. There was murmuring going on, but the Healer fixing Thor's nose snapped at those whispering to be silent. "We are Healers, not gossips!" she said harshly. "If you breathe a word about any of the injuries you've seen today or ever to anyone I will personally see you all locked away for a century! Is that understood?"

There was some shuffling, but then several nodded. "Yes, Lady Gróa," they murmured.

Gróa huffed in annoyance and turned back to Thor. "My apologies for that, My Prince," she said. "I will ensure that Prince Loki's condition is not spread cruelly through the palace."

"Thank you, Lady Gróa," Thor said. "That is appreciated."

She nodded and then handed Thor a towel. "You are done, My Prince." Thor thanked her again as he wiped the remaining blood from his face. He had to admit it was nice to be able to breathe correctly again. Thor hadn't really paid much attention to it but his nose being broken had made inhales... odd.

As Thor was blowing the last flecks of dried blood out of his nose, he noticed Sigyn sidling up to him. The Prince quickly finished and put the towel back down on the tray with the used swabs. "Sigyn," Thor greeted.

"Prince Thor," she murmured. Her eyes drifted over to the door that Loki was behind. "Is... he looked very injured," Sigyn said anxiously. "And he was screaming earlier."

Thor wasn't sure what to say to her. On the one hand, he was almost a hundred percent positive that Sigyn would only want Loki to be better. But on the other side of the argument, Thor was also a hundred percent positive that Loki would not want her to know what he'd endured. Thor shifted his weight from foot to foot as he thought about what he could tell her. "... he was hurt very badly, Sigyn," he finally said. "If I could I would kill his kidnapper a thousand times more for what he did to my brother."
Sigyn was still looking at the door but slowly nodded. "He will not wish to see me," she predicted. Thor was slightly surprised that she would say that. Not that he disagreed, but he was impressed she could know his brother so well so quickly.

"Most likely not," Thor confirmed.

Sigyn was quiet for another moment before turning to Thor. "Well, I do work here so he shall see me. And when he's ready I will still be here," she said firmly. "He's stronger than people give him credit for, you know."

"I know," Thor said. "And he'll get better, Sigyn. I just don't know how long it'll take."

Sigyn shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Time is something we have a lot of in Asgard. He can take as much as he needs."

Thor felt a swell of love for this girl that he was sure would again be his sister-in-law. Thor could think of no other person besides their mother who had ever seemed to understand Loki and give him what he needed. How had Thor not seen how important she was to his brother's stability before? Loki had always been calmer with Sigyn around, Thor could look back with wiser eyes and see that now. Thor had never appreciated her properly before, and he was ashamed of that. Thor would have to fix it. He grabbed at her hands and held them, startling her. "You are a wonder, Sigyn," he told her. "Loki will try to push you away. He does that when he is in pain. Don't let him. He will not mean what he says."

Sigyn still looked startled, but then her expression softened. "Don't worry, Thor. He's not more stubborn than me," she said with utmost confidence.

Thor couldn't quite help but chuckle. "If that is true then you shall be the most stubborn being ever born to the nine realms, Lady Sigyn... and you would have my eternal gratitude."

"Eternal?" Sigyn echoed. "Well, I can think of a few things to do with the eternal gratitude of the crown prince indeed."

On impulse, Thor leaned over and kissed her hands. "He will come back to you, Sigyn." He always does, he added to himself. Sigyn nodded slightly and pulled her hands free before excusing herself to return to her duties. Thor watched her for a moment before going to check in on Loki again. He would have to think of a far better wedding gift for them this time around, he resolved.

But that was for later. Right now, Thor's dear brother was still unconscious on the Soul Forge. Thor's mood, which had lightened marginally with the hope Sigyn brought for the future, dropped straight back down.

Frigga and Eir hadn't seemed to notice he had returned. "I can detect no evidence of spells," Eir murmured, apparently to herself as Frigga was gently cleaning the blood from Loki's body. "But the Soul Forge has limited capabilities for detecting Seidr. Any sufficiently advanced spell would not be found by it. And Prince Loki definitely reacted as if some magic had been used upon him... We shall have to proceed cautiously."

Thor slowly came closer as Eir continued to murmur to herself and adjust the various scans and readings. Thor was soon standing by Loki's head. Loki looked almost peaceful with his face slack and his hair still slightly mussed, but Thor was painfully aware that the peace was brought about only by a spell. A hand came to rest on Thor's, and the young Thunderer jumped. Thor looked to the side to see his mother smiling at him sadly. "You found him for us, Thor," she murmured. "And you avenged him..." Her expression grew firmer. "But if you ever run out of this palace like
that again without telling someone I will nail your feet to the flagstones of your room and you shall
never leave it again so long as I walk this realm. Is that clear?"

Thor felt the blood drain out of his face. He believed his mother was being literal and entirely
serious with that threat. "Yes, Mother," he said quickly. "I'm sorry I worried you."

Frigga's expression softened again. "Good." She leaned over and pressed a kiss to Thor's forehead.
"Thank you for bringing him back to us, my darling. And you're forgiven so long as you never do it
again," she murmured against his skin. Thor nodded in understanding. "Now come, darling. We
must not drown our people so let us get a binder on you before the storm outside rages any longer
than it has already."

Thor couldn't quite help but make a face at the idea of the binders but wasn't going to argue. The
Queen was probably right that the storm should not go on too much longer and Thor was still not
anywhere near the point of being able to stop it himself. The sound of the rain beating the roof
echoed loud enough that Thor could hear it even within the interior healing chamber.

Elsewhere in the Palace, the rain was hitting the windows so hard it sounded closer to pebbles than
drops of water. Sheets of water were running down the glass constantly so that it was hard to even
see the city down below. Odin stared at the rain without really seeing it at all. He probably should
be down in the Healing Wing with his family but if he was going to not destroy all of Asgard he
had to remove himself from the situation. Though Odin had spent many centuries practicing his
control even he could not hope to always maintain it.

A knock came from his study door. Odin didn't answer and continued to stare while the pad of his
thumb rubbed across a small stone on a chain that was kept tucked in his pocket at all times. It was
an inconsequential rock -not particularly rare nor valuable- but he kept it with him anyway. The
surface was as smooth as glass and a cloudy green color that
almost
allowed light to pass through.

Odin had had the token in his pocket for centuries. Ever since he had been given it by a little boy
with eyes that easily outshone the rock held in his fist.

Loki had been trying his first attempt at transforming magic by turning a rock into a marble. The
magic was far too advanced for him and yet he'd almost managed it. The jagged edges had
smoothed out into a more fluid shape, and the dense grey of the gabbro rock chip had begun to
change. Loki had improved immensely in his magic since he had presented the little bit of stone to
Odin all those years ago, but Odin still kept the first attempt.

In his memory, he could remember how Loki's eyes had sparkled as his seidr pooled around the
rock in his hand. Loki had concentrated so hard, and yet Odin had still been shocked when the
stone had started morphing under the continued onslaught of Loki's power. Odin had expected, at
most, for the rock to soften a little or maybe lighten a shade of grey. Even Odin had not been able
to do more than that at Loki's age. And yet, the gabbro had continued to mold itself and shimmer
with color.

Eventually, Loki had stopped, out of breath but excited at how entirely he had changed to rock in
his hands. 'Look, Father!' Odin, for his part, had been rather speechless at the time, but he'd
accepted the rock that Loki handed him before Frigga had come in and swept the boy off to the
bath he had been dodging for the previous hour.

The knock returned at Odin's door, and he growled in annoyance as he was jerked back to the
present and the unpleasant reality it currently held. "What?" he demanded.

Tyr came into his father's office, drenched from head to toe. "Father."
"Tyr. You are back sooner than I would have thought," Odin said as he turned back to staring at the water running down his window.

"Yes, but I have found something I thought prudent to bring to you," he said as stepped up to the window. Odin glanced over and saw Tyr holding the silver medallion that the kidnapper had been wearing when he was alive. "When I took this off his body started deteriorating much faster than I expected," Tyr explained. "I do not think it will be long before it is rotted to nothing."

Odin grunted and reached up to take the pendant from his son. The piece of silver was larger than the average medallion and shaped closer to a boomerang than the far more typical circle. Across the front waves were crashing towards the center where a strange family crest - a seven-pointed star behind the Ehwaz rune - was carved. Odin could feel the magic woven into the very metal of the thing. "You say his body is breaking apart already?" Odin asked.

"Yes. It is like whatever is holding him together is... liquefying. It is quite disgusting, but I suppose it shows his inner revolting self well," Tyr said, his lip twisting unpleasantly. "There is little else in his house of note... aside from proof of his perversions which I did not think needed to be kept."

"Indeed not," Odin agreed as he continued to study the magic in the pendant.

Odin had seen quite literally thousands of family crests throughout his travels, and so there was little to no hope of him remembering where this particular one had come from - if he'd ever even seen it before in the first place. He would have far more luck with discovering where the metal came from or how the enchantment was done. "The other builders and mercenaries?"

"Being escorted out of Asgard as we speak," Tyr said. "They were not given a choice."

Odin nodded and took the medallion over to the large desk positioned in front of the fireplace. With the stronger light from the fire, Odin could make out faint runes etched along the center ring that wreathed the family crest. "Tyr. Summon Laufey," he snapped.

Tyr nearly recoiled in surprise. "Laufey? What? Why?"

"Just summon him. I will meet him at the usual spot," Odin said as he shoved the medallion into his pocket and spun on his heel to storm out of his office. Tyr was still bewildered but hurried to do as his father ordered. Odin summoned a travel cloak from thin air and swung it over his shoulders as he made his way back down to the stables of the Palace.

Though Odin had definitely noticed that the kidnapper's skin had been blue-tinged, the King had not wanted to jump to any conclusions. There were many people in the Nine Realms that had blue skin. Already many in the council were urging him to go to war with Jotunheim. To know that a Jotnar had attacked a Prince of Asgard would only send them frothing for a battle. Everyone knew that Jotunheim would be crushed if another war with Asgard broke out, but Odin knew that would not happen without much loss of life on Asgard's side as well. But the words etched into the front of the medallion were undeniable. They had translated roughly to 'The Children of Ymir, Masters of Sea and Land' - a phrase that Odin had only ever heard on Jotunheim and used by the Giants.

To know that, after everything, a Jotun had been the one to steal Loki away and hurt him in such a way -

Asgard buckled from the strain, and in the far distance, part of a mountain face collapsed to the ground. "Father!" Tyr hurried to catch up to Odin. "You must calm down!"

"I will calm when someone answers for this!" Odin spat.
"Someone has!" Tyr said. "Thor killed the beast already!"

"Not that!" Odin snapped. Tyr was confused, and servants were scattering to the side to avoid the two men. Odin wished that he could take one of the skiffs to Victory Peak. It would be faster by far than riding. But the Ymbrá Mountains were incredibly difficult to fly through. Not only were sudden gales and downdrafts common, but seemingly random magnetic anomalies that fluctuated from place to place and in intensity could disrupt flight as well. Odin picked Lettfeti to ride again as he was the fastest aside from Hofvarpnir, which belonged to Gná and not Odin. Tyr was forced to hurry after his father on his own horse Sinir, who was not as fast as Lettfeti but had better endurance. Sinir snorted in annoyance as he had not even dried from the last trip through Thor's storm but obediently flew forward at Tyr's command.

Odin did not set a particularly forgiving pace as he took the road that eventually led to Amsvartnir Pass and into the northern reaches of the mountain range. The rain was still tipping down although the rumbles of thunder and blinding flashes of lightning had reduced. Odin was still seething as he urged Lettfeti faster until Sinir was slowly being left behind.

By the time the pair reached the base of Victory Peak, the rain had reduced to a drizzle, and both horses were breathing hard. Odin was already heading up the stairs carved into the mountain face as Tyr patted both horses on the neck. "Go walk to cool off," he told them. "I promise you will not have to go that hard again on the way back." Both horses shook their heads as Tyr pulled off their bridles before starting to walk off. They knew that a mountain spring was not too far away and that they could rest at to recover. Though they were the horses of Gods, even they were tired travelling so far so fast. A hundred and twenty miles give or take without stopping was far more than they would typically ask of even one of their horses.

Tyr followed his father up the mountain to where the meeting place was at the very top. The stairs were icy at several points, and the stone steps were very narrow in places, but they made it up without any difficulty. "Father, you must try to calm down. You must stay reasonable while dealing with King Laufey." Laufey enjoyed aggravating Odin far too much to start off already upset.

"I am aware of that, Tyr," Odin said as he stepped onto the platform that held the council table. "But I will have my answers."

"... am I going to need to ready the army, Father?" Tyr asked. The ex-Prince now General couldn't say he disagreed with the sentiment, but Odin had always spoken of how tired he was of endless war. Tyr was not sure to make of the idea that Odin may change his stance after so many centuries.

Odin was quiet for several minutes. "Perhaps," he said after Tyr had thought he'd not be getting any sort of answer. "Go tend to the horses, Tyr."

"I can't leave you up here alone!" Tyr protested. "What if he attacks you?"

"Then I will have my answer and kill him for what he's done. Go down the mountain, Tyr," Odin commanded. Tyr was about to protest again when Odin gave him a stern look with his one eye. Arguments would not be tolerated, not even from Tyr. The General gave a begrudging bow before descending the mountain. He had already decided he would not go all the way down, however. He would linger just outside of sight and comfortable hearing range, should his father need him.

Odin waited another ten minutes before he heard the crunch of footsteps and the sound of a wind blowing across an icy plain. Odin turned to see a spinning portal made of white sparks between two pillars of stone. From the window in space stepped Laufey, accompanied as ever, by Byleistr.

"Odin... this is twice within but half a decade that you have called me here... should I take this to
mean you are beginning to miss our visits, cousin?"

"I am not your cousin."

Laufey waved that away. "Your Mother was my dame's sibling. What else would you call us?"

Odin narrowed his eye but decided to not argue further about that particular point. It wasn't at all what he had brought Laufey here for. "Send Byleistr away, Laufey. I would have words with you alone," he said.

Laufey frowned. "That does not, to me, seem wise."

"You will do as I say if you do not want Jotunheim ripped from Yggdrasil's branches," Odin hissed, his eyes glinting with golden light.

Laufey hesitated for a moment before waving Byleistr away. The younger Jotnar obviously wanted to protest but obeyed and retreated back through the portal and into the tundra of Jotunheim. "There. Now, do you want to tell me what this is all about? Have you come to accuse me of something else?"

"My son... was attacked," Odin spat out.

Laufey stilled even more, if possible. "Your son..."

"Loki. My youngest."

"And you think so little of me that you think I would order an attack on a child?" Laufey asked.

"Would you?" Odin demanded.

"Of course not," Laufey snapped. "I am not some monster, Odin!"

Odin pulled the medallion out of his pocket and flung it across the distance. Laufey snatched it out of the air without looking away from Odin's face. They stared at each other for several moments before Laufey turned his blood-red gaze down to the piece of silver he had now clutched in his fist. Laufey only looked at it for a moment before he turned back to Odin. "Where did you get this?"

"I took it from the body of the man that took my son from his bed," Odin said. "A Jotunn that abused him and even now he is in our healer's care!"

Laufey was quiet for several moments and then took three measured paces to stop right before Odin. "I did not send him, Odin. You have my word," he said as he held the pendant back out.

Odin snatched it away. "He said his name was Flárekkr and he was a master builder exiled from his home for offending another who was more politically liked."

Laufey scoffed. "Did he indeed? Well, I suppose it is some twisted truth he said... he was exiled by himself because elsewhere I would have had him disemboweled and thrown into the shit piles," he growled.

"What did he do to earn that ire from you?" Odin asked. Odin was well aware why he would dearly love to see that but not Laufey.

The King of Jotunheim looked down at Odin. "He took your son, Odin... you know what he did to earn my ire. You are just lucky you caught him so early. Five of my people's children suffered his disgusting self before we found where he was hiding away. We never did find the bodies of the
first four."

Odin shivered at the very idea. "How did he escape you, then?"

"He surprised us," Laufey admitted. "Have you seen perhaps a large black stallion lately?"

Odin nodded. "It was quite a magnificent beast. Large, strong, pulled massive stones that I would not have thought any horse could have managed." The horse had never come too near Asgard, but Odin had admired it from a distance the few times he'd seen it.

"That," Laufey nearly spat, "is his truest form, Odin."

"What?"

Laufey nodded to the necklace held in Odin's hand. "That allowed him to stay humanoid, but a horse is what he was most naturally. His real name was Svadilfari. It took us some time to figure out how it was that he spirited youngsters away so quickly from their homes. As a horse, he is much faster than we had hoped to be. Even over ice and snow, he was sure-footed, and we lost track of him near our border. I sent out the word if any found him that he was wanted for his crimes. That must have been why he used a false name."

"I should have realized when he said how little he would charge to build the basis of our barrier;" Odin growled. All the man had asked for was 'two jewels and a home for him to bring a wife to.' Odin hadn't had any inkling what he'd really meant by that. He had taken the visitor at face value.

"He was a skilled manipulator, Odin. And you had no reason to suspect he was anything but what he was," Laufey said. "And... you've done all the Nine a service in killing him. The families of his victims will be pleased when I tell them."

"I didn't," Odin denied. Laufey frowned in confusion. "He is dead, yes. But I am not the one who killed the monster, though I wish dearly I had."

Laufey's brow went up. "If not you, then who did?"

"Thor," Odin answered. "He found his brother being abused and killed the villain responsible."

"Commendable of him," Laufey said. "He has our thanks."

Odin nodded. Silence lingered between the two kings for several long moments. "Svadilfari... I need to know more about him. What magic he could do... where he was from. Can you tell me that?" he asked.

"... yes, but what point would that serve after the fact?"

"I don't want him finding any peace in the next life. He does not deserve it," Odin said. "If I am to ensure he suffers justly for what he's done to my boy and others... I need to know more."

Laufey inclined his head. "Sometimes I forget how much I respect you, Odin. Thank you for reminding me. I will get you what you ask. I will send a letter detailing all me and my people know of him to you once I return to Utgard. During our search for the missing children, we uncovered quite a few things that may be of use to you."

Odin finally allowed his shoulders to loosen slightly from the stiff posture they'd developed. "Your cooperation is appreciated."
"Of course," Laufey replied. "I can't even begin to imagine how horrible it must be for your own son to be treated so brutally."

"Try your hardest," Odin said before he could stop himself. Laufey frowned. Odin shouldn't say anything. Laufey had been very clear that he'd rather be ignorant to the truth about his child, but Odin couldn't quite help himself. Laufey should know what had happened. "He is both our sons, Laufey."

Laufey's frown deepened in confusion before clearing into shock followed immediately by horror. "What?" he hissed, barely even audible over the mountain winds and snow swirling off the cliffside.

"I could not do what you did, Laufey. I couldn't take that little baby and just give him away," Odin said in a near rush. He couldn't seem to control his tongue now that the truth had started coming out. "Not even to those I knew would take him in and take care of him. Frigga and I have been raising him as our own since the very start."

There was a long silence between the two Kings and Odin stared at Laufey, waiting for some sort of response. Odin could almost see the gears turning in Laufey's mind. "... why tell me this now, Odin?" Laufey asked softly. "After what has just happened?"

"Because you should know when your own child has been attacked," Odin answered honestly and a little faster than he'd expected himself to. "You cannot fool me, Laufey, you've wanted to know what became of him."

"But I did not deserve to know it," Laufey replied easily. "And now he most likely despises me."

Odin couldn't say to if that were true or not. Loki was nothing if not challenging to read. "We have been trying to help him accept where he is from. I fear this will set him back greatly in those goals."

"Because Svadilfari was part Jotnar," Laufey surmised. "... yes, I can see how that will most likely scar him against us."

"Perhaps, but Loki also despises ignorance," Odin said, and the corner of Laufey's mouth tugged just slightly upwards before falling again. "He may wish to return to Jotunheim someday to find out more about where he is from. I cannot guarantee it, of course, but I know my son... his curiosity is insatiable. We have had a hard time keeping his mind occupied."

Laufey's mouth twitched again. "Much like his sire then..." he murmured. "Is there something you desire, Odin? For this unexpected knowledge that you've given me?"

"Just an oath," Odin said.

"An oath?"

"Yes," Odin agreed. "By the Norns themselves. If Loki ever does choose to return to Jotunheim, or if he ever seeks you out in any way, you will ensure no harm comes to him. Not by your hands or others. I know many in your lands still hold hatred and disgust for those with Banthum... but you will keep him safe from them, no matter what."

Laufey inclined his head regally. "That is not a difficult oath to make Odin. I cannot say that I hold much hope that he will ever come to Jotunheim, especially after what he's suffered, but should Loki ever do so, he will be as safe as I can make him," Laufey agreed.
"Even if your own heirs threaten him?" Odin pressed. "He would make succession quite a bit more difficult for them, I'd wager."

"Difficult, but hardly impossible," Laufey answered. "Loki is safe from Jotunheim, Odin. I swear it."

Odin nodded in satisfaction. "I will expect your letter soon after my return to Valaskjalf," he said as he turned away to start for the stairs back down the mountain.

"Odin," Laufey called before he got more than three steps away. Odin half turned back. "... why the name Loki?"

The wind howled as Odin considered how to answer. Finally, he decided there was no use in hiding the real reason since he was saying so many other truths lately. "He reminded me of Loptr."

Laufey stared for a moment. "Loptr... I only barely recall him... he died quite young didn't he?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. Killed by our father," Odin said matter-of-factly. Laufey cringed visibly at that. "But Loki won't be like Loptr. We have just agreed to that. Haven't we?"

"Yes, I suppose we have," Laufey agreed. "If you need me... well, I'm sure you won't if you haven't yet... but you know how to reach me, Odin."

Odin nodded in confirmation and started down the stairs. The descent was more treacherous than the climb up as gravity seemed to work with the ice layer to try and steal Odin's balance. But he met up with Tyr, whom he was annoyed but not very surprised to find not very far down the stairs at all.

"Did you find the answers you sought, Father?" Tyr asked. "Or need we prepare for war?"

"No war today, son," Odin said. "At least... not for us. For Loki, I fear, a different sort of war might be starting."

Chapter End Notes

Idavoll- After searching and debating I finally decided that the actual city that you see as Asgard is actually called Idavoll. That is the name of the field that all the gods have their homes on so I figured it made sense. Also, after Ragnarok, it is supposed to turn into a lush green field again and all the remaining gods will build their new homes there. Idavoll in this story gets it's name because it was founded on the plain of the same name, because people are always doing that.

Soul Forge- So this is a lovely concept that just... breaks under scrutiny. I mean, really... what is it even examining in Dark World? I figure it's a pretty basic diagnostic tool like an x-ray, MRI, and EKG all rolled into one. As such it can probably detect most physical things and a lot of energy readings but things like spells bewitching people not so much. Maybe the energy left behind from a spell but not like giving a printout of 'oh this guy was turned into a newt but he got better' type thing. Also bonus points for those of you that got that reference.
Gróa- Whew, fitting all these random gods and goddesses into things is kind of like trying to build a jenga tower with some pieces that were shaved down into tiny twigs. But Gróa is from a story, *Skáldskaparmál*, where after a fight Thor has shards of a whetstone lodged in his head and she's the one getting them out. She sort of whoopsie daisies it though and Thor had bits of stone in his head for the rest of ever. Giving all new meaning to hard headed. Anyway, considering she was apparently trying to heal Thor in that story I thought she fit well as a healer's assistant. Not as skilled as Eir, clearly, but well respected and capable of most things. (maybe no head surgeries though, lol)

Gabbro- That's just a type of common rock. Pretty common all over Earth.

Loki's Token- I doubt anyone but Frigga knows that Odin carries that with him. Odin isn't the overly mushy type but he also is the sort to keep secret mementos of his children near him. He also has one for Thor and all the others as well, maybe I'll write a little oneshot about them some time...

Seven-pointed star- Also known as an Elven or faerie star. Depending on what religion the star is being drawn for it can mean a couple different things. Here though I'm going with a more pagan idea (for obvious reasons, I hope) representing the different worlds of the Faerie and also a symbol of protection. (Sheriffs badges are seven pointed stars also more likely for the christian use of it as a protection symbol, if there's any significance at all)

Ehwaz- The horse rune. It looks like a big M, essentially. It can have a lot of different meanings due to where it is compared to other runes, if it's oriented the right way, and other things, so I'm not going to try and list all the different interpretations here. Transliteration into the Latin alphabet turns it to an 'e'

Laufey and Odin- Yep, they're cousins. Bestla and Laufey's 'mother' were siblings. I guess in the context of brother v sisters... sisters since they both had children rather than sired them. This is just due purely to the fact that royal families all over Europe are ALL related in some way or another. Especially in olden times. There's really only so many families in power that would marry each other so it's sort of inevitable. If you're keeping track though, that means that Thor is biologically related to three different thrones already. And Loki is actually related to Thor just as second cousins rather than brothers biologically speaking.
"My King," Eir greeted softly as she came to stand in Odin's office.

Odin Allfather didn't turn to look at her. His blue-grey eye was fixed on some spot in the distance while his mind wandered far away. "How is my son?" In his pocket, Odin's clutched tightly the smooth stone that was Loki's token.

"The Queen has returned Prince Loki to his magically induced, dreamless sleep. It was the only way for me to get near enough to examine him. He would not let me or any of my helpers near. Only Prince Thor and Queen Frigga have managed to touch him. Prince Loki should be asleep at least for the rest of the night," Eir supplied.

There was a long silence as Odin ran his thumb over the talisman that Tyr had brought him. Odin's thoughts were running a million a minute, and yet, at the same time, he swore he was only thinking one thing. "Tell me, Eir."

Lady Eir shifted where she stood. "Perhaps the Queen-"

"Eir! Do not dodge the question," Odin snapped, finally turning from the window to fix the healing Goddess with his one eye blazing. "You will tell me what that... that beast did to my boy!" Odin needed to know what his son had suffered through. Every tiny scratch and bruise was Odin's fault, and he would not allow himself ignorance.

Eir swallowed hard but managed to not shift uncomfortably again. She gave a stilted nod and clasped her hands behind her back while trying to look professional. "The Prince has sixty-three lash marks along his back, forty-nine of which were deep enough to need treatment to close properly, a broken right ulna, six broken fingers, a broken and dislocated mandible, his back molars are cracked, many cuts to the interior of his mouth, a slice to his left ear, a dislocated hip, minor dehydration, an assortment of bruises over his face and body, and evidence of..." Eir paused here, but at the unyielding look in Odin's eye, she took a deep breath to force herself to finish. "Evidence of sexual assault."

When Odin still said nothing, Eir felt the need to fill the oppressive silence. "Physically he should make a full recovery, but it is his mental health I worry over. This has... obviously been a very traumatic experience for him."

"Three days with that monster... yes, I would think so," Odin growled as he turned to look out of his window again. He hadn't even slept since the morning they woke to find Loki missing, and now his rage wasn't letting him rest either. A large part of the King wished that Thor hadn't killed the beast. Odin would have preferred to make his death more drawn out. More fitting for all the suffering he inflicted upon Loki. Odin could still see perfectly the image of a naked and bloody
Loki clinging to Thor sobbing inconsolably. The memory would haunt him for a long time, he knew.

Odin heard Eir shifting uneasily and turned slightly to look back at her. "There is something else?" he asked.

"Well... Prince Loki is Jotnar."

"I'm well aware of that, Lady Eir," Odin snapped impatiently.

Eir steeled herself and pressed on, "And he has been developing as I would expect one of his age, and has even been showing signs of getting nearer maturity. There is a chance... that his attacker might have-"

"Do not finish that sentence, Eir," Odin ordered abruptly.

"It is a possibility that we have to face and deal with, My King," Eir argued. "Our laws are... murky about this at best, and Loki has been severely traumatized by this already. If he is indeed-"

"Eir!"

"Pregnant," Eir continued despite Odin's anger. "Then we must deal with the situation instead of ignoring it!"

Odin clenched his fist tightly and tried to remind himself that it wasn't really Eir he was angry at. She was right. They couldn't just hope and ignore the fact that there could be longer reaching consequences of what that monster had done to Loki. That didn't mean he had to like those facts, though. Odin took several deep breaths and tried to push his outrage as a father to the side to try and figure out what was best for Loki. "When will you be able to tell if he is or not?" he managed to grit out.

"We might know as early as the morning. The latest it will take for us to be able to tell is in another four days," Eir said. "But... you know as well as I, the many problems with such a situation. And that's not even taking into account Loki's feelings on the matter."

"I will pray the Norns will not be that cruel," Odin said. He didn't want to put his son into that position. In Asgard, the termination of pregnancies was only legal if the health of the mother was at risk. The idea being that, due to declining birth rates among the Aesir, the adoption of unwanted children was the better solution. Odin had always been somewhat ambivalent to the law. Especially since the number of sexual assaults was so low in Asgard and children born of it an even smaller number. Asgard had one small orphanage. Most children there were not even Asgardian and passed through fairly quickly. But this now threw the fairness of that particular law into question in a frighteningly personal way that Odin wished dearly had never happened.

Loki had already suffered enough. Odin didn't know how much strain being forced to bear his rapist's child would put on Loki's psyche, even if he were to give that child up at the end of it. And giving a child up was not an easy thing to do in the first place. Being Prince complicated things further. If news of Loki giving away a child so young got out there would be viciousness in court, Odin knew. Viciousness and disapproval, for what sort of royal family would give away a potential heir to the throne? Even if that heir was begotten by violence? Loki was still a child himself, he wasn't ready for any of this. Odin closed his eye and again hoped that all of the questions were going to end up being moot. For Loki's sake.

"Is that all, Lady Eir?" Odin asked.
"Yes, Prince Loki will be ready to leave the healing wing in a week. I wish to keep him long enough to confirm... the other issue," Lady Eir said.

Odin didn't like that but nodded in agreement. "Send for Lady Vor to join me when you leave." Eir looked puzzled but nodded in agreement. Odin looked down at the necklace in his hand. He had already memorized the acid etching of waves across the thick silver plate. Finely carved runes all along the edge of the pendant that had directed Odin to confront Laufey he'd already ingrained into his memory, and he could feel the enchantments they held - ancient magic that he may be able to tap into now for his own purposes.

After perhaps half an hour, there was a knock on the door. "Come in," Odin roared.

Lady Vor was as inscrutable as she always was when she stood in the middle of Odin's office. "You summoned me, Allfather?"

"Yes, Lady Vor. Tell me, what you make of this?" Odin said as he handed the pendant over. He had his own ideas about it, but he valued Vor's opinion highly.

Vor took the pendant in her hands and studied it carefully, occasionally turning it over and brushing her fingers along the runes while her dark olive and pale orange seidr wafted over the slightly scuffed silver surface to read the enchantments upon it. "It looks to be a Kelpie bridle," she said.

"That was my thought as well," Odin said as he took the necklace back from her. "I took it from the Jotunn that kidnapped Loki." And wasn't that an annoying little riddle. One of the last things he'd expected to come across was evidence of a Kelpie of all things. Odin could only hope that the news he was waiting on from Laufey would explain the oddity of it.

"A Jotunn?" Lady Vor echoed in surprise. "Kelpies do not live in Jotunheim. The temperatures get too cold for them."

Odin grunted. "Nonetheless, he was using its power to shapeshift to keep Loki hidden from Heimdall," he explained as his thumb brushed over the etched waves again. If it weren't for the runes around the rim, Odin would have simply dismissed the situation as the Jotunn having stolen the bridle from some Kelpie, most likely dead. But that did not make sense if the bridle itself had come from Jotunheim. And clearly, the villain had had the bridle there as well if he used a horse form to flee from Laufey's troops that sought justice. "Can we use it to bring the villain back from the dead?" A Kelpie's bridle should, in theory, be linked to whomever last used it.

"Lady Vor gave a slight start of surprise. "Why would you want to do that, My King?"

"So, that I can kill him again... slower this time," Odin said. "And more painfully."

"I would think that to be a waste of your time and energy," Vor said. "Although I can't say I disagree with the sentiment. I hear Prince Loki is... still resisting treatment."

"That is one way to put it," Odin grumbled. Hysterical might have been a more accurate term, but Odin appreciated Vor's restraint in not using it. "Lady Eir is treating him."

"She is treating his body... but I fear the mind will take much more time and effort for her to treat appropriately. She hasn't had a chance to start on his mind yet," Lady Vor pointed out matter-of-factually.

"Do you have a suggestion, Lady Vor?" Odin asked.
Vor shrugged, "Only that you try to be more patient than you usually are, Odin King."

Odin sent the woman a sour look. "You never have such an unhelpful suggestion," Odin said. "What do you really wish to say?"

"Are you sure you wish to know?"

"Would I ask if I didn't?" Odin snapped.

"Yes," Vor responded, entirely unmoved.

Odin scowled. "Well, I do wish to know. What is it, Vor?"

Vor sighed heavily. "Lady Eir is a very competent healer, have no doubt of that. But she has minimal experience with such trauma. Perhaps Prince Loki would benefit from being also seen by someone who has dealt with such a situation before."

"And who might you suggest?" Odin asked.

"There are a few options I can think of off the top of my head. Shall I write you a list of them and their qualifications?" she asked.

Odin thought for a moment. "Send the list to Eir for her to look over first," Odin grunted. He wanted the absolute best and Eir, he knew, would ensure that. Vor didn't look offended by the command and just bowed. "That's all," Odin said.

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Thor sat beside his brother's sickbed and carefully held Loki's hand between his own. After the initial treatment, Eir had moved Loki from the Soul Forge to an actual bed. Loki was kept in his enchanted sleep, so he looked peaceful despite the bandages and casts around his body. The pure white comforter and mattress stuffed with down pillowed around Loki as if the entire bed was trying to swallow him whole. Though most of his brother's broken or dislocated bones had been set, they were not yet fully healed. A shell of blue seidr woven together with what seemed a netting of sparkling orange veins kept the worst wounds held stable and healing.

Frigga was sitting on the other side of Loki's bed and was petting his freshly washed black hair back. Her own pink and golden seidr was still just visible sparkling at the corners of Loki's eyelashes telling that he was sleeping thanks to her magic. Barely any part of Loki's pale skin was visible without the glow of seidr over the top. Already the worst of the bruises had lightened as the magic healed Loki's soft tissues faster than his bones.

Odin had come down along with Tyr briefly, but both had then left again. Tyr would not say what duties he had to perform, but Odin had told Frigga something about contacting Laufey. That had puzzled Thor some, but he didn't feel particularly up to questioning his parents right then. Eir came in every half hour or so to check on Loki and drip multicolored tinctures into his mouth.

After what felt like hours of sitting in silence, Thor looked up. "Mother?"

"Yes, Darling?" Frigga asked back without looking away from Loki's face. Even the lower half of Loki's face, including his mouth, had magic glittering upon it as the cracked teeth and dislocated jaw was healed. When the Queen finally allowed Loki to wake he wouldn't be able to speak due to the spell.

Thor hesitated before looking back up to Frigga. "... what did Father see that made him leave like that?" Thor asked. Thor had rarely seen or felt his father so enraged. He had a terrible feeling he
knew, but in the off chance there was something even *worse* he didn't know about, Thor felt he had to know if he were to help his brother.

Frigga opened her mouth as if to answer but then closed it again. After a long moment, she sighed. "Many things, Darling," she finally said. Thor recognized a dodge when he heard one, but he didn't dare press any harder. He wasn't sure what he would do if he'd gotten an answer in the first place.

"But Loki will be alright... won't he?"

Frigga gave her best attempt to smile, which was not particularly strong or convincing. "Yes, Darling. He'll be alright."

Loki was a much better liar...

With Thor's powers bound, the storm had finally tapered off near dawn although a dismal mist clung to the city even after the sun started peeking over the mountains. The average citizen was busy taking stock of damage that had been done to their property or chasing down where lost items had been carried off to by the wind.

Amid the mess of the morning after such a storm, there was an even stranger sight. A large blue figure flanked by Einherjar on either side stalked down the Bifrost to the grand front steps of Valaskjalf. Only a few citizens had ever seen Jotnar aside from in books, and so everyone stopped and stared. This Jotunn had their slightly angled blood red eyes fixed on their target, and surprisingly red hair that caught the sun like fire fell to their shoulders in thick and somewhat wild wind-tousled curls broken up by a few tight braids and ornaments. A white fur of some Jotunheim beast was wrapped around the Jotunn's shoulders and hung low over their front and back, but other than that all that they wore was a leather skirt of two different lengths (more extended in the front and back than on the sides) and a pair of thick boots that went to their mid-calf. Though they had a sword scabbard at their hip, it was currently empty.

Tyr came down from the Palace to meet the Jotunn at the base of the stairs and inclined his head slightly. "I take it you are the messenger from King Laufey?"

"I am no messenger, but you are correct I come on my King's orders," the Jotunn said, their voice full of pride. Everything about the Jotunn near screamed pride, in fact. From the ramrod straight posture to the tilt of their head that made certain the silvery lines of their Dynasty marks caught the Asgardian sunlight. Their nose was of a classically noble shape, and their jaw was strong and set parallel to the ground eighteen feet below. The Jotunn, without lowering their head or relaxing their posture, reached under the fur wrap and pulled out a thick bundle of parchment wrapped in a black ribbon and sealed with blue wax. "My orders are to give this directly to your King and no other."

Tyr couldn't quite help himself, "I thought you weren't a messenger."

The Jotunn narrowed their red eyes as they tucked the package away again. "You are lucky your guardian made me leave my sword at his post. I am of the Royal Guard. No mere messenger."

Tyr shoved his somewhat inappropriate amusement probably brought on by lack of sleep to the side. He probably shouldn't tease the nearly twenty-foot giant that could make weapons from summoned ice. "Of course. My apologies, Master..."

"Jarnsaxa. And it's not Master. 'Lady' will do for a title, if you feel you must," the Jotunn said.

"Lady Jarnsaxa. Again, my apologies. Asgardian habit is to default to male. I will try to remember to not do that again," Tyr said. This was why he preferred to leave the talking to his Father.
"Do," Jarnsaxa agreed. "Now... I cannot leave without seeing Odin Allfather. I would prefer that to be done quickly as it is uncomfortably warm here."

"Of course," Tyr said before nodding at the Einherjar standing beside Jarnsaxa. "I will take things from here." The Einherjar bowed and left to return to their posts. "Follow me, Lady Jarnsaxa," Tyr said with a welcoming gesture.

Jarnsaxa nodded her head slightly in acknowledgment, and the little ornaments in her hair clinked together lightly. "Am I correct in assuming this is something about Svadilfari?" Jarnsaxa asked so quietly that Tyr almost missed the question entirely. "King Laufey announced last evening that he had been killed finally."

"... it is," Tyr acknowledged, not seeing any reason to deny it. "King Odin requested more information on the beast."


As they walked, Tyr felt slightly uncomfortable. Though he wasn't as much of a talker as some of his brothers, the topic and the following silence was something he longed to change. "... I don't believe I've ever seen a Jotnar with red hair before," he finally said, settling on the first innocuous thought that popped into his head. In fact, aside from Loki, Tyr couldn't recall seeing any Jotnar with hair before. Even Tyr's grandmother Bestla, whom Tyr did not remember all that well, had not kept any hair on their head.

Jarnsaxa hummed thoughtfully. "It is a rarity but us Jotnar that hail from nearer the equator seem to have it most often, usually accompanied by purple eyes," Jarnsaxa said. "Several of my family are red-headed even though it has been multiple generations since we were that close to the equator."

"I see," Tyr said. He struggled for a moment to think of anything else to say. "Well... it is quite fetching. I would have thought the contrast with your skin too much, but it does not seem to be so."

Jarnsaxa raised a thin eyebrow. "I do hope that was not an attempt to flirt, General Tyr."

Tyr snorted. "No," he assured with half a laugh before realizing how that might have sounded. "Ah, not that you aren't attractive, I'm sure. I just... don't... do that."

Jarnsaxa hummed again. "A pity. I imagine you break many a heart."

"Perhaps," Tyr said noncommittally. Tyr was glad when he spotted his Father's public study up ahead of them since he'd succeeded in making a complete fool of himself. "Here we are," Tyr said as he opened the door to the study.

Jarnsaxa's red gaze swept the ornate room for a moment before returning to Tyr. "King Odin," she greeted.
"I hear you bring news from your King?" Odin asked as he went right up to the Jotunn fearlessly. Though Jarnsaxa towered over twice Odin's height, there didn't seem to be much of a disparity at all.

Jarnsaxa bowed her head slightly. "I do," she agreed and reached into her fur wrap again to pull out the package of parchment. "He was very insistent I give it only to you," Jarnsaxa added as she held it out to Odin.

Odin nodded and took the thick bundle. He hesitated for a moment and eyed Jarnsaxa closer. "You are not the usual messenger he sends," Odin stated.

"No, I am not," Jarnsaxa agreed.

"You are a Vedmakt if I'm not mistaken," Odin added.

Jarnsaxa didn't react immediately but then nodded again. "I am surprised you would know that word... and recognize one in front of you," Jarnsaxa admitted. "But you are correct."

"Why, if I may ask, would Laufey send one of his Vedmakt here with a message?" Odin asked. "Is the information he sent so sensitive it required such protection?"

"I requested the task," Jarnsaxa admitted.

Odin hummed and went to his desk to pick up a small dagger. He sliced the bindings off the bundle of parchment even as he studied the Jotunn in his study thoughtfully. "You wanted something from this visit yourself, I take it?" he asked. He didn't wait for an answer, however, since he seemed to already know it somehow. "Why come here personally, Vedmakt Jarnsaxa?"

Tyr thought he saw the slightest tremble in Jarnsaxa's mouth, but it might have been a trick of the light. "The one who killed Svadilfari... I was told it was Prince Thor."

"Yes," Odin confirmed.

"Might I speak with him?" Jarnsaxa asked. It came out slightly rushed as if the words had to be forced to be said. Tyr straightened by his spot near the door. A Jotunn that they'd never met wanted to speak with Thor? Why?

Odin narrowed his one eye. "Is there some reason you wish to speak with my son? He is currently in the Healer's Ward."

Jarnsaxa's perfect composure shook for a moment before she straightened again. "Was he badly injured then?"

"Answer my question before you ask yours," Odin ordered.

Jarnsaxa's jaw clenched slightly before she let out a long breath. "I merely wished to thank him for what he did for all the Nine. Many have wanted that monster dead for many decades."

There was a heavy silence in the room as Jarnsaxa bravely met Odin's stare. Tyr wasn't entirely sure how she managed it although the General did detect that faint tremble again and this time he was certain it wasn't a trick of the light. "... Thor was not seriously injured. But his brother was," Odin answered.

Jarnsaxa's face twisted with emotion for a moment. "I see." There was a beat, and then Jarnsaxa dipped her head. "I am... most aggrieved to hear your other son was harmed. My condolences to
Odin didn't move for a moment. "Tyr. Go and fetch, Thor." Tyr looked to his Father in protest. "Do as I say," Odin commanded. Tyr had reservations about the idea but knew better than to argue with his father in front of a stranger.

When Tyr reached the healing wing, he tried his best to not look at the battered form of Loki on the bed looking so tiny and vulnerable. Magic was glittering across him, healing his physical wounds but that still seemed nowhere near enough. Nothing could erase what had happened. The General of Asgard really wished that Thor hadn't killed Svadilfari. Tyr hadn't gotten any vengeance himself before the monster died and that was terribly disappointing. The more he saw what his baby brother suffered, the more he wanted to rip into the one responsible. Tyr had already torn apart several training dummies since he lacked the correct target for his anger. The mindless destruction had not helped him much.

Thor and Frigga both looked up when Tyr entered. "Thor, Father requests to see you," Tyr said. Thor frowned and his hand visibly tightened around Loki's slack one. "Why?"

"Someone wishes to speak with you," Tyr answered. "It should not take long and then you can come back here, Thor. I promise."

Thor still seemed reluctant and looked back at Loki's sleeping face. "Who is it that wants to speak with him, Tyr?" Frigga asked. "Is it really so important?"

"It is a Jotunn, Mother," Tyr said. "She says she wishes to thank Thor personally for what he did for all the Nine."

"I don't want thanks," Thor muttered. "I didn't do it for thanks."

"I know, Darling," Frigga said as she reached over to brush a hand through his golden hair. "She seems genuine, Thor," Tyr said. "And Father has allowed it."

That didn't seem to persuade Thor at all, but then Frigga gave him a slight nudge on the shoulder. "A short walk will do you good, Thor. And Loki will not be waking for another few hours at least." Thor scowled but didn't dare argue with their mother. With a sigh, he got up and followed Tyr out of the healing wing.

The walk back was a quiet one, and Thor was clearly unhappy to be asked to step away from Loki's sickbed. Tyr couldn't blame him for that in the least, and he wasn't much happier that this was being allowed, but he had to trust his father knew what he was doing.

Jarnsaxa still had not sat down, but then again no chairs in the room were really built with giants in mind. Jarnsaxa's red gaze instantly went to Thor, and her eyes widened just a little. Odin gestured for Thor to join him, which he did. "Thor, this is Jarnsaxa of Jotunheim. Jarnsaxa, my son Prince Thor," Odin introduced formally.

Thor couldn't help but stare a little at the only true giant he'd seen in person as a child. Jarnsaxa was massive. Thor's own few inches shy of six feet was laughable next to Jarnsaxa's near twenty. The term giant hadn't ever quite registered as an adult as it did now. Jarnsaxa sunk down to one knee to reduce the imposing distance between them and still, she was looking down at Thor. "Prince Thor. I wish to sincerely thank you for what you did. Often I wished I could catch that beast and end it myself, but I never got the chance. And you are so young yet... I didn't realize. It is even more an impressive feat, and one worthy of recognition."
For some reason, Thor felt a wave of heat rushing to his face. He'd never been thanked by a Jotunn before, so perhaps that was the reason. Those red eyes were really quite intense when fixed solely on you. "I didn't do it for thanks," he muttered.

"All the more reason for it," Jarnsaxa insisted.

There was a moment where Thor couldn't help but fidget under Jarnsaxa's gaze. "Well, you're welcome, I suppose," he muttered.

Jarnsaxa tilted her head to the side ever so slightly before reaching for her boot. She pulled a small iron dagger from it, and Tyr stirred at the sight of the weapon so near his little brother. Jarnsaxa spared the General a quick glance but otherwise didn't stop in lifting the blade. Odin's eyes narrowed, but he didn't move to interfere. Jarnsaxa brought the knife down upon her open palm and quickly sliced a line across it.

Thor watched with bewilderment as ruby red blood quickly started spilling from the Jotunn's hand. Jarnsaxa held out her bleeding palm up so that the liquid began to pool there. Thor stared at it for a moment and then his eyes went up to Jarnsaxa's face. Jarnsaxa nodded slightly and then closed her hand. The temperature around her fist plummeted so fast chilly mist wafted through the air and frost formed across her blue skin.

Thor continued to watch as Jarnsaxa's hand shook as if she were squeezing as hard as she could. The cold breeze made gooseflesh of Thor's exposed arms as he watched the strange scene.

Finally, Jarnsaxa opened her hand to expose a red crystal sitting in her palm where the blood had been. The sides were not perfectly flat, and one side was a little larger than the other, but it looked entirely stable. More like a stone than frozen blood. "Hold out your hand, Prince Thor," Jarnsaxa murmured.

Bewildered but also transfixed, Thor did as he was told. Jarnsaxa carefully tipped the crystal into Thor's open hand. It was cool to the touch, but no more than a river stone freshly pulled from the water. "What is it?" Thor asked as he stared at the odd thing in his hands.

"It is a blood oath to you," Jarnsaxa said as she put the dagger back in her boot. "... I owe you a great debt for what you've done, Prince Thor. And I promise you with that stone I will repay it one day."

Thor frowned at the stone and then looked back up at the Jotunn. "You don't owe me anything, though," he said. He didn't even know Jarnsaxa, and he definitely hadn't killed Svadilfari for her. Thor had killed him because he deserved to die.

"But I do," Jarnsaxa insisted. There was a moment where Jarnsaxa hesitated and then sighed. "... there were five in Jotunheim, Prince Thor. The other four cannot give you their thanks... so I shall do it for us all."

The meaning behind those words took a very long time to sink into Thor's brain. But when it did his eyes widened in horror. The idea that Loki wasn't the only one that had been treated so horribly hadn't even occurred to Thor. It should have from what Svadilfari had said in that stable, but it hadn't. Thor sputtered, trying desperately to come up with something to say.

"Shh, I would rather you not," Jarnsaxa said before Thor could think of anything at all. She put a large hand on Thor's shoulder. "It was quite some time ago now, and I'd rather not think on it further. You have given us more justice than we had." Jarnsaxa shook her head so that her red hair fell back behind her shoulder. "And now I should take my leave. I fear I shall overheat if I linger..."
"I will escort you to the Bifrost. Tyr, take Thor back to his mother, please," Odin ordered.

Tyr nodded and went to put a hand to Thor's shoulder. He guided the still somewhat stunned younger prince out of the study and back towards the healing wing. Odin watched them go before gesturing for Jarnsaxa to proceed him out of the office. Jarnsaxa inclined her head and left first.

Odin made sure to seal the office behind him before hurrying to catch up to Jarnsaxa's longer stride. The two walked in silence for several moments. "Might I ask you something?" Odin asked finally. "A favor."

Jarnsaxa glanced down at Odin. "... you may, but I do not guarantee my answer."

"My son, Loki," Odin began before frowning.

Jarnsaxa kept her red eyes fixed ahead. "He was brutalized," she guessed with nearly no emotion in her voice.

Odin scowled but nodded. "Yes."

"You wish me to help 'fix' him," she guessed again.

Odin sighed. "I know it is not so easy," he denied. "I would like it to be so, but I know trauma when I see it." Jarnsaxa hummed in agreement but didn't say anything. "I did want to ask if, when he is ready, you would be willing to speak with him?"

Jarnsaxa thought for a moment as they walked. "If," she said finally.

"If?" Odin repeated.

"If he is ready," she said. "He may never be ready. Or willing. And I shall not be surprised if that is the case."

"If then," Odin corrected. He hoped his first statement of 'when' would be proven right, but he couldn't argue with her about it. Not with the one person in all the Nine who had even a hope of understanding whatever it was Loki was going to go through in his recovery.

They passed a large statue of King Bor that seemed to glare down at them disapprovingly before Jarnsaxa said anything else. "... yes," she murmured. "If he ever wishes to speak with me... I will."

Odin nodded. "Thank you, Vedmekt Jarnsaxa. We owe you a debt for your help."

Jarnsaxa shook her head, making the ornaments woven in the fiery strands clink together lightly. "There is none," she said. "And I will accept none."

"Very well," Odin murmured. He could tell there wouldn't be any arguing with her about it. They continued to walk when something that Laufey had said floated to the forefront of Odin's mind. "... would he have killed Loki?" Odin asked.

Jarnsaxa missed a step but quickly recovered.

Odin stopped and turned to face her directly. "Laufey and you both said the other four children he took on Jotunheim were gone... would he have murdered my son had we not found him?"

The lack of answer was almost answer enough, but Odin waited and watched Jarnsaxa seem to
gather herself. Without a word, Jarnsaxa reached up to her fur wrap and undid it. Underneath the fur was a leather collar that covered her neck, shoulders, and collarbones in a thick protective weave. Odin watched as she reached up to the collar and did something at the back of it. Jarnsaxa leaned closer as she pulled the leather down and away to expose a thick scar that wrapped halfway around her neck.

Odin stared at the jagged line for a moment before Jarnsaxa covered it again. "When he got tired of one he would get a new one... whoever wanted to live the most got to do so," she murmured. Odin frowned. "I sliced two throats to live... I almost let the second end me before I became too cowardly to meet the afterlife that no doubt awaits me."

Odin stared in horror as Jarnsaxa fixed her collar and put the wrap back around her shoulders. "He made you... kill each other?" he echoed in horror.

Jarnsaxa's red eyes flicked to Odin for a moment. "He said he only wanted willing whores," she whispered before swallowing thickly. Her hand went up to her throat for a moment before dropping quickly back to her side again. "... I don't think I would have cut a third had I gotten the chance. I am glad your son never had to face such a choice."

Odin's eye swept over the Jotunn standing in front of him. "It is no crime to survive," he said.

"Isn't it?" Jarnsaxa challenged.

"No."

"Tell that to my nightmares... or the families of the two children I murdered," Jarnsaxa replied before turning away and starting to walk again. "I believe I can find my way back on my own, Odin Allfather," she said. Odin didn't try to stop her.

Late that night, Odin had retreated to his private study. Frigga was still sitting with Loki and Thor. Loki's physical wounds were mending without too much complication, Eir reported, but Odin hadn't anticipated any trouble on that front. Odin had the long letter from Laufey in his hands that detailed all the scattered bits of fact and conjecture that had been gathered about Svadilfari. It was simultaneously too much information and not enough. There were a lot of details that helped paint a picture of how depraved the monster had been and yet very little that Odin could use to punish his spirit properly.

"What was he?" Tyr asked his father from where he was leaning against the doorframe. He had been watching Odin read the letter for nearly half an hour and could no longer take just standing there and waiting.

Odin sighed and sat back in his chair as he dropped the thick package of parchment onto his desktop. He'd already read the thing three times despite its length. "According to Laufey's letter... Svadilfari was actually only half Jotunn that escaped capture several centuries ago through a portal to another realm." There was a long and awkward pause. "Loki is not the first child Svadilfari has... hurt, as you know." Jarnsaxa's admission to Thor would have told him that even if Odin didn't suspect Tyr of eavesdropping on the conversation with Laufey. "When his perversions were discovered Laufey attempted to bring him to justice with quite a large force of his best fighters."

"How could he have escaped Laufey and the other Jotnar?" Tyr demanded. Though he had many reservations about Laufey, Tyr knew that the Jotunn King was not easy to escape. "Did he have some help from outside of Jotunheim?"
"Not that they could tell. The horse that we saw working with the men... that is a form that he can take, and the stallion was very fast even over snow and ice. He found an unprotected portal to Alfheim and fled into a marsh," Odin murmured. He couldn't help but hate himself for not recognizing that Svadilfari -or Flárekkr- was a danger. Loki was in the healing ward with terrible wounds, and Odin had let it happen. Ignorance was not an excuse. He swallowed hard and picked up the paper. "According to Laufey... Svadilfari's sire was a Kelpie." It solved the riddle of the Kelpie bridle but not in a way Odin had expected.

"A Kelpie?" Tyr echoed in surprise. Kelpies weren't exactly common in most of the Nine Realms. They came primarily from Alfheim and the coasts of Avalon -and even those herds were not very large. Additionally, the icy waters of Jotunheim wouldn't be comfortable to the shifters so how the water horse and giant would ever come together to produce offspring was mind-boggling.

Odin nodded and put the paper back down. "Yes. And from the mess in the stables where we found Thor and Loki... he'd been using his bridle to keep Loki hidden as a horse," he murmured. Only if Loki had been in a different form would Heimdall have been unable to spot him. Nobody had been searching for a horse.

"But... how did he hide being a half Kelpie? Or half Jotnar for that matter?" Tyr demanded. "Surely something should have given us a clue!" Tyr had thought the man a friend! He'd even had a drinking contest that very night of the feast with him! Tyr couldn't help but look back and wonder if that hadn't been part of the plot and want to gut himself. He had been a fool!

Odin was quiet. "He did... I should have seen in. I knew there was magic in that necklace he wore, but I didn't think about what it might be..." he berated himself. "I thought it harmless. It seemed a minor trinket that cast vain magicks over his own form... nothing insidious." There was a painful irony that -in hindsight- the glamour he used to disguise Loki's form was of a similar spell to the one the pendant had cast over Svadilfari. It should have been such an obvious clue, and yet, Odin had thought nothing of it. He'd been so arrogant to think nobody else would have thought to hide their true species with a glamour spell and now Loki was the one paying for it.

"The necklace?" Tyr echoed. "That thick one he always wore? What about it?" He had been curious about the thing since he'd taken it from the body and watched the corpse begin to liquefy before his eyes, and even more so when his Father had raged upon seeing the trinket.

"Kelpies have a special bridle that allows them to shift their forms from that of a horse to a two-legged one. When they are in their horse form, it looks like what it is, but when they possess only two legs, it also shifts and looks like a necklace. If one is put on a non-Kelpie, it will force that person into the form of a horse and under the Kelpie's control," Odin explained as he crumpled the paper from Laufey in his hand. He should have noticed the necklace for what it was. All of this would have been avoided if he'd only investigated that magic more closely.

"But if Loki was wearing the bridle-"

"He must have had two," Odin said. "If you kill the Kelpie the bridle belongs to, I imagine you'd end up with an extra... But I could have sworn that only those descended from the first Kelpie had such artifacts..." Therefore, there shouldn't be many in existence and getting hold of an extra would have taken tracking down one of those rare so-called Pure Kelpies. Kelpies, like most sentient species in the nine realms, had their own form of royalty that traced their lines back all the way to before they and the Hippocamps of the Olympians separated. The vast majority of Kelpies rarely -if ever- took different forms from their horse one and even then it was usually the stallions of the herds and not the mares because only the Pure Kelpie stallions tended to have the bridles which seemed to be the key to their shapeshifting.
Odin sighed and looked at the half-crumpled papers again. "Laufey tracked down Svadilfari's dame to a Jotunn that had served as a scout before disappearing one day. Eventually, Laufey found that scout again when they were first searching for their missing children. They'd been rendered insensate from a nasty old head wound shaped like a hoof. Laufey couldn't tell if it was caused by Svadilfari or whatever Kelpie sired him."

"So either Svadilfari was raised by his Kelpie sire that begot him upon a disabled and defenseless Jotunn or is so despicable and ungrateful a creature to attack both children and his own mother," Tyr surmised.

"Laufey preferred the former option," Odin said as he shuffled through the papers. "Though Svadilfari's dame was not as young as the children Svadilfari hurt when the beast was born, they would have been quite young indeed, and Laufey's healers said the wound was easily that old. Combined with Svadilfari's own preference for children it seemed likely to Laufey that his sire taught him his own perversions and even younger children were easier targets for a younger Kelpie..."

"That is a disgusting scenario," Tyr growled. Odin gave a short nod of agreement.

"The theory among some of Laufey's healers is even that the Kelpie might have begot Svadilfari purely to abuse him himself... there is, of course, no evidence of that since they know very little about before Svadilfari was already nearly full grown," Odin murmured.

Tyr scowled. "I cannot see how if he were hurt by his sire he would then go and hurt others the same way," Tyr muttered.

"It would not be unheard of, Tyr," Odin said. "And really, at this point, the why he started doesn't matter. Chances are there are far more victims we will never know about. I highly doubt a monster like him could have simply stopped harming children between the time he fled Jotunheim and when he appeared here in Asgard."

The only sound for several minutes was the crackling of the fire behind Odin's desk. "... so what will you do now, Father?"

Odin sighed and picked up a list of ten names that Vor had sent him. "We shall focus on helping your brother. The dead can wait... Loki cannot. Have you written to your brothers?"

"I have," Tyr agreed. "I'm sure they'll be here as soon as they can."

"Good. It is unfortunate Loki will most likely be awake before they get here. He could use their support as well," Odin muttered as he eyed the names. Odin would definitely need to run the list by Eir and Frigga both.

Tyr nodded slowly in agreement. He crossed the room and carefully reached out to push the paper down onto the desk, causing Odin to look up with a frown. "Then... might I suggest we go and see Loki ourselves, Father?"

"Tyr-"

"Father. Let's go."

Odin studied his eldest's determined face before sighing and nodding in agreement. He would rather be doing something. Odin always felt better when he was trying to fix things and being active in the solution. But, perhaps Tyr was right. And even if he wasn't, most of the night had gone by since Odin had dared step into the healing wing again. He needed to see with his own eyes
his son's progress.

Chapter End Notes

**Abortion in Asgard** - I was hoping to hit a few different marks with this issue in this particular scenario. Mostly how if you have no experience with something you can easily no pay much attention to it. How complex the whole issue can get especially in cases of sexual assault, and how in a perfect world sure there's other great options open but how each possible answer has it's own emotional angle to take into consideration. Also, Asgard not having much of a crime problem leads to laws that really are outdated that never bothered to be be changed because, well why bother? That never even happens! (Every law system has relic laws by the way so this isn't just a utopian Asgard phenomena)

**Loki's Healing** - They have magic so I imagine healing injuries is a lot easier and faster but I didn't want it to be hand wavey insta heal either. So I settled for magic having to sit on the wound and healing spells go for a while for them to do their job. It's just a whole heck of a lot faster than physical methods.

**Jarnsaxa** - *fangirly scream* You don't even know how happy I am I've gotten to her! She's sadly not in Marvel that I can find. Which is SUPER lame. She's a badass. Also, she's Thor's giant lover in myth. They have a son named Magni (who is in Marvel just with a totally different mother. Amora is his mother, in fact. Bleh.) But I repeat that Jarnsaxa is a badass warrior babe and shall continue to be such in this fic. Her name means Iron Dagger for crying out loud. You're going to be awesome with a name like that. Also I really wanted her to be a redhead. No evidence for it. I just wanted it. Also, one of Heimdall's nine mothers sometimes was named Jarnsaxa but there's really nothing to say if this is the same Jarnsaxa as was with Thor or not.

**Tyr** - So, Tyr. I love him. I really do... he's also Asexual, which is part of why he abdicated. Not the full reason but part of it. Not to be confused with being Aromantic btw. He's had relationships and isn't opposed to being romantically involved. He's even had sex before and found it soundly.... meh. I'm good, thanks.

**Vedmekt** - Made up word. But essentially they are like the Jotunn version of Valkyrie.

**Gaslighting and Victim Blaming** - That's essentially what that whole business with making the kids kill each other was. The idea that if you aren't going to die then clearly you *want* to be here being raped by me over and over. Super insidious.

**Svadilfari** - As I hinted before, I tweaked some things about Svadilfari, namely what he was. While, yes, he is still of Jotunn descent he is also half Kelpie. Kelpies have a couple myths where they are used as manual labor much like how Svadilfari was in the original myth. Kelpies, when killed, were reported to consist of nothing but wet turf and some substance like a jellyfish. Kelpies also had a habit of dragging young boys into water. Although there it was most likely to kill them not to rape them or anything. Also, Kelpies for the most part were solid black and turned into males as humans over females. All told, I felt that Svadilfari being part Kelpie fit quite nicely. I also linked Kelpies to Hippocamp as sharing the same sort of evolution tree but splitting off a long time ago.
Svadilfari’s Bridle- The bridle of Svadilfari is the bridle of a Kelpie. There are quite a few legends revolving around Kelpie bridles actually. In one story when a woman takes a silver necklace off a man he turns back into a horse. In another, the bridle would turn normal people into a horse if used on them. So, I combined the two ideas here so that the bridle kept Loki as a horse and the silver necklace that Svadilfari was wearing in the story that I kept making a big deal of was another that kept Svadilfari in a humanoid shape.
Anguish

Chapter Summary

Loki struggles in the aftermath of his abduction.

Chapter Notes

WARNING! This chapter is pretty heavy on the angst and contains unintentional Self-harm. Loki's just been brutally raped so he's not in the best place. Therefore this chapter has the potential to be particularly triggering. Please take caution.

On the slightly brighter side, those of you who really want to know what happened in the other time line, Thor is going to King Loki next chapter and will find out. He'll also be cursing a lot... so there's that. Also, I don't know how this happened but this chapter was supposed to be Chapter 44... so an extra one weaseled it's way in without my noticing... yaaay?

The first thing he became aware of was the faint smell of familiar Vanaheim Lilies that his Mother used as a fragrance on her clothing. Then the soft pillowy feeling all around his oddly numb body. A warm hand only a little bigger than his own was clinging to his own, and even that felt strangely detached from the rest of his body. The sensation couldn't quite be described as floating, but he didn't feel like he was on entirely stable ground either. Distantly he heard talking, but that was slowly coming into focus. "Loki? Loki, Darling, wake up now," his mother coaxed.

Loki groaned, not wanting to wake up in the least. A slender hand with callouses from time spent sewing and weaving brushed across his head and a pair of soft lips lightly grazed his temple. "Come, Darling. You must wake."

Loki still didn't want to do that but reluctantly opened his eyes at his mother's urging. He had to blink several times to try and clear the sleep from his eyes. Frigga smiled at him and gave his forehead another kiss. "That's right. There's my bright boy."

Something was definitely off, but Loki's mind was oddly sluggish and not wanting to identify what was wrong. Loki tried to ask but found his jaw locked in place. His eyes widened instantly as his muscles failed to do anything and his hand flew to his mouth. Loki's lips tingled, and his lower face felt cold to the touch. In some back corner of his mind he recognized magic, but why it might be there didn't fully register. "Shh, it's alright, my darling," Frigga said, catching at his hand. "Your jaw is not yet healed. It shouldn't be too much longer, I promise."

Loki whimpered but allowed Frigga to lower his hand. He didn't like the idea of not being able to talk. "It's alright, brother," Thor's voice said, and Loki turned his head to the side. Thor was the one holding that hand.

Loki's eyes drifted down to where Thor's hand was holding his and then the haze over his mind
faded enough for him to recall finally what had happened. Loki felt burning in his eyes and squeezed them shut. Just as the tears were beginning to fall, his mother swept him into a hug and held him close. Loki tried to fight it back. Warriors and Princes didn't cry. But the tears wouldn't stop no matter how hard he worked at it. Loki buried his face into his mother's chest, barely noticing how his tears soaked into her dress.

Thor's hand squeezed his, but Loki couldn't bring himself to pick his head up. "Loki."

The sound of Odin's voice was unexpected, and Loki couldn't stop himself from flinching. His Father hadn't said Loki's name particularly loudly or with anger -indeed most emotion had been carefully stripped from Odin's tone. Loki kept his face buried against his Mother. He couldn't dare face Odin after what had happened. He just couldn't. "Loki. My Son, look at me," Odin urged.

Loki shook his head. Odin sighed, and Loki felt a dip on the bed beside him. Despite himself, Loki felt anxious and trapped and pressed closer to Frigga's soothing presence. The tangled ball of emotions continued to build until Loki was trembling against his Mother. Frigga rubbed his back gently in an attempt to soothe him. "Loki, I need you to look at me," Odin said.

The very last thing Loki wanted to do was face his Father, but Loki found himself peeking up anyway. Odin's blue eye was fixed on Loki and made Loki want to burst into a fresh wave of tears. He wasn't even sure why. Odin did not look angry and yet... There was so much in his gaze that Loki could not even begin to parse out, and it hurt.

"I am not upset with you, Loki," Odin said, seeing the tears building in Loki's eyes and assuming his son was frightened. Odin sighed as Loki didn't react aside from blinking and causing fresh tears to drip from his dark lashes. Odin reached out to place a hand on Loki's head. Loki flinched back hard, and the unexpected motion brought Odin up short. "Loki, I will not harm you," Odin said. His voice was soft. He tried his best to keep the anger he was feeling on Loki's behalf as well as the hurt that his son would flinch away from him. Judging by how Loki turned away quickly, Odin wasn't sure he succeeded.

Loki couldn't bite back the sobs and rocked against Frigga, who continued to desperately try and comfort him. Loki hadn't wanted to get his father angry at him. He really hadn't! Loki didn't even know why he recoiled so hard! Loki had seen the hand, and his body had just moved without him meaning to. "It's alright, Brother," Thor said as he squeezed Loki's hand so tight it almost hurt. Loki didn't really mind that though. It helped to distract him from the anger he had definitely caused from his reaction to his father.

Loki didn't particularly want Thor or his Mother to be touching him right then. He was so... filthy he shouldn't be touched by anyone ever again. But he was also selfish, and Loki desperately clung to Frigga for comfort as best he could despite the horrid state of himself.

Frigga's comfort slowly calmed Loki's sobs to something more manageable. Loki stayed clinging to her for several more minutes even after his tears had slowed. His eyes hurt from all the crying and his jaw was sore from how his muscles had strained against the magic. Even his throat hurt from how dry it felt. "Here, darling," Frigga said.

Loki looked up to see a glass with a thin silvery straw extending from it. The liquid was a pale minty green color. "This should help," Frigga said as she brought the glass closer. Loki would prefer water, but he was too thirsty to care and carefully took the glass from her. It was awkward to drink without the ability to use his jaw, but after a moment he got the hang of it.

The drink even tasted of mint although it was faint and there was an undertone of something else purely medicinal that Loki couldn't identify. Loki carefully sipped the whole glass down, making
sure to keep his eyes fixed on the glass or the lumps of the comforter where his knees were. He
didn't want to be aware of everyone staring at him. Loki couldn't bear to see their reactions right
then. Once he was done, Frigga took the cup and put it to the side. "Better?" Loki nodded. His
throat at least wasn't so scratchy from needing a drink.

"Loki," Odin said, and again Loki couldn't quite help the cringe his own father's voice caused.
Odin sighed, and Loki felt a pang of panic that he'd upset his father again. Loki's eye darted up for
just a second to see Odin rubbing his forehead.

Frigga reached over Loki's head to put a hand to Odin's shoulder. Loki quickly averted his eyes
again. This was all his fault, he thought in anguish. He was tearing his family apart. Tears built
back up, and Thor's hand squeezed. Loki glanced over and saw Thor giving a genuinely terrible
attempt at a smile. "Loki," Odin tried again. "You have been through something horrible. Take
your time to recover. We will be here for you." Loki squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to
od -if only to show he had heard the words. He couldn't quite process them, but he had heard.

"Darling," Frigga said. "Lady Eir needs to look at you. Can you let her?"

Loki thought about having someone touch him and violently shivered. He shook his head. He
couldn't have anyone in contact with his bare skin. Not until Loki was... well, he wasn't sure what
he needed to do to make it alright, but there was definitely something. Perhaps a spell to wash the
taint away? There had to be something out there. Loki was positive. If there were spells to turn hair
blue of all bizarre things then surely there was a cleansing spell powerful enough to erase the
feeling of grime all over him.

"Alright," Frigga said. She stroked his head soothingly. "Would you like to just sit here with me
then?"

Loki swallowed hard but then nodded. That seemed safest. His mother's familiar and comforting
scents was helping with the whirlwind inside his head. Loki heard his Father get up and couldn't
stop himself from shrinking closer to Frigga. There was a pause. "I will visit again soon," Odin
said. Loki cringed at the tone. So very carefully neutral. That was Odin's kingly voice when he was
talking to the court or making a decree. Odin left the room, and Loki tried his utmost best to not
break into a fresh round of tears. Odin was busy, and Loki had most certainly angered him by
recoiling as he had. It made sense that Odin would leave. Why then did it hurt so much?

Loki couldn't bring himself to pay very much attention to what was going on around him. He heard
talking but didn't even register what topics were being discussed. He curled up in his Mother's lap
and stayed there because everything hurt and Loki felt that if he overthought he would cry again.

Eventually, Loki drifted off to an exhausted sleep yet again although it was fitful. He dreamed of
horses chasing him and chains trapping him in place. He could feel the bite of the whip against his
back and blood oozing down his skin. A large hand sliding over his bare skin like a grotesque
slimy slug. Loki whimpered in his sleep as he heard a familiar chuckle into his ear. "Such a pretty
little broodmare, you are. I do like it when my whores are from good stock... Don't try and kick me
this time and maybe I'll feed you tonight."

Loki woke again with a start. His heart was racing, and his skin was clammy from a thin layer of
sweat. Judging by how quiet it was, it had to be very late at night. Loki looked around and saw that
his Mother had summoned a bed for herself nearby and was asleep. Nobody else was around. Loki
took several long minutes to try and catch his breath and was only partially successful. It took Loki a moment to realize that the sheets were damp not only from his sweat.

Loki felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment and awkwardly pulled his knees up to his chest. He was still sore from his injuries, and his wet sleep pants were uncomfortable. He wasn't a child! He'd long since grown out of such a thing! And yet... Loki buried his face in his knees and tried to not be too loud as he cried. He was a Prince! A Son of Odin. Not some simpering baby to wet his bed at a stupid nightmare!

"Loki?"

Loki stiffened. Though he had tried to keep his sobs quiet, he must not have succeeded.

Frigga got up and moved to his bedside. "Darling, what's the matter?"

Loki whimpered but couldn't have said it even if his jaw was free to move. How could Loki ever admit that not only was he so weak he couldn't even defend himself, but now he had soiled his bedding like an infant? Frigga put her arm around him, and Loki leaned into her touch selfishly. He was dirtying her just as badly as he was and yet he couldn't stop himself.

Frigga waved her hand over the bed, and the wetness was cleaned away, leaving crisp, fresh sheets and sleeping pants behind. "It's alright, Darling," she said softly. "Everything's alright."

Loki shook his head. Nothing was alright. Nothing would ever be alright ever again.

Thor tried to be as patient as he could be and give his brother support and space at the same time. But even when, on the second day Loki was awake, the spell keeping his jaw from moving was removed Loki didn't say anything, Thor knew things were far worse than he could have imagined. A quiet Loki wasn't one Thor had ever dealt with before. There was a haunted look over his brother and no matter how Thor tried to cheer him nothing seemed to break through.

Loki barely ate instead poking at things as if they were the most uninteresting bits of scrap that ever existed. Frigga spent all of her time in the healing wing with Loki and Thor tried his best to spend as much time as he could there as well. He couldn't always. Mjolnir had to be retrieved, and so Odin thought it a good idea to test if Thor could summon her back. It had taken Thor nearly a dozen tries, but he had eventually called her back to his hand. Odin had gone quiet and pensive at this. Thor felt Odin's eyes lingering on him more than once, but it never lasted long. Thor was relieved about that as he still hadn't come up with any convincing story to tell.

Loki's state was drawing most everyone's attention. He still refused to allow Eir to touch him. When it became absolutely necessary for the healer to touch Loki to do her spells or examine his wounds, Frigga had to put him to sleep, or Loki would thrash and cry as if being ripped to shreds. Tyr tried to get Loki to come out of the shell he'd made for himself by playing Tafl with him, but Loki lost so quickly each and every time, that it was apparent to everyone he wasn't remotely interested in it.

"Can I take Loki for a walk?" Thor asked late into the second day of his brother's stay in the infirmary.

Eir frowned at the request. "Prince Loki really should not be leaving his bed yet."

"Please? It will only be for a little while, and you know how he hates the Healing Wing," Thor reasoned.
"Where do you plan on walking with him?" Eir asked.

"Just through the gardens," Thor said. "Mother's gardens," he added when he saw Eir's less than pleased look. They could be in the public gardens for ages after all.

Eir still didn't look happy but sighed. "Very well, but only for an hour and if he begins to be in pain let him sit down and have someone call me. He should not really be walking very much with his injuries. His hip has only just healed and is still inflamed."

"I promise," Thor said immediately. Eir still didn't seem happy, but Thor didn't give her the chance to change her mind and ran to Loki's private room. Loki was sitting on the bed with his knees pulled up, and his eyes fixed on nothing. "Loki! Would you like to go outside with me?"

Loki slowly looked up and blinked several times. It was as if he had entirely missed what Thor said. So, Thor took Loki's hand in his and repeated the question. After a long moment where Loki's eyes swept his room, Loki finally nodded. Thor grinned. "Fantastic. Come, let us get you dressed."

Loki watched as Thor looked around the room and then huffed. There was very little in the healing chamber at all. Only Loki's sleep things. "I suppose we'll have to make a stop by your room then," Thor said.

At the mention of his room, Loki suddenly became a lot more apprehensive about the idea of leaving the healing wing. But as Thor gently tugged on Loki's hand, he found himself following along anyway. He was a Prince and would be a great warrior someday. Loki could face his own room. He was sure of it...

Thor was beaming, but Loki could tell that he was forcing it. Loki wondered if it was for his benefit because Thor thought he couldn't see it or if Thor was trying to fool himself. Either way, Loki followed his brother silently through the halls. Loki tried to not feel as if everyone they passed was staring and judging him. They couldn't possibly know what had happened. Loki knew that his family wouldn't have told anyone. And yet, Loki felt as if every guard could see it branded across his face.

The halls never before felt so winding and endless as it did when Loki just wanted to melt into the ground. He had a white robe over himself and his bedclothes, but that wasn't enough. Loki needed more. More layers more... more something. Anything to keep their eyes from landing on him and seeing the slime that Loki could feel stuck to each and every pore of his skin.

Thor was babbling about something that Loki couldn't bring himself to listen to. Nothing seemed important to him. Everything felt and seemed off-kilter and wrong. Loki couldn't make it readjust no matter how hard he tried.

They finally reached Loki's door and stopped. Loki stared at the wood. Distantly he noticed new dents in it and that the lock had been broken. In his mind's eye, Loki could see beyond the wood. The things on his side table he'd hit when he tried to fight. The torn bedclothes scattered across the floor. The bed...

Loki tried hard to bite back the whine of anguish.

_The hand clamped down on his mouth made it hard to breathe, and the smell of booze made Loki not want to. He fought and struggled so hard, but the man's grip was too strong. Like vices wrapped around him, that felt like they would crush his bones. "Hush now, Prince Loki. You tease me all night at the party and then leave your balcony door wide open to invite me in? You want this... don't try and deny it now, slut."_
He didn't! He didn't want it! He hadn't been flirting with anyone! A hand lightly touched Loki's shoulder, but he flinched as if he'd been punched. Loki looked over and blinked away the blurriness in his vision. Hot tears rolled down his cheeks, and he hastily wiped them away. "How about I get you something, and you change in my room?" Thor suggested softly.

Loki wanted to say no. That he would face it like a strong warrior. A strong son of Odin wouldn't be scared of a room. But... Loki shivered and nodded. He was not a strong son of Odin. He wanted to be. Desperately. But he just wasn't. It hurt too much.

Loki very deliberately didn't look into the room as Thor disappeared inside. Surely it was put back together and cleaned by this point, but Loki didn't want to risk that not being true. The blood seeping into his sheets beneath him was etched into his memory, and he didn't think he could risk seeing it with his own two eyes in daylight hours on top of that.

Thor rummaged around for a few moments and then returned. "This should do," he said triumphantly before closing the door to Loki's room firmly behind him. "Come on, Brother."

Loki felt he should do or say something, but nothing was coming to his mind. He could barely muster up the focus to just follow along behind Thor as they walked the short distance down the hall. Were they even going to Thor's room? Loki wasn't paying attention, but he assumed so. The hallways all looked the same to him so they could be heading right back to the healing wing for all Loki knew.

They were shortly in front of another door, and Thor opened it wide. Loki saw the predictable chaos of Thor's room and allowed his brother to pull him inside. "Sorry. I know you hate my mess," Thor said as he kicked some random bits and bobs out of the way. Was that a battle axe? Yes, Loki realized as he stared at it. Thor for some reason had a battle axe on his floor. Well, under his bed now. Usually, Loki would find that amusing, but he couldn't quite reach that point.

"Here, brother," Thor said as he held out familiar green and black clothes. "I'll wait on the balcony. You can change in the bathroom if you like."

Loki slowly grabbed the clothes with a nod and then went off to the bathroom. He heard Thor sigh and felt a pang. He was upsetting Thor. Loki didn't mean to be, but he wasn't sure what else to do. Loki closed the door to the main room and put the fresh clothes on top of Thor's mostly clear vanity. For the most part, only a few cleansers and a large assortment of loose hair ties populated the area around the sink. Not even a brush was in sight.

Loki reached for the ties of his tunic before his own movements in the mirror caught his eye. Was that really him? It didn't feel like he was looking at himself. He supposed it only made sense if it was him as it was a mirror and all and yet... yet it wasn't. Loki couldn't explain it more than that. His eyes were red-rimmed and his hair a tangled mess. Loki lifted a hand to his face and touched his cheek, watching as his reflection did the same. Was his skin always so cold? He hadn't thought so but then again everything felt cold to him now.

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Loki studied himself for another moment and then dropped his hand. He was here to change not stare at himself in a mirror. Loki pulled off his shirt and froze at the sight of bruises. A physical splint was on his broken arm but only because the bone hadn't fully healed and could rebreak if he put too much force behind it. The bruises should have been long gone. As Loki stared the marks faded away as if they were never there and he swallowed hard. Just his imagination. That had ever been a double-edged sword for him.

Loki wrapped his good arm around himself and closed his eyes. He couldn't let this get the best of him. Loki felt as if his skin was crawling and wanted nothing more than to peel it off of himself.
Loki turned and looked at Thor's bath. Surely, his brother would understand Loki wishing to clean up. All he'd had was magical cleansings since... well since before. A good scrub might help Loki not feel as if he was covered in filth.

The knob squeaked just a little as Loki turned it to full blast. Normally, Loki mixed hot and cold water, but this time he wanted to be beyond a shadow of a doubt that nothing had survived. He used the hottest water that the bath could produce to fill the tub. Steam was filling the room, and that had the added benefit of clouding over the mirror.

As the tub filled, Loki shed his pants and quickly got into the bath. He couldn't quite help but let out a little noise at how hot it was but refused to jump out again. It was only hot water. Loki let the hot water continue to rise around him as he reached for a nearby pumice stone. He was mildly surprised that Thor even had one but was grateful as well.

The hot water was still painful, and Loki's skin was turning red, but he ignored that and started scrubbing at his body that was already submerged. It hurt. The pumice stone wasn't really designed for regular skin, but Loki didn't care. He needed every inch of that monster's filth off of him, and he couldn't wait for a gentle soap or something stupid. He needed to be clean immediately.

Tears built up in Loki's eyes as he tried to desperately scrub the feeling away. The hot water was still rising, but Loki ignored that as he brought the stone to a new patch of bright pink skin and started rubbing it hard against himself. He couldn't help but hiss in pain but kept going. It was better to hurt now and be sure he was clean than to have to worry about it later.

Loki didn't notice the brief streams of red that dissipated into the water as he scrubbed himself raw. Tears were flowing freely down his bright red face, and he wasn't entirely sure if it was from the heat of the water, the stone, or something more profound that Loki didn't want to examine.

Loki kept scrubbing at himself furiously even as he started to get light headed. The steam filling the room seemed to be clouding his mind just as quickly. He ignored it and kept going. He couldn't stop part way. He had to finish. Maybe then he wouldn't upset his father by flinching away anymore? At least Loki wouldn't pass his dirtiness onto his mother.

He had to be clean! His magic was not feeling very strong right now so Loki would settle for ensuring that nothing of that monster could survive on his skin. Loki pressed harder against the pumice stone even though it felt even worse when he did. Loki had to get clean. That was all there was to it. He would feel so much better when he wasn't dealing with that taint over every inch of himself. A little discomfort now was worth that.

Black dots started floating in Loki's vision, and he was getting dizzy, but he refused to stop. Loki had to blink several times to try and focus, but it was getting harder and harder to do so. His head was throbbing, and he was feeling vaguely nauseous, but he'd felt that since he woke up practically. Loki scrubbed at his skin and sat in the hottest water he could until he passed out against the side of the tub.

Thor was starting to worry where he leaned on his balcony railing and faced outward. He had told himself to let Loki take his time in dressing, but his brother had been in the bathroom for a long time. Thor looked over his shoulder at the closed bathroom door. He could hear the water running. He knew how much Loki cared about his appearance so at first Thor hadn't thought anything of it. But surely the tub was filled by now?

Thor wanted to give Loki time, but he couldn't help but be concerned. With how oddly Loki was acting, Thor couldn't tell what his brother would do. Thor went over to the bathroom door and knocked loud enough to be heard over the running water. "Loki?" There was no answer and though
Thor was disappointed Loki hadn't said anything the whole time so Thor wasn't as surprised as he might have been otherwise. "Loki? Is everything alright?"

Thor sighed and wondered if it would be better or worse to take a peek and make sure his brother was alright. Loki valued his privacy even before this. As Thor pondered the problem, the sound of the water changed. It was slight, but the water was definitely hitting stone opposed to more water. Thor had overflowed his bath enough times by accident that he recognized the change.

"Loki!?" Thor burst through the door. "Loki!"

Loki was unconscious in the tub that was overflowing with steaming hot water. His skin was bright red and his breathing too fast. And he was beginning to slip down!

Thor nearly fell in the water as he hurried to catch his brother before his head went under the water. Thor hissed at how hot the water was in the tub even as he pulled Loki out to lay on the cool floor tiles. Thor quickly turned off the water and bent closer to Loki. "Brother! Brother, wake up!" Thor urged. Loki didn't, and Thor quickly darted back to the hall to yell at a guard to get Lady Eir.

Once he had someone summoning the healer, Thor rushed back to Loki's side. His skin was still so bright red, and several spots on his body were raw and bleeding. Thor had once on Midgard heard the term 'road rash' and had looked it up on the 'Googles' to find out what it was. He was very unpleasantly reminded of those pictures when he looked at the spots on his brother's skin only perhaps not as severe. Thor grabbed a nearby towel to lightly drape over Loki's nude body even as he tried to call Loki back to consciousness.

Eir was there quickly. She paused at the doorway and observed the scene for just a moment. "What happened?" Eir asked as she came to Loki's side and let her seidr sweep her patient.

"He fell unconscious in the bath," Thor said. "I managed to catch him before his head went under, but I don't know how long he was unconscious for."

Eir reached over to the bath and put a hand in the water. She pulled it out quickly with a grimace. "Fool boy. He knows not to set a bath that hot," she said. Although her words were harsh Thor could see how worried she was. "It is but a mild case of heat stroke, Prince Thor. He will recover."

Then Eir's eyes spotted the raw wounds on Loki's body. She let out a little noise and picked up Loki's limp arm to examine the injuries more carefully. Thor carefully fished the pumice stone out of the bottom of the tub. "I think he was using this," Thor murmured as he handed it over.

Eir studied the coarse stone for a moment before sighing. "Yes, that seems likely," she said. "The sooner your parents decide on a mental healer the better."

"What do you mean?" Thor asked, not at all liking the sound of that. "Do you think he did this on purpose?" That was an absolutely horrifying prospect, and yet Loki had tossed himself off of the Bifrost before. Thor knew that hurting himself and even trying to end himself wasn't outside of the realm of possibility for his brother. Such a thing was hurtful to admit, but Thor couldn't forget watching Loki fall into nothing either.

"I cannot say. But either way, if he did it knowing he'd hurt himself or he was too caught up in what he was doing to care if he was hurting himself, neither is good," Eir said. "We will need to watch Prince Loki more carefully until he has a chance to see a mental healer."

Thor nodded in agreement. He should have been paying more attention. He'd been trying to give Loki what he needed, but Thor wasn't even sure what that was at the moment. He was at a
complete loss, and he didn't like that in the least. Thor wanted to know for sure how to help his brother.

When Loki woke up, he was back in the healing wing with bandages wrapped around various parts of himself and a cold compress across his chest and forehead. He wanted to protest the cold radiating from them, but it was actually soothing, so Loki let it be. "He scrubbed himself raw in several places, my King," Eir was saying off to the side. "And the bath was far too hot. I am afraid to leave him unsupervised for very long."

"It was intentional?" Odin asked. Loki could hear the frown in his voice. His father must be so ashamed of him...

"I cannot say if he meant to hurt himself or if he just wasn't thinking about how it would affect him," Eir said. "But he certainly isn't behaving normally. Have you picked a healer yet?"

"Because he seems to be having trouble sleeping on his own, we thought that Ixtlilton would be best," Frigga said. "You said he had experience with soothing dreams and night terrors."

Loki wondered who that even was but also couldn't find it in him to dwell on it. "He does," Eir confirmed. "I'll write to him immediately and see if he can come to Asgard. He's quite accommodating from what I hear, so I don't imagine that'll be a problem."

"I will write my own request for you to send with yours," Odin said. "I want to assure him that anything he might require will be handled."

"I'm sure that will only help, my King."

Loki laid there for another few moments. He should probably say or do something, but he didn't really feel like it. And even if he did, what would he do? Moving and speaking both seemed like far too much effort. He was saved from ever having to decide when Frigga appeared in his vision. "Loki, Darling. You're awake. How do you feel?"

He felt horrible. Like everything was wrong and would never be right again. But he didn't say that out loud. Loki didn't want to hurt his mother, and he had a feeling that saying that would only cause her to be upset. So Loki settled for the simplest option of saying nothing.

Frigga gave him a smile and kissed his temple beside the cold compress. "You gave us quite a fright. But everything will be alright now," she said. Loki still couldn't believe that.

Frigga sat down beside Loki and talked to him, but Loki was barely listening. He still felt dirty. Why did he still feel so filthy? He'd scrubbed so hard all over, and yet it was still there making his skin crawl. Loki would have to clean himself again, that was all. Maybe because he hadn't actually finished, that was the problem.

Loki stared up at the ceiling above him and busied himself with something simple that couldn't possibly lead to worse thoughts. Counting each tiny fleck of light grey that was mixed into the otherwise white plaster. Loki wasn't even taking any sort of precautions to make sure that he didn't recount the same specks. All he wanted was something to keep his mind focused. The endless counting would do that.

When dinner came, Frigga tried her best to get Loki to eat, and for her, he managed to take a few bites, but he just wasn't remotely hungry. Even thinking about food made him want to be ill and so once again Loki ended up pushing it around his plate more than anything. Thor returned looking for all the Nine like a kicked puppy and held up a hefty tome on Energy Transfer. Loki had no idea
why Thor would have something like that until his brother said he thought Loki might be bored. Well, it was better than counting ceiling specks, Loki thought.

Loki resisted going to sleep and just let his eyes scan the words in the book that Thor brought him. He wasn't even really processing them and lost his place many times. Frigga had gently suggested Loki might be tired as it was getting late, but Loki was not inclined to seeing if his nightmare from the night before repeated.

"Darling, you must sleep sometime," Frigga said as she adjusted his blankets over his legs.

Loki let his eyes follow another line of text before dropping down. There was a diagram on this page. Maybe he could stare at that for a while and not raise suspicion. Frigga was watching him closely though so he couldn't get away with it for too long. "Loki, Darling, please."

Loki shook his head a little. He couldn't sleep. It was too big a risk. What if it happened again? Loki didn't think he could take the embarrassment on top of everything else. Frigga sighed. "Very well, but only for another hour, alright?" she said. Loki didn't respond, but he didn't think an hour would be long enough for him to figure out another delay.

"My Queen?" Eir called. "Might I speak with you for a moment?"

Frigga gave Loki a kiss on his temple and murmured that she'd be right back. Loki didn't mind, he knew that he wasn't exactly outstanding company right then. He did wonder, for about a half minute, what they were talking about since it probably had something to do with him, but then lost interest. Whatever it was, Loki couldn't quite bring himself to care. What worse news could there possibly be?

Loki was distantly aware of Odin's distinct rumble in the other room, but he couldn't make out the words. Loki had reached the bottom of the page and had no idea what he'd read, so he let his eyes go back to the top to try again. Maybe he'd actually register what words he was seeing this time. Loki made his eyes follow the sentence across the page.

He was only partially paying attention to the rise and fall of voices on the other side of the door since he couldn't hear the words anyway. Loki could tell that Odin was getting agitated about something. Off in the distance, he felt Asgard rumble from it. What had Loki done this time? Clearly, Eir was talking about him and whatever it was Odin was upset. Loki didn't want to upset his father. Perhaps it was the bath incident? Loki would have to try and muster the effort it would take to apologize if it was making his father so angry.

Things in the other room had quieted again, and Loki flipped the page of his book, no longer caring to try and read whatever had been on the previous page. It probably wasn't that interesting anyway. Loki wanted to find it interesting, but that would also require reading correctly, and that just seemed like an exhausting prospect. His mind didn't want to focus on anything too complicated.

A loud shout in the other room made Loki jump. Loki looked at the door even as he heard his mother starting to cry. Trepidation began to build deep inside Loki's chest. What was Eir discussing with them that would bring his mother to tears? Were they going to have to discard him? Loki wouldn't be entirely surprised if that happened. He was so... dirty and... Loki wouldn't want to be around him either. He couldn't exactly be a proper prince if he was so... defiled. Loki had already been thrown out once in his life. No doubt this was cause for it to happen again. Even if he had been somehow good enough for Asgardians where he wasn't for Jotnar, that wasn't true anymore.
Such a pretty, naughty little Prince, a voice whispered in his mind. Letting me fuck you so hard. What would Daddy say if he could see you moaning like a common street whore?

Loki whimpered and covered his ears with his hands. It didn't help. He could still hear that whisper cutting like a scalpel across his mind. Loki didn't let it happen. He didn't! If Odin thought that though... Loki couldn't let him believe that! He would tell his Father he hadn't wanted it. Loki might like to break the rules, but he hadn't gone with that brute willingly!

Tears broke free of Loki's lashes as he curled so that his face was buried in his knees. He hadn't done it on purpose! He really hadn't! It had just hurt so much that Loki passed out. He'd never done anything like that before, and that monster was so much bigger than Loki. It hurt so much! If Loki knew he'd wake up in that man's stable, he would have fought harder to stay awake! But it had been better than the pain! Loki didn't know!

"Loki!"

Loki felt familiar arms wrap around him and turned into his mother for comfort. He shouldn't since he was still dirty, but he needed her too much. He would find some way to make it up to her later. Loki cried into Frigga's shoulder as she shushed him gently and rocked him back and forth. "It's alright, Darling. You're safe. I promise you that he can't ever touch you again."

That didn't help. Not even a little bit. He was still there in Loki's dreams just... waiting. With his horrible taunting voice and his mocking laugh. Frigga continued to soothe him as he cried until, despite what he wanted, he slipped off to sleep.

Again, Loki's dreams were plagued with flashes of terrible things he didn't want to remember. Horrible whispers blaming him and hands that were too rough where they touched and other awful things that made him want to curl up and die.

When he woke again with a start, his bedding was wet again. Loki pulled at his hair and sobbed in frustration, embarrassment, and pain. He just wanted this all to stop! It was too hard! He couldn't fix it! Loki just wanted none of it to have ever happened or at the very least be able to forget about it! Was that such a horrible thing to ask for?

Frigga came in carrying breakfast for him and saw him crying on the bed. It only took her a few seconds to realize what had upset her son and quickly cleaned the evidence of the accident away. "Shh, it's alright, my love," she said as she wrapped Loki in a hug. "It's nothing."

Loki shook his head. It was something! He was seven hundred and ten years old! He was far beyond this sort of thing! Frigga held him close and tried her best to calm him.

Eventually, Loki did manage to stop his tears although he felt exhausted again after it. He wanted so badly to just forget everything that had happened. Frigga put the meal she had brought in front of him and urged him to eat. Loki couldn't even bring himself to eat a little of it. He'd forced himself previously to have at least something, but it was just too hard that morning. He was a disgrace, and that knowledge quite easily stole what very minimal interest he had in eating.

Loki pushed around his eggs mindlessly with his fork rather than eating it. As he was, Lady Eir came into the room. "Prince Loki. How are you feeling today?"

Wretched. What sort of a question even was that?

Lady Eir sighed when Loki didn't say anything. "You need to eat that, My Prince. Your body needs the calories." Loki shrugged, not really caring about that. Lady Eir was silent for a moment before
crossing the room to sit beside Loki. Thankfully, she was far enough away to not be touching because Loki couldn't handle the thought of that. "My Prince, there are some things we need to speak about."

"Eir!"

"He needs to know, Queen Frigga," Eir said in a tone sharper than Loki had ever heard anyone dare take with his Mother before. "You know it's true. I don't wish to burden him either in his fragile state but he will find out sooner or later, and he'll need to make a choice."

Loki didn't at all like the sound of that. "It is too fresh, Eir," Frigga said. "I won't allow it."

"When will you allow it, my Queen? Seven, eight months from now?" Eir demanded. "When it is too late? There will never be a good time for this news."

"Surely it can wait another day!"

Eir sighed heavily. "A day will not make any difference, My Queen, and I think you know this." Loki glanced between the two women, trying to figure out what in Asgaardia's name they were talking about. "A day is not enough to make any appreciable headway with Prince Loki's trauma. It is better to give him time after he knows everything. That way he can adjust to the news and make a better decision."

Loki was only getting more confused. What decision would Loki have to make? He was still subject to his parent's permissions for everything but going to war for another three hundred years. He couldn't make any decisions. "It is too soon," Frigga insisted.

"It will always be too soon," Eir said, firmly but not entirely unkindly.

Frigga looked so torn as she pulled Loki close. Loki didn't resist, not minding the comfort since he would very much like to never leave his mother's grasp. Eir turned to Loki and started to reach out but then stopped herself when Loki stiffened. "I'm sorry. I won't touch you, My Prince," she said and let her hand return to her lap. Loki allowed himself to relax just a little.

Eir sighed heavily and then squared herself as if going into battle. "My Prince, there are some things I must tell you," she said. It sounded recited, and Loki remembered the yelling he'd heard last night. Was this what that had been about?

"As a Jotnar, you know that you... have both sexes." Loki looked away, already finding this far too uncomfortable a topic. "And, while there is no shame in that-" Loki almost managed a scoff "-it has made some complications."

Loki allowed his eyes to drift back to Eir. She looked so terribly uncomfortable, and it was beginning to make Loki dread whatever she had to say. Eir let out a long breath. "I ran the test many times, My Prince, and I am positive that you're with child."

Loki felt his whole world end in one agonizing instant.

Chapter End Notes

Ixtliilton- Leaving the European Gods behind. Ixtliilton is the Aztec God of Medicine and Healing. Specifically dealing with children. Don't even ask me how to say that
name by the by... I looked up a 'how to say this' thing and it gave me (Yxtlilton) but that is not terribly helpful and I have no idea how correct it is.

**Bed Wetting**- A fairly common thing for children who've suffered sexual abuse is to revert on some things such as bed wetting. I'm not putting a tag for it because this is the only chapter I have planned where it really features and also I don't want someone to think it's tagged there as a sexual fetish.

**Parental Permissions**- Because Asgard is a heavily fighting-centric culture it made sense to me that they would have a lower age limit on those going to war. The age they can go to war without parental permission is 700. At 1000 is when they get most of the autonomy although a few laws require a little older age. Also a lower age limit on those going into war is something that's happened historically so it makes sense with Asgard's weird medieval yet futuristic amalgam that for them that little thing never really changed.
First Steps

Chapter Summary

In which Loki tries to say he's all better now. Really.

Chapter Notes

So, this is a slightly longer chapter and as I'm sure you've noticed... out quite a lot faster than previous chapters. That's because I've been super stoked for this particular chapter for the past twenty or so. Don't get used to the rapid fire updates is what I'm saying, lol. Also, I hope this clears up all those questions people have about how this could have happened in the other timeline.

Thor didn't see his brother for the next two days. He kept attempting to visit but was turned away each time by either his parents or Lady Eir. The absence worried him much, and Thor couldn't very well force his way into his brother's sick room. Thor couldn't be sure how Loki would react to that, but he somewhat doubted it would be in any way possible to be considered good.

Then, the morning of the third day since Thor had seen his brother, he went to break his fast and saw Loki sitting there at the table looking tired but healed. "Loki!" Thor darted forward. "Are you alright? I was worried!"

"Fine, Thor," Loki said. His voice was a little thin, but he was at least speaking this time. Thor counted that as a marked improvement. The utter silence last time he'd seen his brother was far too unnerving. "Lady Eir has said my wounds have healed very well. No lasting damage done."

Now if that weren't the most obvious lie that Loki had ever told Thor would eat his own boots. But pointing that out seemed... imprudent, so Thor let it go and took his seat beside Loki. "I am glad to see you up and about, Brother," Thor said.

Loki gave a wane smile. "I am glad to be up and about... being stuck in the healing ward is dreadfully boring."

"I'm sure. I tried to visit..."

"I was probably asleep," Loki said with a wave of his hand. "You know how Eir gets."

"I do," Thor agreed. He glanced over at his parents at the head of the table to try and gauge their reactions. Frigga looked worried and Odin very pensive. Thor wasn't sure either of those reactions boded well. "Are you sure you're alright, Loki?"

Loki pursed his lips together for a moment. "Of course, Thor. You know a few broken bones is nothing to us." Thor wasn't sure what to say to that. Broken bones were the least of what Loki had been through, and, while Loki was acting more like his old self, Thor couldn't help but think that it
wasn't actually a good thing. Thor was far from an expert, but he didn't believe that acting as if nothing had happened would help his brother recover. It hadn't seemed to in Thor's other life.

Before Thor could try and find a way to voice his concern, Loki had turned to Frigga. "Mother, can I please go outside today? I'm perfectly fine. Even Lady Eir says so."

"Lady Eir said no such thing," Frigga said. "She said that you could leave the healing wing if you took it easy."

Loki huffed a little. "I am fine, Mother. Really. Nothing even hurts."

Frigga frowned, but she only managed to open her mouth before Odin reached over and put a hand on her forearm. "Frigga, dear. Leave the boy be. We can't just lock him up inside."

"I'd like to see Ofnir," Loki said. "I haven't seen him in a week. He must be worried."

Frigga still didn't look happy. "I will stay with him, Mother," Thor piped up. He didn't want Loki wandering around on his own after everything he'd just been through either, but Loki looked as if he was about to throw a fit or at the very least say something he'd later regret. "And we won't go beyond the garden."

Loki scowled darkly at Thor and Thor tried his best to not take it too personally. "... very well. But remember what Lady Eir told you, darling."

Loki's scowl got even darker. "I remember what Lady Eir told me, Mother. I'm not a simpleton."

"I didn't mean it that way, Loki," Frigga said in her best soothing voice. "I just don't want you hurt again."

Thor saw Loki's grip on his utensils tighten and Loki's jaw clench before he took a deep breath. Loki visibly relaxed his posture and grip. "I know, Mother," he said. "And I have no desire to be injured again either. I'll be careful."

Thor was both in awe and a little terrified at how good Loki was at pushing everything down. Just a few days ago he wasn't even talking, and now he was doing a half decent job of acting as if nothing had happened at all. Had Loki always been this good at that? Thor was well aware of how Loki bottled his negative emotions until they exploded -he'd been on the wrong end of those explosions enough times to consider them inevitable- but he'd never actually been able to see Loki starting to do it before. Thor had no idea how Loki could do that.

The rest of breakfast was somewhat awkward with Loki saying little even when addressed directly. He wasn't as utterly silent as the last time Thor saw him but quiet enough that Thor knew he was understandably preoccupied. Loki ate only about a third of his breakfast, but he left the table before Frigga or anyone else- could say anything. "Loki! Wait!" Thor said before shovelling the rest of his food in his mouth while getting to his feet.

"Well hurry up," Loki said in an annoyance. "You're always so slow, Thor."

Thor struggled to finish chewing and then swallow as fast as he could. "Not everyone eats as fast as you, Loki," he said before clearing his throat of a few crumbs. As they entered the hall and moved away from the dining chamber Thor said, "Mother's just worried about you, you know."

Loki frowned but then sighed. "Yes, I know... but I just want to move on already."

The brothers walked through the halls in silence for several minutes. Thor felt as if he should say or
do something -but he had no idea what would actually help. As soon as they exited the halls and stepped out into their mother's garden, Loki paused and closed his eyes. Thor gave him his minute by pretending as if their mother's Alfheim Ash Tree was terribly fascinating. Loki sighed, and Thor saw, out of the corner of his eye, Loki push a hand that trembled a little through his hair. "Let's go, Thor," Loki said as he started walking again.

"Right..."

The path through Frigga's garden was winding and edged with enameled tiles showing different stylized flowers in a repeating pattern. Flower beds were overflowing with blooms of different types and colors. Ponds and fountains gurgled near sitting areas that were tucked away behind more plants, statues, and trees. The path eventually ended at a large slightly raised grassy space upon which an elegant sitting area was placed. A weaving frame was still set up beside a lounge covered in pale golden fabric, and a garden table supported a basket full of yarns.

The stone walkway continued on the other side of the clearing and Thor was expecting Loki to barrel right through. At first, it seemed as if Loki would, but then he paused beside Frigga's frame to look at the tapestry that was half finished between the pieces of wood. Thor examined the weave as well. What was happening in the scene was very hard to tell as the bottom wasn't yet put in, but one of the figures was very distinctly blue. Thor had to wonder what in the Nine his Mother was working on.

Loki abruptly turned from the weaving and continued on across the little knoll. "Loki!"

"I don't want to talk about it, Thor," Loki said without looking back.

"You don't have to, but you should still wait for me," Thor said. "Nor do you need to go away angry. Who knows what scene Mother is depicting!"

Loki paused and glared over his shoulder at Thor. "I thought you said I didn't have to talk about it. Drop it would you?"

Thor sighed. "Alright, I'm sorry."

Loki huffed, but when he started walking again, it was a bit slower. The path continued to weave through bushes and flower beds until it made a small bridge over a brook that fed a fish pond and watered much of the garden on its meandering trek. Thor was content to just walk along beside Loki for the moment. "The rumors about them are true you know. They are monsters," Loki said suddenly.

Thor very nearly missed a step which would have resulted in him falling into the brook. He caught himself at the last minute, however. "W-what?"

"Jotnar. They're monsters," Loki said, clenching his fist tightly at the base of his back.

"... what about Gerd?" Thor asked. He had to navigate this carefully he knew, but he felt very ill-equipped to do so. Thor would have definitely liked some warning that he was going to be thrown into this conversation.

Loki waved Thor's question away with one hand. "Gerd is only half. Clearly, they managed to escape inheriting such evil traits."

"Oh, Asgaedia help me, Thor thought even as he tried to come up with the right response to that. "I somehow doubt that evil is a trait that can even be inherited, brother."
"Why not?" Loki asked. He looked over at Thor. There was a strange sort of manic light behind his green eyes that Thor was very unhappy to see the return of. Thor had thought he'd never have to see it again once he'd made his choice to come back and save Loki. "Other such... deformities can be. Why not evil as well?"

"Because, brother," Thor said, trying to keep his voice as light as possible. "You are Jotnar, and you are not evil."

Loki's eyes widened by a fraction, but then the moment passed, and he looked back to the path. "You don't know what you're talking about, Thor," he grumbled.

"I can tell evil when I see it, Loki," Thor said. "And that is not you." Loki grumbled something under his breath that Thor couldn't quite make out but didn't say anything else. Did that mean that Thor won that argument? He wasn't sure. He so rarely won arguments against Loki and even when he 'won' he didn't always truly come out on top.

The two of them stayed quiet the rest of the way through the gardens until they reached Ofnir's pen. "He has missed you," Thor said as the large lock rotated and shifted to the open position. "Mother says he's been pouting."

Loki hummed to show he heard even as he went inside the large pen. Ofnir practically jumped from the top of the rocky hill to land right in front of Loki, already mewling for attention like a kitten. Loki chuckled and put a hand to Ofnir's snout. "I'm sorry I haven't been here, Ofnir, but I am now," Loki said. He scratched at the scales under the large lizard's chin, and Ofnir's spiked tail swung wide, carving fresh divots into the ground. "He looks pale," Loki said after a moment.

"He's been eating poorly," Thor said. Ofnir hadn't eaten at all the first two days Loki was missing and had only nibbled at some of the meat that they'd tried to feed him after that.

Loki clucked his tongue. "We should bring him something then," Loki said.

"He's got half a deer over there," Thor pointed out with a gesture to the center of the pen where the messy remains of a large stag that had its left side missing were strewn.

Loki looked over at the mess and frowned. "And how long has that been there?"

"I think it was put in here last night?" Thor guessed. He hadn't honestly been paying that close of attention to when Ofnir was being fed. He had only glanced in periodically to make sure that there was evidence of something having been there recently.

"So, it's at least twelve hours old," Loki said.

"He's a wyvern, Loki. They'll eat carrion if they have to," Thor pointed out in exasperation.

Loki scoffed even as he moved his hand to scratch above Ofnir's eye. "That doesn't mean we should make him. Honestly, Thor. It's a good thing you don't have any pets," Loki said.

"Oh, you think so?" Thor asked. "Well, I have been thinking of getting some sort of pet, for your information, and I'm sure it'll be far better than Ofnir."

"Better than a wyvern?" Loki asked incredulously. "I find that hard to believe, brother. And jealousy does not suit you."

"I'm not jealous," Thor denied.
Ofnir flopped onto his side, making Loki smile. Thor was glad to see that smile again, even if it lasted for only a moment. Loki moved to scratch at Ofnir's stomach where some thinner scales were. Ofnir groaned and shifted so that Loki's hand was in a different spot. "You spoil him, brother," Thor said.

"Nonsense," Loki said.

Thor chuckled and moved to sit on the ground as Loki lavished attention on the far too pleased Ofnir. Eventually, Ofnir was satisfied with the scratches and began trying to get Loki to play with him instead. Loki conjured glowing green animals for Ofnir to chase and practice hunting. After perhaps an hour of running all along the pen, Ofnir finally made his way over to the deer remains and started eating what was left. "Maybe he just needed exercise," Thor mused as Loki sat down beside him.

Loki was a little red-faced from exertion, which Thor found odd. Loki hadn't been using that much magic, Thor didn't think. "Are you alright, brother? You look tired."

Loki waved the question away casually. "I just haven't had a chance to cast any spells lately," Loki said. "It is just like when you decide to go back to a weapon you haven't wielded in some months. You're a little out of practice but give it a few swings, and you'll remember all the tricks to it."

Thor highly doubted that explanation but decided to act as if he believed it. "Ah, I see. Well, no doubt now that you are out of the infirmary you will have no problems remembering your swings."

"No doubt," Loki said.

The two brothers sat there in silence for some time as Ofnir happily tore into his meal and crunched bones with his powerful bite. Thor glanced from the clouds he had been watching down to Loki. His brother looked lost in thought, and Thor contemplated if he should make an attempt to get Loki talking. After watching the microexpressions cross Loki's face out of the corner of his eye, Thor decided it probably wasn't the best of ideas. Not just then anyway.

Thor laid back against the grass with his hands behind his head as he watched the clouds swirl. Despite the binder he still wore, the atmosphere hadn't entirely cleared. There hadn't been any more downpours like the first day, but there had been a few drizzles when Thor thought particularly dark thoughts. But here, it was somewhat soothing watching the clouds mingle with each other and pass by at different levels.

It was nice. Peaceful even.

"Thor?"

"Mm?" Thor lifted his head to look at Loki, who was staring at the surface of Ofnir's pool, or at the very least in that direction. "Yes, brother?"

Loki was quiet, and Thor pushed himself up to balance on his elbows to wait. Loki would no doubt say what was on his mind when he was ready and Thor rushing Loki never worked. Loki took a deep breath and held it for approximately ten seconds before letting it back out. "... thank you."

Thor was puzzled and had a hard time hiding that. "For... what are you thanking me, brother?"

Loki finally looked at Thor with an expression of pure annoyance. "Must you be so thick?" Thor shrugged since he didn't try to be particularly obtuse but always seemed to be when Loki was
around. "For finding me," Loki said.

"You needn't thank me for that, Loki," Thor said. "I will always come for you if you need me."

"You can't promise that," Loki said.

"I can and do," Thor shot back instantly.

Loki's expression twisted and then he looked away with a huff of agitation. "You are hopeless," Loki said. Then so quiet that Thor almost didn't hear it at all, "Don't you dare ever change."

Thor couldn't hold back the grin, and he leaned over to wrap his arm around his brother. "I love you as well, Loki!" Thor instantly realized he'd made a mistake. Loki stiffened and then his hand moved faster than Thor could follow. The familiar sting of a blade in his side made Thor automatically let go and grab at the spot.

Loki had sprung away with a panicked look on his face and a now bloody dagger in his white-knuckled grip. "Asgaedia wept..." Thor said between grit teeth as he pressed onto the wound. He'd rather hoped to avoid getting a scar in that spot this time around, but it seemed the Norns were determined he have it.

"T-thor! I'm sorry! I just-I didn't-"

"It's alright, Loki," Thor said. "I should have known better than to surprise you."

"It's not alright!" Loki dropped his dagger and crouched beside Thor to press against his wound. Thor couldn't help the hiss of pain. Loki's daggers were always so sharp. "I stabbed you!"

"You've stabbed me before," Thor pointed out. He recalled a certain snake incident at their brother's home not all that long ago. Why he continually fell for that prank, Thor had no idea, but he really should stop picking up suspiciously docile looking serpents. They were never actually friendly snakes.

Loki glared. "That's not the same thing!"

"How is it not the same thing?" Thor demanded. "It's still a dagger in me."

"Because I didn't mean to do it!" Loki looked more than just a little distraught. "When I stabbed you before it was a prank! I knew exactly where I was hitting and didn't go very deep! This... I could have gutted you!"

"I doubt you would have done that," Thor said. "And I surprised you... after everything that's happened I should have expected it."

Loki looked at him as if he were crazy. "Why by the Norns would you 'expect' me to stab you, Thor?"

"Well, not stab necessarily," Thor said. Oh, how he wished he was better at backtracking or lying or just words in general. "Just... that you might react badly."

Loki pursed his lips but turned his attention to the wound. "It's still bleeding... I used the whole blade. I'm sorry, Thor."

"I'm not upset. Truly," Thor said. He pressed harder against his side. Loki must have knicked the edge of something for it to still be bleeding like it was. "I'll go see Eir, and I'll be fixed right up,"
Thor said. "No big deal."

"But-"

"Really, Loki! I'm fine. I won't be but a moment," Thor promised as he got to his feet. Ofnir was staring at them where he had ended sprawled out in the grass. "Stay here and play some more with Ofnir and when I get back, we can go raid the kitchens for sweets or something. Yes?"

Loki still looked unsettled but slowly nodded. "Alright..."

"Wonderful. I'll be back," Thor said. He made sure to close the door to Ofnir's enclosure as he left. Thor really should have realized it was a bad idea to touch Loki. He wasn't outwardly affectionate at the best of times, and he had just been through something terrible. Thor was somewhat impressed he got away with only a single stab wound and not say, a fireball to the face. Although, with how Loki was strained from the small magic he did earlier maybe a fireball was out of the question currently.

More than a single servant stopped and stared as Thor walked by with blood on his shirt. Huh, it was odd how Thor had forgotten those looks. As the princes got older, the servants came to expect a certain amount of wounds and general bedraggled outfits from the boys, but that had been a long time ago for Thor. A few guards and servants were alarmed enough to even ask if Thor was alright, which he waved off. He was perfectly fine. It wasn't like he'd never been stabbed before. Thor was very much used to it.

The healing ward was empty when Thor arrived. That wasn't terribly surprising. Now that Loki was released most of the assistants were probably allowed to go home or take much needed extended breaks. Eir was likely the only Healer around at the moment, and even she got out of the healing wing from time to time. But that was fine, Thor knew where the supplies were and doing it himself meant he didn't have to try and come up with an explanation of how he got stabbed in the first place.

Thor found the salve he was looking for in a small jar on an already prepared emergency tray. He unscrewed the lid and carefully applied it to the cut. The cool blue cream tingled against Thor's skin, but already the blood oozing from the wound was slowing. Thor nodded in satisfaction and reached for a bandage. Now that the bleeding was managed his own healing should make the stab wound disappear in short order.

Unfortunately, Thor's shirt was not so lucky as to be able to heal. He frowned as he looked at the stained and torn fabric. No doubt his mother would throw a fit. Thor could hear it now. Wait, no... he really could hear her.

Thor frowned and looked over at Eir's office door that was closed. Despite knowing he really shouldn't, Thor moved closer so that he could actually make out what was being said in the other room. He had to get closer than he wanted, but he did eventually manage it. "I'd be here in two days," Eir was saying.

"Good. Does he know... the full situation?" Odin's voice this time.

"I've written him another letter apprising him of the changes, yes," Eir said. Thor could hear some shuffling of papers. "Although, I feel I must caution you Ixtlilton does not have nearly as much experience with that side of things. We might need to consider another specialist for that issue."

"Has Loki... made any indication of what he wants?" Odin asked.
"Not as of yet, but it's been only two days since he was told," Eir said. "I'm not certain he's truly grasped it yet."

"Odin," Frigga said. "We're his parents... can't we make this decision for him? He's not even reached majority yet... and it could be dangerous!"

Odin sighed. "I wish we could, Frigga... but that would be doing Loki more of a disservice. Or do you want to take his choice away from him?"

"No," Frigga said. Thor thought she sounded a little bitter. "No, I would never want that. But... he's so young. Can we really lay this choice on him? After everything that he's already been through?"

"I feel we have no choice but to do so," Odin said.

Frigga let out a noise that made Thor want to recoil. He'd never heard his mother sound like that before. "He's just a child himself! We cannot possibly expect him to raise his own!"

Thor stood there frozen. Loki was... he...

Thor should have realized. The revelation shouldn't be even half as shocking as it was. Thor himself had realized a man attacking Loki in horse form had to be Svadilfari, and yet he hadn't thought through to what that really meant for his brother. Thor hadn't allowed the reality about the future to sink in.

Shock started melting away to anger, and Thor spun on his heel and went to Eir's cabinet. He wasn't supposed to go through it, but he didn't care. He quickly found what he was looking for on the top shelf. There were at least five bottles of Sleeping Draught so Thor doubted that Eir would immediately notice one missing. Thor snatched one and quickly left the healing ward. Servants stared as Thor nearly ran through the halls back towards his room.

Thor was glad for his binder as he was sure without it the sky would be flashing to match his mood. Thor only just resisted slamming his door closed behind him. He didn't want to alarm anyone more. His boots were kicked off carelessly while Thor yanked the cork out of the small bottle. Thor downed the whole thing in one quick motion before flopping down on his bed and closing his eyes. He thought only about that medallion and King Loki as he quickly succumbed to the potion's effects.

As Thor appeared in the familiar dark of the decimated Asgard, he was already storming forward. The darkness seemed a much shorter span this time. "Loki!"

The fire was crackling still, and the elder version of Thor's brother sat up a little straighter. "Now, Thor..." Thor stormed right past where he usually stopped at the edge of the fire and grabbed the old Loki by the front of his tunic. Or he tried to do so. His hands went through as if Loki weren't there at all. Thor expected to see the familiar shimmer as a fake Loki disappeared. The same shimmer that always happened when one of his illusions was broken, but it was as if he was trying to grasp air itself. "Calm down," King Loki said. "You cannot harm me. Like I told you before, you're not truly here."

"You lied to me!" Thor snarled.

Loki's expression shuttered into a mask that betrayed nothing. "I did no such thing."

"You did! You told me Sleipnir was made of magic!" Thor felt his eyes burning but refused to allow tears to fall. "You said the rumors were ridiculous!" Thor felt himself fall to his knees and he didn't care. The fact that his brother, his baby brother, would be forced to carry the child of the
man who had abused him rose in his mind and tore at him. "You said it had never happened... and now..." Thor couldn't even say it aloud.

"It was magic that made Sleipnir... but not mine," Loki said. Thor looked up through his tears. If Thor didn't know his brother better, he'd say King Loki was not feeling anything, but the lines around his mouth and eyes said differently. "That... monster used his magic on me... he wanted me to bare his child. He did everything he could think of to make sure I would. He thought it would give him a powerful claim to the Throne of Asgard. Before I even knew I was a monster Jotnar, I thought that his magic had twisted me into something unnatural and was the sole reason he could even plant his seed in me. And I did not lie to you about anything, Thor. The Loki that you grew up with did. Although... I suppose in this, our experiences were close enough that it would be practically the same thing..."

"How," Thor asked. "How could I not remember?" It just didn't make sense that he wouldn't remember his own brother having a child.

King Loki tilted his head to the side. "You may not recall, but there was a party not long after Sleipnir first appeared in Asgard. I had Tyr help me fund the party. I said it would cheer me up. And it did. Because after nobody remembered any of it." Thor was confused, and it must have shown because King Loki sighed. "I, what is that Midgardian phrase I heard? Oh yes, 'spiked the punch' with a little potion. Well, a lot of potion. It took me months to make enough. But, I couldn't have them knowing... It was too hard. Of course, I must have missed a few people because those annoying rumors kept persisting... And I'm fairly certain it didn't work on Frigga and Odin, or if it did, they broke through it at some point. And then someone told the Midgardians, and I was never free of the damned story, no matter how I denied it."

"You... made us forget Sleipnir," Thor said in bewilderment. He had no idea such a thing was even possible.

"No. I made you forget where he came from," Loki corrected.

Thor was still staring. "How did you hide a full year had gone missing?"

"It was closer to two by that point," King Loki said. "And it wasn't so hard. The potion was made to focus on specifically everything involving myself and Sleipnir. The shame of it was too much to bear, Thor. I couldn't show my face with all of Asgard knowing what happened. I just wanted it all to go away."

Thor supposed he understood. To a point. He wouldn't want everyone knowing something like that either. But, surely, Loki hadn't needed to take such drastic measures? They would have supported him. And then something else occurred to the Thunder God. All of Asgard? How could all of Asgard have even known? "... How did everyone know in the first place?" Thor asked aloud. "We wouldn't have told the people and made you face such a thing." Nobody would dare ridicule Loki over being a victim, but to be a young boy raped would have put an unpleasant tinge on many -if not all- of his relationships after. Not to mention how vicious people would be whenever Loki got into an argument with them. Such knowledge would be an obvious place to attack to hurt Loki in the future.

Loki studied Thor with eyes that were too familiar and too distant at the same time. "... perhaps I should start at the beginning. It'll be less taxing than explaining everything in reverse order as you question it."

"Please," Thor said. "I need to know how this could have happened. Tell me we at least avenged you properly!"
Loki’s face went dark for a moment, and then he took a slow breath. Thor watched the mask fall back into place over King Loki’s face. "The beginning," he said firmly. "I was seven-hundred and ten -a child... we’d had a very nasty argument at Winter's End Feast. I had said something snide to Sif -I don't even remember what at this point- and you, of course, defended her. We made quite a scene, and I stormed off. That night... a man came into my room." Loki's voice went soft, and then he cleared his throat.

Thor could only stare as this older and tired Loki pulled his composure together again. "He took me to his home and... amused himself with me. Apparently, because of the argument, everyone assumed I had just run off in a fit of pique. Mother started to worry after a couple missed meals, but Odin just assured her I'd be back and everything was fine. However, even he started to worry after at around day three, I heard. I had never been gone so long, you see."

"By day five I had come up with a plan. It was desperate, but it worked. Even though it made me sick, I begged for his attentions. No matter how it tore at me or hurt, no matter how much blood spilled or how his hands bruised my flesh, no matter what he said... I begged him for more. I became the cock-hungry, sycophant whore he so wanted and he got sloppy," Loki said. His voice was pure venom, but Thor had the unsettling feeling that it wasn't aimed just at Svadilfari. King Loki dug the pads of his fingers into his eyes as if tired. Thor wanted to reach out, but he couldn't even touch this Loki. He felt powerless, and he hated it.

After a moment, Loki dropped his hand and fixed Thor with his gaze again, although it was red-rimmed and slightly bloodshot. "He was so exhausted trying to keep up with my 'desires' that he fell asleep without putting me in more than one chain. I broke my hand and slipped free while the beast slept. But, I was afraid if he woke up too soon and came after me he'd catch me, so I turned into a horse to escape... even though I never wanted to be a horse ever again," Loki said. He swallowed hard, and his grip on the broken Gungnir tightened until his knuckles were white.

"I don't even know where I ran to. Just away," Loki said. "I thought for sure that he would chase me down and find me. So I stayed as a horse for a few days. I could fall back and let the horse take control... it isn't wise to do -one could get lost as the animal- but I would be harder to find. And... I didn't have to face it. When I finally thought I was safe, I tried to turn back and couldn't. I suppose my body knew I would kill myself if I tried to turn back with Sleipnir as a horse... so self-preservation didn't let me. I thought about finding Mother for help but... I didn't want to tell her what happened, so I let the horse take over again. I didn't really care if I never turned back at that point."

King Loki's attention seemed to waver for a moment, but then he blinked and turned his eyes back to Thor. "I suppose Asgard started looking for me at some point... the next year was a bit of a haze. I couldn't turn back, and I couldn't guess as to why just then, and I was probably in shock, which I'm sure didn't help. At some point, I must have been found by someone because I remember Mother was there. I vaguely remember carrying Sleipnir... but even that is nothing more than sensations and impressions. The... ordeal of birthing him I recall with far more clarity than I'd like... and I then I had to stay in the stables to nurse him properly. Everyone knew even if they weren't supposed to talk about it," he said, sneering at the end.

"And... that villain?" Thor asked in a strangled voice. "What happened to him?"

Loki blinked a few times and rubbed the skin under his eyes before straightening his shoulders. "Had fled long before I had managed to gather my wits enough to tell anyone what happened. As far as I can tell he fled as soon as he woke up to find me missing from his bed."

"He got away?" Thor demanded in outrage.
"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Loki said. A truly wicked gleam came to King Loki's eyes. "Do you by chance remember when I brought you a gift, Thor? I brought you a large black doe to try and breed your goats on from one of my journeys? You had been talking about it for months beforehand and bemoaned how no goats in Asgard were large enough, and so you were so excited I found another beast big enough for them to mount without crushing."

Thor did remember that. That goat had been an angry black hellion and had taken all of Thor's strength to wrangle. "... that was him?"

Loki's face twisted into a self-satisfied smirk. "It was quite cathartic hearing his cries as your brutish goats mounted him and bred him over and over," he said. "Sometimes I even went down at night to visit him after a nightmare would wake me. I would ask him how he felt to be breeding stock... he seemed far less enthralled with the idea now that it was him that was being mounted constantly. He even asked me to kill him once... I don't think I have ever laughed so hard in my life. It was harder to ensure no kiddings happened, but a few herbs in the water periodically made sure any that started were ended soon enough."

Thor recalled that too although he had thought the doe had just been having miscarriages. Thor never suspected that Loki would be ending the pregnancies since why in Asgaedia's name would he? Loki wouldn't have given Thor a breeding goat and then stopped it from being bred successfully. At least, Thor wouldn't have thought so. Thor wasn't quite sure how to feel about these revelations. On the one hand, he was sadistically pleased with Loki's choice of very poetic vengeance, on the other he would have liked to be aware of it at least. "I tried to bred that goat for years..."

"Almost ten," Loki confirmed with vicious glee. "I would have been content with him being there being uselessly bred by your goats for the rest of time, but you got fed up with it, and slaughtered the beast." Thor remembered that day if he thought back for a moment. He had had to struggle to hold that large creature still, but Thor recalled how easy it was to cut the goat's throat clean through and then hang it to drain the blood before he'd sent it to the kitchens. Thor hadn't even thought about it. Slaughtering a poorly performing breeding animal was an everyday occurrence.

A horrific thought suddenly occurred to Thor. "Didn't we eat that goat?" That was what happened to most slaughtered farm animals.

King Loki's grin faded some. "I wasn't going to put any bit of that... thing in my mouth ever again. Not even to eat. So no. I switched the meat out with that of a different goat. Geri and Freki ate that one and were quite pleased with the feast."

"... you should have told me," Thor said.

Loki tilted his head to the side. "Why? By that point, you didn't know anything about it. You'd have just thought me insane or evil to subject something to such treatment. You didn't remember Sleipnir's sire... or that I'd been stuck as a horse for a year after being missing for a week."

Thor supposed that Loki had a point, but he would have understood and helped if Loki had explained it! "Did-did you ever... tell anyone?" Thor asked. He hated to think of his brother suffering such a thing in silence.

"Of course not," King Loki said. He practically scoffed at the very idea. "Just thinking about it makes me- I'm only telling you this now because I doubt your Loki will be the same as me. You saved him... I had to save myself."

"I'm sorry," Thor said. His voice was a painful croak, and his face was wet with tears. "You didn't
deserve that to happen to you. I would have done something if I could."

"... I know," Loki said. "But I survived and became stronger for it."

"Did you?" Thor asked. "Did you really? Because I remember one day, you suddenly weren't the same. And I could never understand it. You used to love swimming because it kept you cool... and then you never would again. You always hated my hugs, but you never used to hit or stab me to stop me from giving them to you. And you got so angry... You spat poison at everyone and grew so distant. Are you saying that had nothing to do with what happened?"

Loki's eyes were like flecks of green ice. "I am not the way I am merely because I was raped as a child." His voice was a low hiss of anger.

"No," Thor agreed. "But it was the start." Thor was sure of it. If Loki had just buried it and nobody ever sought to help him after the fact because they didn't know it had happened, every other thing would have only compounded upon that trauma.

"Don't you pity me, Thor," Loki said.

"I don't pity you, brother," Thor said. "But I wish I could have been there for you. I hated seeing you pull further and further away with no idea why."

The older version of Loki was quiet for a moment. "You would have just thought me weak," he said. "I was not acting a very good warrior no matter how hard I pretended to be."

Thor shook his head. "I would not think you weak. You were attacked and treated so terribly... And I was no help."

"I didn't want help," Loki said.

"But you needed it!" Thor snapped. "You were suffering weren't you?"

Loki's eyes drifted over Thor's tear-stained face for a moment. Thor wanted to demand his answer again but didn't. "... yes. I was."

Loki agreeing didn't actually help. Thor being proven right was bitter and unpleasant in this context. Being told that his brother was suffering -that he had suffered- did not give him an answer on how to fix it. Thor lifted a hand and wiped his face. "Tell me. Tell me how to help him. Please!"

"I don't know how, Thor," Loki said. "I never had it so I don't know what help would be. All I can tell you is to give him time. Time and vigilance."

"V-vigilance?" Thor echoed. What in Asgaedia's name did that mean?

King Loki was silent for a long few minutes before he shifted Gungnir to rest against his shoulder. Thor watched with growing trepidation as Loki's right hand moved to the bracer on his left. The sounds of buckles being undone were far too loud in the ruined throne room. Even the crackling of the fire and the winter gales blowing through the holes in the walls seemed to fade into the background. The metal buckles clinked against the golden plates protecting Loki's arms. Loki dropped the bit of armor into his lap before pulling his sleeve back and pointing his fist to the ground.

Thor stared at Loki's pale skin. Flecks of green and gold glowed across his skin before fading. The light left behind the sight of a thick silvery scar running down Loki's forearm. Smaller thinner scars ran across in parallel lines every half inch or so. Neat, straight, and hideous. Thor forced his
eyes up to Loki's face. "The bridge wasn't the first time, Thor. Six months after Sleipnir was born I couldn't take it anymore. I tried to act like nothing was wrong, but everything was wrong."

"H-how..."

"I think Heimdall was watching me," King Loki said as he lowered his sleeve again. "He was probably suspicious of me, as usual. I went out to Jarnsvirid and found a place I liked. Someplace peaceful... and far away from everything. I cut my arms so deep I couldn't even hold my daggers in my fingers. And yet I woke up in my bed as if nothing happened. At first, I didn't remember what had happened -probably Odin's work- but as I got older and gained more magic, it came back. But I think that's why they let me wipe away the time before Sleipnir's birth. So I wouldn't try it again."

"You tried to kill yourself..." Thor said it softly. He didn't know why that surprised him so much. Loki had tried it before. Right in front of Thor even. And yet, Thor was caught off guard. Perhaps because of how young Loki would have been. How young he was.

King Loki rubbed his wrist for a moment before starting to put his bracer back in place. "It was too shameful," he said. "It had to stop somehow. Before I broke even more. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I could barely function at all. Everyone knowing was just... too much!" Loki closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Thor watched Loki's hands tremble as the older version of his brother tightened his bracer back into place. "I tried so hard... I was perfect and everyone still looked at me just... I couldn't forget with everyone knowing as well!"

"And..." Thor hated how his voice trembled. "Was it better after we didn't know?"

Loki was quiet and wrapped his fingers around Gungnir again. "In many ways, yes... worse in others," King Loki said softly. "It was better that nobody knew. I could pretend that it never happened. Lie about it. But I knew the truth... and that never went away. Eventually, it got to the point I didn't think about it almost ever, but I still knew it. It never stopped hurting. But between those moments of remembering, I could be alright for a little while. It was when someone brought it up again that was the worst."

Thor nodded. He could quite easily remember how Loki would fly off the handle at even a passing mention of the 'rumors' of Sleipnir's birth. Thor thought it was a little extreme even with how offensive the supposed slander had seemed, but Loki had always taken everything to extremes. So, Thor had written it off as yet another quirk of his brother. It had never even occurred to him that there might have been real unresolved trauma behind the reaction. His own inadequacies burned.

"You... using Hlidskjalf you can see through time and space," Thor said. King Loki inclined his head slightly in agreement. "Will this Loki try to kill himself as well?" Thor was almost too scared of the answer to ask, but he felt that if he didn't, he would be failing as a brother yet again.

Loki closed his eyes for a few moments, and Thor's heart thundered in his chest anxiously. "Possibly," Loki said when he opened his eyes again. "I am not as precise in my use of Hlidskjalf as I would like. As much as I hate admitting it... Odin was better at its use. I see this Loki as an adult though... so even if he tries he will not succeed. Like I didn't. That is why I tell you to watch him."

That was not particularly comforting. "Is there anything else?" Thor asked. King Loki looked mildly confused. "Did you ever erase our memories again to hide something that happened?"

"... it was just the once," Loki said. "After that, I was able to use other means to hide what bothered me." Thor clenched his fist against the ground. He glared at the cracked base of the throne as if it had personally caused these horrors. "... you are angry."
"Yes, I'm angry!" Thor snapped as he looked up again. "I'm furious that this was hidden! That you suffered alone when you didn't have to! How am I supposed to save you if you don't trust me, Loki?" Thunder rolled off in the distance.

"Would you have believed me had I warned you?" Loki asked, not seemingly bothered by Thor's anger at all. "I put quite a lot of effort into my cover story of how Sleipnir came to be. If I were to just have told you here without any proof... would you have honestly thought me doing anything but lying to you?"

Thor forced himself to his feet. "I wouldn't have taken the risk. I would never take a risk with your life!"

"I couldn't believe that," Loki said.

"What have I ever done to give you a reason to doubt my love for you, Loki? I know I was not always the best brother or even the kindest to you, but I have always loved you!" Thor asked. "I would do anything for you, brother!"

Loki stared at Thor as the blonde slowly caught his breath. "It is nothing about you, Thor," King Loki said with a voice only slightly above a whisper. "It never has been. I said it was you... I wanted it to be you, but it's not. It's me. It's always been me. That's the worst thing he did to me, Brother. He broke me, and I daren't expose that to anyone. I can't. My trust is... not strong enough to risk it."

Loki swallowed hard and turned his eyes to the ground for a moment before looking back up. "My own wife never once saw me fully disrobed. I couldn't let her. She would have seen my scars, and that could have made her ask questions. If she asked questions, she'd know soon enough what happened. And if Sigyn found out... she'd have demanded answers. Once that happened everything I tried to hide would come out. And then all of Asgard would know that I was nothing more than a broodmare and whore. I couldn't let that happen!"

"You aren't those things!" Thor said immediately. "You were attacked! None of it was your fault!"

Loki closed his eyes tight. "I told myself that over and over but just saying it doesn't mean I believed it. Sometimes I still don't believe it. Do you know how many people used that damn story to justifying how horrible I am?"

Thor frowned. "They didn't-"

"They did!" Loki snapped. "Never around you -they weren't that stupid but always in whispers and in the shadows. When I was a child, they seemed to remember how young I was and shut their mouths, but it was as if when I became an adult, it was free game! Of course, Loki uses women's arts, he was bred by a horse, he's a perverse thing! Loki cannot be trusted, look at what deviant things he does! Poor Sigyn, married to such an unnatural ergi creature as Loki! I could go on! There was no shortage of whispers! Never mind that if any of them had thought for more than a second, they would have recalled that Sleipnir was already several hundred years old so I would have been a child when he was born! I was a child!" Loki's voice had risen with each word until the last was shouted at the top of his lungs. Tears were trailing down his face, and the armrest of Hlidskjalf had dents from how hard Loki had dug his fingers in.

Panting hard, Loki slowly uncurled his fingers and brought his hand up to wipe the tears away impatiently. "People are cruel, Thor. Especially to people they already don't like or understand. I learned to be cruel back. It may not have helped them like me, but I had little other recourse."
"I never heard any of that! If I had, I never would have permitted it!" Thor said. He wanted to grab Loki but could only stand there uselessly.

"I know. We all knew... that is why they never let you hear it. The only thing you ever heard was the occasional quip about Sleipnir and me... and I know you thought little about those since I always made sure nobody said it twice," King Loki said. He looked so exhausted again. "And I had already been caught lying enough to earn myself a reputation... they were small stupid lies - childish fibs really- but it meant that I wasn't to be trusted."

"I trusted you," Thor said. "I always trust you. Even when I shouldn't."

Loki's composure seemed to crack for just a moment before it was covered again. "Yes, and I have no idea why you do... there's no reason for you to do so. And I keep expecting for you to stop believing me. Maybe that's part of my problem. I was always waiting for you to just stop. I was positive it would happen. Everyone else stopped believing me, why wouldn't you?"

"Because I'm your Brother, Loki."

Loki was silent for several long moments as he studied Thor's face. "... I've never deserved you."

"Please," Thor said as he leaned closer, using the armrests of the throne to support himself. "Tell me what other horrible things you suffered. I cannot let this happen again. I simply can't."

King Loki was quiet as his green eyes swept Thor's face. "... the Norns will not be happy, but I never liked them anyway," Loki finally said. "From my life, most things were... minor after Sleipnir's birth. The... hair incident is the most notable thing I can think of. Oh, and of course... Angrboda."

Thor's face furrowed. "Angrboda?"

"Yes... I was not happy with her, Thor. I said I was and decided that I would be... but I wasn't. It took me a very long time to realize that," King Loki said. "That is why I worry about why she would have given you this gift to travel back in the first place. Her plans are always long reaching. If the younger me finds his way to her... watch carefully."

"I will."

King Loki nodded. "The future is in flux..." he said, looking off past Thor at the fire. "I will summon you here if I see something distinct... but I do not always get warnings. Remember, I am within a different stream of existence than you."

Thor wanted to demand more help than that, but he didn't think he would get it. And he wasn't even confident about how accurate King Loki's vision would be. Even Odin while using Hlíðskjálf had some margin for error, and he rarely looked beyond the reality he was in. "Are you sure that is all?" Thor couldn't quite help himself from asking.

King Loki looked a bit annoyed. "Of course I'm not sure. That's sort of the main problem, isn't it? You're interfering with time on a grand scale. Already things are rippling and changing further down the line. You've splintered off from the main path, Thor... and now there's no telling where you'll end up."

"Hopefully better than we were," Thor said.

"You are doing well enough so far."
"Well enough?" Thor echoed. "I let you get raped!"

"No," King Loki said firmly. "I got raped in spite of you being there. It isn't the same thing." It might not have been the same thing, but Thor didn't think it was different enough either. Loki sighed. "Do me a favor, Thor... don't beat yourself up too much over this. He will only blame himself."

Thor scowled at nothing in particular. "But it's my fault..."

Loki hummed thoughtfully. "I don't think I realized before just how many unnecessary burdens you place on yourself. Maybe you'd not be as bad a King as I thought."

That caught Thor very much off guard. "I wasn't ready," he said.

"Not at your coronation no," Loki agreed. "But perhaps not as beyond all hope as I believed you to be. Just be careful not to crush yourself under the weight of all the responsibilities that aren't yours that you still take up."

"I'll not be crushed," Thor said. "I can promise you that."

Loki inclined his head just slightly. "Good. I wouldn't enjoy watching that despite how I might have said otherwise before this. Now you should go. Spending too much time separated from your body is not healthy for you," Loki said with a casual wave of his hand. Thor's body started to glow and break apart. King Loki watched as the form of his brother winked out of existence bit by bit.

"So that is what you are up to," a familiar voice said.

Loki glanced to the side where Heimdall's voice was coming from. "As I said before, I'm not up to anything. I only became aware of this situation after Thor had already set off on his fool self-appointed quest," Loki said as Heimdall stepped out of the shadows.

"But you'll be more than happy to take advantage of it," Heimdall said.

"It will help us both, blind man," King Loki said as he shifted to rest his cheek on his fist. "Or would you rather spend the rest of eternity with only me for company?"

Heimdall's jaw visibly clenched. "... I would not. You are poor company. Always have been."

"Mm, then do stop complaining so much, Heimdall," Loki said. "I got us into this, and I can get us out."

Thor groaned as he woke up and tried his best to clear his mind. He needed to learn how to fall asleep on command if he was going to continue seeing King Loki in his dreams. Taking Sleeping Draughts whenever he needed to go to the ruined Asgard was not terribly healthy. Thor pushed himself up and rubbed at his eyes to try and wake up faster.

"So, would you care to explain where you just were, my son?"

Thor froze and was suddenly wide awake. He looked up and saw Frigga standing there idly spinning the glass bottle the Sleeping Draught had been in. "M-mother..."

"Well, Thor? Where were you?"
Ash Trees- Ash trees are rather significant in Norse myth. One of the two first humans was named after Ash trees. The first male to be specific. Askr (which means Ash tree creatively enough) was made along with his wife by three gods. Which three gods changes but Odin is always in the trifecta.

The Snake Story- Yes, though I've moved when it happened since I've changed the aging structure and when Loki gets his shapeshifting powers, I loved that scene in Thor Ragnarok too much to not have it have happened in this story. My full version of that story will go up in Tales and Lessons at some point.

Loki's Suicide Attempts- Considering how I'm including the Svadilfari story into Loki's backstory I found it unlikely that dropping off the Bifrost was truly Loki's first attempt to kill himself. Also, Odin's super not helpful approach of 'make him forget he tried it and that'll fix it' just made sense to me of something a less emotionally aware version of Odin like the one in Thor would do. Not that he meant bad just... he thought about the incident and not so much the cause so it didn't really help anything at all.
The Beginnings of Plans

Chapter Summary

Plans to heal Loki's trauma and plans to keep Thor from endangering himself. Both begin to form.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So, would you care to explain where you just were, my son?"

Thor froze and was suddenly wide awake. He looked up and saw Frigga standing there idly spinning the glass bottle the Sleeping Draught had been in between her fingers. She was looking at it casually as if it were terribly interesting. "M-mother..."

"Well, Thor? Where were you?" Frigga asked as she looked back down at him.

Frigga's eyebrow was high on her forehead as she waited for Thor's answer as to where he had just 'been,' but Thor wasn't sure where to even start in his explanation. Should he try to dodge entirely? Thor didn't think he had the skill to lie directly to his mother's face. Not even Loki could manage that level of deception, and Thor was quite a bit less skilled than his brother was. Still, perhaps he could feign ignorance. Thor felt he had to try it. "I don't know what you mean, mother. I was right..." Thor faded off almost instantly when he saw how unimpressed Frigga looked.

"Thor. Have you forgotten that I can see one's soul within them?" Frigga asked, her hands finding her hips in disapproval. "Yours was only just tethered to your body by a thread. Exactly how it would be if you were astral projecting, which is not something I was aware you knew how to do. So, I shall ask one more time. Where, my son, were you if not here in your body?"

Thor cringed. He had not realized that was what had been happening when he visited King Loki, although perhaps he should have. In fact, he was sure that he should have thought about the mechanics of how he reached the older version of his brother. Yet again, magic -especially it's complexities- eluded him. "... it is a long story, Mother."

"Then you had best start explaining it," Frigga said. "Because should your soul be ripped from your body do you know what that would do to you?" Thor didn't have a chance to even attempt a guess. "You would be but a husk, Thor! A body without a soul is just a pile of meat and bones and blood. And attempting to reattach a soul that has been lost is a monumental task! What could possibly be so important that you would risk yourself in such a way?"

"Loki." Thor couldn't manage to do more than whisper it, but judging by how Frigga straightened and her expression shifted to one of surprise, Thor knew that she had heard.

Frigga's shock melted very quickly into concern. "What do you mean?" Frigga asked. Thor couldn't look up at her and instead studied his hands, which he was wringing uneasily.

Thor took a deep breath and steeled himself away. He still wasn't entirely sure how he would explain this to Frigga, but he could only do his best. "Mother, I was speaking to... well, another
Loki," Thor said as he looked up from his hands. "It was how I knew where to find Loki when he was missing. I was told he was there."

"Another Loki?" Frigga's eyes seemed to bore into Thor's, and he couldn't maintain her gaze any longer. "Exactly what do you mean 'another,' Thor?"

Norns damn it all, how had King Loki put it? Thor wasn't sure he understood it himself, and now he had to explain? "He is... an older Loki from a future I seek to avoid. I'm not sure how it works really. But when I sleep, I can sometimes go before him although I am not really there. We can converse though, and sometimes he answers my questions."

Thor saw Frigga's hand, and she gently forced him to look up again. Thor swallowed hard at the expression of worry on her face. He hadn't meant to make her worry, although he had guessed it was most likely inevitable. "Sometimes? Thor, how often do you do such a thing as cross barriers of time and reality?"

"Only twice before this time, mother," Thor assured her quickly. "Once to find where Loki was being held. The other when the other Loki brought me before him and gave me means to contact him."

"Why would he give you the means to contact him?" Frigga asked. "Loki knows full well how dangerous interfering with the flow of time can be! Not only is it dangerous and unpredictable but it is against our laws!"

Thor cringed again. "... he was doing so because I... started it," Thor made himself admit.

There was a moment of silence. Thor looked away from Frigga's now confused face. "What do you mean you started it? You do not know how to pierce time in such a way-"

"I already have done so, Mother," Thor said.

"What?"

"I had to!" Thor said quickly. "If I hadn't then Loki would be dead and I couldn't let that happen! I knew I could save him I just needed the chance and-"

"Thor! Darling!" Frigga caught Thor by each shoulder. He hadn't even realized he'd jumped up from where he was sitting on the bed. "Calm down, Thor. What are you talking about?"

Thor reached up a hand to wipe at his eyes. They were burning, and his throat felt clogged, but he pushed all that to the side. Thor needed to get control of himself if he was going to explain things in any way that made sense. Thor wiped his eyes again. "It was horrible, Mother. The Svartalfr attacked Asgard. They-they killed you while you were protecting one unable to protect herself. After... Loki and I went to avenge your death and stop the Svartalfr from trying to gain the Aether, which had reappeared. Loki... he died protecting me. I held him as he bled to death... and I couldn't lose him too."

"I wanted to bring him back," Thor said. "He should not have died like that, and it was my fault! But Father wouldn't let me. He said we couldn't... so I had to do something else to make sure that Loki survived!"

"Thor. When does this happen?" Frigga asked.

"Centuries from now," Thor said. He wished his voice did not come out so much like a croak, but he hadn't actually spoken of any of the events that caused him to come back in time since speaking
with Angrboda. Thor was somewhat unprepared by how much talking about it hurt. "I did not mean to come back so far, but I could not control the magic."

Frigga's eyes wandered Thor's face for a moment and then she brushed her thumb across his cheek. Thor quickly lifted a hand to rub the moisture away impatiently. "This was very dangerous a thing to do, Thor," Frigga said.

"I know, but I had no other choice," Thor said.

"Why?" Frigga asked. "There could have been other ways, darling."

Thor shook his head. "There weren't. I told you, Father would not consent to bring Loki back. Even though he should not have died. Stopping it from happening in the first place was the only thing to do. I could not search through all of Hel and Valhalla for him." One realm by itself would have been too much to search, but Thor hadn't known where Loki would have spent his afterlife and so he would have had to search both realms. Thor might not always have the most grounded expectations, but he in no way expected to be able to manually examine every inch of two domains for where Loki might have been.

Frigga frowned. "Why would he have been in Hel, darling?"

"Because..." Thor hesitated. He didn't want to admit to all of the horrible things that had happened, but Thor also didn't know how else he would make it clear to his mother that coming back in time had been the only real option. "Because to avenge you, I had to break Loki out of his cell in the dungeons..."

Frigga's breath caught. "His cell?" she asked in alarm. "Why was Loki in a cell?"

Thor closed his eyes, and his chin fell. One of the last things he wanted to do right now was to explain to his mother what had happened in his first life. "... everything went wrong, Mother." Thor glanced up through his lashes at Frigga and saw she was still frowning. Thor let out a long breath and began at the very beginning.

Explaining what horrible things had occurred in Thor's first life was not easy. Thor could only seem to stay it in short burst intermixed with awkward pauses as he tried to think of how to phrase things. Frigga was mostly silent as she listened, only occasionally broken by a little gasp or noise of distress. She didn't, however, ask any questions, for which Thor was immensely grateful. Thor wasn't sure how he would have started again if he were interrupted.

Thor's explanation was not, he readily admitted, his best example of making sense. He tried to be matter-of-fact and even to describe what happened in order. But, Thor would forget something, or round back to something later when he realized that he'd not explained thoroughly something that had occurred on his periphery that he rarely took note of. Frigga sat patiently beside him on his bed as he fumbled his way through telling his own life story. One would think he'd be better at it than he was.

After his story, Thor then went on to tell her what he'd just learned from King Loki, although he thought it best to not tell her the wreckage of Asgard that King Loki surrounded himself in. Not at the moment, anyway. There was plenty to digest in just his story to be starting with. The terrible future that loomed in a universe where they fail Loki even worse was a burden for hopefully never but at least later.

There was a long silence once Thor had finished. Thor wished that his mother would say something, but he also wasn't entirely sure he knew what it was he wanted her to say. What even
could she say? If someone had come up to Thor with such a story, he had no idea what his reaction might be, but he strongly suspected he would not be nearly as patient and believing as Frigga was already proving to be.

"... this explains a few things," Frigga finally said.

Thor looked up, confused by that. "My Darling, you are not very subtle," Frigga said as she brushed his hair back from his face. "You killed that abuser with Mjolnir. There is no way you should have been able to summon her at your age and without any training to do such. And, you've changed in other ways more difficult to place. It makes sense in a way that your soul is older than your body as Lady Vor has mentioned to your father and I several times how you seem to have matured."

"Are you upset with me?" Thor didn't want to upset his mother, but he was aware that he'd broken laws to save his brother. Plus, he may not have directly broken any decrees of his father about Loki, but he certainly had not followed the spirit of them.

Frigga tilted her head thoughtfully as she studied Thor. After a moment, she shook her head. "No." Thor felt a tension in his shoulders that he hadn't before noticed ease. "You have sacrificed much to better your brother's life. However, this cannot be known. To change the flow of time even a little is against our laws. You have reversed it entirely to change it. If your Father were to know he'd have little choice but to uphold those laws," Frigga said.

Thor cringed. He honestly hadn't thought about that very much -but then Thor was still not used to thinking in terms of what punishments he might receive for breaking laws. Thor had usually been scolded and his actions dismissed up until the incident after his failed coronation. Perhaps, despite Thor's efforts, he still hadn't fully absorbed the lessons his father had tried to teach with his banishment.

"We shall have to handle things carefully, Thor," Frigga said as she continued to brush his hair back behind his ear. "For now we must focus on helping your brother, but I shall try to find a way to ensure you do not suffer for trying to right a wrong."

"... does he know?"

Frigga looked confused. "Does who know what, darling?"

Thor swallowed hard. "Does Loki know... about the baby?" The last word came out as nothing more than a whisper.

The confusion on the Queen's face turned quickly to sorrow. "Yes, we've told him," she murmured. "Difficult decisions will have to be made soon. Just because you say there was a child before does not mean that we will force Loki to bear one after such trauma."

That was a relief to hear. Thor knew only the very basics of pregnancy and childbirth, but he knew enough to not find either part particularly enjoyable prospects. And that was when one wanted children. Loki's case was even more fraught.

Just then, there was a knock on Thor's door. "Thor?" Loki called. "Are you in here?"

"Yes, Loki. Come in," Thor said.

Loki came in with a frown on his face. "Here you are. You said you'd be right back. Did you fix your side?"
Thor put a hand to the bloody tear in his shirt that he was still wearing. "Ah, yes. I was changing my shirt when Mother caught me," Thor offered quickly. Not entirely a lie just not entirely true either. Loki seemed unsure and glanced between Thor and their mother uneasily before nodding. Thor didn't know if Loki believed him or if he just couldn't prove Thor's fib.

"You both really must be more careful. My heart cannot take seeing my Darlings bleeding so often. You are fortunate that Ofnir did not bite you, Thor. His venom is not something I think you would enjoy," Frigga said as if that had been at all what they'd been talking about before Loki came in. Thor was caught flat-footed by the sudden excuse he'd been tossed but nodded along looking as properly chastised as he could. Luckily, despite not expected his Mother to come up with the story, Thor was not unfamiliar with just nodding along to the story a vastly superior liar gave him.

Loki's suspicion faded from his face and was replaced with a momentarily relieved expression before turning to neutral. "It wasn't Ofnir's fault, Mother."

Frigga waved her hand. "Yes, yes. Thor told me he was roughhousing with him. That is hardly the point, my Dear. One should not wrestle a giant lizard with so many sharp points just for fun."

"I'll try to remember that in the future, Mother." Thor did his best to sound solemn but must have failed because Loki rolled his eyes.

"See that you do," Frigga said before bending down to kiss Thor's forehead. She gave Loki one as well before leaving the room, presumably to go and plan how she would keep this new information she was privy to from Odin. Thor was left staring. Frigga and Loki really were frighteningly similar at times.

Loki waited until Frigga was gone before going over to sit heavily beside Thor on the bed. "I was worried about you," he scolded. "You'd been gone so long I thought you'd gotten lost and bled out or something!"

"I wouldn't get lost in my own home!" Thor protested. "Really, Brother. I'm not a simpleton."

"Sometimes I wonder," Loki said as he flopped back to stare up at Thor's ceiling.

Silence fell between the two brothers for several minutes. Thor wanted to ask if Loki was alright but refrained. Loki was quite obviously not alright or fine or any other synonym thereof. Thor didn't know how to fix that, however, and he wished desperately he could. "Can I help at all, Loki?"

Loki continued to stare before shaking his head. "I do not know how you would be able to, Thor."

Thor nodded, not particularly surprised, and laid down beside his brother across the bed. Thor reached out and twined his fingers with Loki's and gave his brother's hand a gentle squeeze he hoped would convey everything that he couldn't put into actual words. Thor was surprised but also relieved when Loki didn't pull his hand back.

The two of them lay like that for some time before Thor's stomach decided to grumble. The noise was loud enough that Loki quite obviously heard it as he snorted and pushed himself up. "Bottomless pit that you are. Shall we go see what the kitchens have for us?"

Thor grinned. "That sounds an excellent idea."

The rest of the day went on almost as if nothing happened. Loki was acting much like his old self albeit even less tolerant of Thor's casual physical affection than he had been before and now Thor knew not to push too hard. Sometimes Loki would grow silent and distant, and Thor would be
worried, but Loki eventually managed to bring himself back with a sharp shake of his head. Thor wasn't sure if he should worry about the lapses or not. In the end, Thor decided to not mention them as it hadn't been even a week and Loki would need far more than that to find his footing again.

Late that night Thor was woken up by his door creaking. Thor's hand grabbed tightly to the knife that he had wedged between his bed and the wall. After what had happened to Loki, Thor wasn't about to take any chances with someone sneaking into his room at night. There were still twice as many guards scattered about the grounds then there had been before Loki's abduction, but they weren't impossible to sneak by.

"Thor?"

Thor dropped his grip of the knife instantly and sat up. "Loki? What's the matter?"

Loki's face was ghostly pale as he came closer and then slipped into the bed beside Thor. "... nothing. I just was cold."

Thor knew that was a lie immediately, Loki was never cold plus they were quickly leaving winter behind, but moved over so that his brother could get in under the covers beside him. "Well, join me, brother. These beds are plenty big enough for two."

After some awkward fumbling and shifting, the two brothers were both wrapped up in blankets side by side. Thor searched for a moment and found Loki's hand to hold again. His other hand reached up to cradle the back of Loki's neck and press their foreheads together. Loki let out a long shuddering sigh and closed his eyes. "Sleep, brother. I'm right here," Thor murmured.

Loki nodded, but Thor could tell by his breathing that Loki didn't get to sleep right away. Thor didn't say anything else, and Loki kept his eyes closed. The moments drifted by incredibly slowly and Thor just continued to lend his silent support. It was several hours before Loki seemed to drift off and he relaxed finally. Thor shifted closer to try and bring as much comfort as he could before he too fell off to sleep.

The next morning it was late when Loki and Thor finally pulled themselves awake and went to their own chambers to get washed up and changed before going to breakfast. Thor was mildly surprised that they hadn't been woken up earlier but was glad for it as well since they had been up so late the night before.

Thor made sure to wait for Loki outside of his room. When Loki appeared, he looked somewhat disheveled, and his visible skin was bright pink. "Is everything alright?" Thor asked, recalling how his brother's skin had looked when he'd taken far too hot a bath. It was worrisome, and Thor couldn't stop himself from thinking that Loki had hurt himself again somehow.

"Yes, of course," Loki said as he smoothed his hair back. A large black raven -Thor thought it was Muninn- fluttered through the door and landed on Loki's shoulder. Thor hadn't even been aware that the Ravens had returned to Asgard, but then again he hadn't been concerned with them either. Loki gave the bird an annoyed look but allowed it to perch on his shoulder. "Shall we?" Loki asked with a gesture down the corridor.

"Why was Muninn in your room?" Thor asked even as they started walking towards the dining hall.

Loki's face twisted with more annoyance. "Apparently, he's my babysitter," he spat. "As if I need one." Loki shrugged his shoulder and Muninn flew off with a noise of displeasure. Thor only just
stopped himself from pointing out that last time Loki's skin had looked as it did now Loki had given himself heatstroke and several open wounds.

They reached the dining hall in short order although Loki gave Muninn, who was now perched on Odin's chair opposite his brother, another glare as the Princes took their seats. "Heimdall reports that Hringhorni will be reaching Asgard sometime late this afternoon," Tyr was saying. "I will be there to meet the twins when they arrive."

"Hodr and Baldr are coming to Asgard again?" Thor asked. That was incredibly unusual. Hodr and Baldr had rarely both been in Asgard at the same time and almost never both of them together twice in the same decade. Such a feat took much effort and schedule manipulation to arrange.

"That's right," Frigga said. "I've decided it really is too unfortunate that we have allowed our familial ties to whither so. We should not allow our duties to our people to prevent us from being the family that we should. Wouldn't you agree, dear?"

Odin looked entirely too distracted but nodded at the question directed at him anyway. "Of course, my lovely sun."

Loki and Thor exchanged a look but then silently agreed to merely eat and not pursue whatever was causing their father's distraction. The King would most likely not tell them, and even if somehow he was convinced to do so, they probably didn't actually want to know. Besides, Odin was now speaking with Tyr about something in low tones that the Princes could not hear so they'd most likely lost their chance.

As they were eating a servant came into the room. The Asgardian only looked a century or two older than Thor and wore a simple red tunic belted with a braid of gold and the crest of the Asgardian Royal family on his breast. A page of some sort. The page bent low to the King and the family. "My King, I was sent with word from Lord Heimdall that the Bifrost was called for by a Lord..." the page hesitated badly. "Lord Etchital-"

"Ixtlilton," Odin supplied.

The page visibly slumped in relief. "If you say so, My King. Lord... that is waiting."

Odin nodded and lifted his head. "Activate the Bifrost, Heimdall," he said in a loud, clear voice.

Frigga got to her feet and carefully put her napkin down on the seat. "Loki, Darling, come along, we must see Lady Eir."

Loki made a disgusted face. "Must we? I feel fine, Mother."

"Yes, we must," Frigga said patiently. "Come along."

Loki's face soured more, but he obediently got to his feet. Thor would have followed, but Frigga shook her head. "You stay and finish your breakfast, Thor."

No, Thor. We will be discussing many things Loki would not be comfortable with you knowing. Including the baby. Give him his time, Frigga's voice whispered in his head.

Thor very nearly jumped in his seat but managed to disguise it by reaching for another pastry that was halfway across the table. Loki still gave him a strange look but didn't seem to think much of the oddly disjointed motion. Thor watched them as they left the hall. Frigga had never spoken to Thor in such a way before. Indeed, he hadn't even been aware that she could project her voice into his mind like that. Thor would have to ask her later how she had done it, although he wasn't...
confident that he would actually understand the explanation.

Thor sat in his seat picking at the pastry he had just grabbed and tried to look like he wasn't itching to jump up and find out what was going on. But no. No. His mother was right. Loki would not welcome his presence at such a meeting. Support did not always mean being right there beside someone. Especially not with Loki who seemed to need a mixture of closeness and distance that was so difficult to manage.

After a little bit of time, the doors to the dining chamber opened again, and several Einherjar were there escorting a man that Thor had most definitely never seen before. He was slender but not without wiry muscles. The man was at least seven feet tall and had skin the color of burnished copper that had thin veins of bright yellow running through it that oddly reminded Thor a bit of Jotnar markings but far more subtle. Thor could only see the yellow when the light hit his skin just right. The visiting God's hair was impossible to see out due to the headdress he wore, which had many layers of bright green, red, and yellow feathers intermixed with fabric and heavy gold decorations. These colors were repeated in the leather wrap that this visitor wore around his hips like a skirt which was kept secure around his narrow hips by a large golden belt. Around his shoulders he had a travelling cloak edged with even more green feathers. But all of this was nothing compared to what Thor did not see.

Where Thor expected to see a face, instead all he saw was expressionless glossy blackness. Thor could not even find the man's eyes behind the mask although he assumed that there were some as the mask had holes for sight to be allowed. Instead, all that Thor could see was a pale white glow from behind the mask - which was frighteningly lifelike. It was as if someone had taken molten obsidian and poured it across the man's face and it had hardened in a shell. And yet that couldn't have happened because who would be able to remain as calm as the mask portrayed while molten anything was poured onto you?

"Lord Ixtlilton, thank you for coming," Odin said as he got up from his seat to greet the other God.

"Of course," Ixtlilton said as he casually handed one of the Einherjar his cloak. "When I heard it was a child that was suffering I knew it my duty to do what I could. None so young should suffer."

Odin nodded in agreement. Thor stared at the man and tried to figure how that mask was even attached. Was it part of the headdress? It didn't seem to be as the great feathery thing had a thick red band holding it to Ixtlilton's forehead and the mask started several inches below that. And yet it wasn't strapped behind his ears either...

And for that matter how was Ixtlilton even speaking so clearly? His entire mouth was covered, and yet it was as clear as Odin's voice. "-who is currently staring very rudely, is my son, Thor."

Thor nearly jumped and realized everyone was looking at him. He scrambled to his feet and gave a short bow like he probably should have before. "My apologies, Lord Ixtlilton. I did not mean to stare," he said. Thor mentally berated himself for having not been paying attention.

Ixtlilton chuckled softly from behind the mask. "Quite alright. I understand I must be strange to you. It has been so very long since our different Pantheons have had the need to interact." Thor nodded in agreement. He had seen some strange things in his life, but he hadn't seen someone quite like Ixtlilton before. That mask was somehow terrifying and soothing at the same time. An impossibility just like how it seemed so very lifelike and attached to his face through nothing but pure will-power.

"My other son, Loki..." Odin hesitated for a moment. "He is with the healer now. I hope you received our latest updates?"
Ixtlilton inclined his strong jaw upwards slightly, causing the light of the Asgardian sun to shine off his mask. "I did. Most disturbing news. It is far from my area of expertise, but I shall do my best to assist as I can."

"I can take you to Loki now if you'd like?" Tyr offered.

"Thank you but no. He should finish his meeting with the physician that he trusts first. I can wait my turn," Ixtlilton said. "Besides, I somehow doubt we shall make it much past introductions on our first meeting. He was, after all, just assaulted by a man he did not know. I would be almost more concerned if he accepted me right away."

"Loki doesn't like strangers on a good day," Thor said.

Ixtlilton looked at Thor, or Thor assumed he did since the mask tilted in his direction. "Then, assuming he will not be having a good day, I will assume he will hate me."

"It won't be personal," Tyr said.

"No, I wouldn't think so. But don't worry. I have long ago come to accept that I cannot be a friend to all my patients," Ixtlilton said.

"Loki has an unfortunate knack for testing one's patience and resolve," Odin warned. "Especially that of our healers."

Thor had the most bizarre impression that Ixtlilton was smiling but the mask, of course, didn't change at all. "I have found quite a few children have such a knack. I assure you, King Odin, after dealing with all of Coatlicue's multitude of children through their less than auspicious youths, I think I can handle your one."

"I am glad to see you so undaunted," Tyr said.

Ixtlilton inclined his head before addressing Odin again, "As to the other matter, did you wish for me to contact one of my contemporaries who has more, shall we say, experience with such issues?"

Odin considered it for a moment before shaking his head. "No. Due to Loki's... heritage Frigga and I think it best if we contact one who is more familiar with Loki's biology in this matter. Especially as it is unclear how the nature of the other party might affect the situation."

Thor was very glad he already knew Loki was pregnant because otherwise, Thor was sure that he would be entirely lost as to what his father was talking about. Thor had no illusions as to the fact that he would never have been told the truth about what they were talking about if he asked, so Thor was relieved that he didn't have to. It made things much easier when one didn't have to ask questions.

"Thor, why don't you go and spend some time with your friends. I am sure that they worry about both you and your brother," Odin said.

Well, that was probably true, but Thor didn't think he could act particularly cheery right now. Too much that was too important was going on and Thor didn't know how to help. His renewed youth was always a burden when he was trying to protect his brother but never before had he felt it quite so keenly as he did lately. Nobody was letting him anywhere near Loki or had even told him about the baby. How was Thor supposed to make things better when everyone kept him from doing so?

"Come, Thor," Tyr said, putting his hand to Thor's shoulder. "You have been neglecting your training anyway, and I would like to see if you can summon Mjolnir to you again."
"Why do you want to see that?" Thor asked even as he found himself allowing Tyr to lead him out of the dining room.

"Because it is quite unusual," Tyr said. "Mjolnir is not a weapon just anyone can wield, Thor. Surely you know that."

Thor most assuredly knew that and told Tyr as much. "But I still don't see how that matters. It isn't as if Father will let me wield Mjolnir anytime soon." It had not been for several more centuries that Odin had allowed Thor to train with the mighty hammer and it had taken Thor near begging for it to occur.

"Perhaps he shall surprise you," Tyr said. "And in the meantime, it does no harm to practice. Maybe one day you will even be able to swing it more than once before using up all your strength."

Thor scowled. "Still one more time than you can swing it, Brother."

Tyr flicked Thor's ear. "Just because Loki is absent does not mean you are required to supply me with his usual amount of disrespect and snark, Thor."

"You would get bored otherwise," Thor said as he rubbed his still stinging ear with one hand. Tyr laughed and didn't argue the point, so Thor decided to count that as a win for him.

When the two Odinsons reached the practice ring, Thor was glad to see that his friends were there already. Sif was hacking away at a practice dummy with a determined look on her face. The dummy's head was already hanging on but by a thread and still, Sif swung her blade around for another blow. Hogun was standing off to the side watching with Astrild as Fandral and Dagr faced off against each other.

Thor came closer just as Dagr got under Fandral's thinner sword and caught the blonde's wrist. Fandral's face went comical for a moment, but then he was tossed over Dagr's shoulder to land flat on his back in the dirt. Fandral groaned in pain even as dust slowly settled again. "What use is fancy flourishes if it gives me a chance to get under your defense?" Dagr asked as Fandral rolled onto his side.

"Style is worth it all on its own, you uncultured lump," Fandral said before getting up and brushing some dirt off his trousers.

"Yes, that's why you keep hitting the dirt," Dagr said with a smirk.

Fandral scowled and would have said something in reply, but then Thor and Tyr's approach was noticed. "Thor!" Astrild said. "It's been some time since you joined us for practice."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that, my friends," Thor said.

"Don't be sorry," Sif said before swinging around and burying her sword into the practice dummy's gut so hard that the blade stuck through the post that was for all intents and purposes the target's spine. Sif left her sword jammed in place and came over.

"How is Loki?" Hogun asked.

"They said he was found but little else about it," Dagr said.

"And it has been awfully stormy lately," Astrild added.

Tyr put a hand out. "Loki is recovering from his ordeal, never you worry. But he is not yet ready to
rejoin us out here at practice. Now, I think drills would be a better use of our time than gossiping,
yes?"

"I'm not sure I would call it gossip..." Fandral murmured.

"Then what would you call it?" Hogun asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Friendly curiosity?" Fandral suggested.


Fandral jabbed his elbow into the other boy's side. "Hush before I put you in the dirt."

"Try it."

"Boys," Tyr interrupted. "If you're so eager, you can start us off. Pick your weapons and step into
the ring."

Both blondes made a face but did as they were told. Astrild and Fandral sparred together so
frequently in an effort to improve Astrild's own skills that a match between the two of them could
last an incredibly long time. They were just too familiar with each other's strengths and
weaknesses. Not helped in the least by them both routinely pulling their blows for fear of hurting
each other -something Tyr regularly took them to task over but they couldn't seem to shake.

"Well, this should take a while," Dagr said as he went to lean against a section of fence that was
under the shade of an elm tree that was outside of the packed dirt practice area. Thor and the rest
followed Dagr to find their own spots in the shade. The shaded fence was easily far enough out of
the way that they wouldn't interfere and yet close enough that they could still see the match in
progress. "I'm surprised Tyr didn't pull you out to spar immediately, Thor. What with how you
haven't been around lately."

"Just because he hasn't been with us doesn't mean he hasn't been training at all, Dagr," Sif said.

"Have you?" Dagr asked Thor.

Thor shrugged. "A little."

"I heard you summoned Mjolnir," Hogun said as he hoisted himself up onto the fence to sit on the
top crossbar.

"Did you really?" Dagr asked.

Thor hesitated as he mentally debated what he should tell his friends. "... yes. I went out looking
for Loki and was attacked. I lost my weapon and just... called Mjolnir to fight with instead. But I
haven't done more than swing it once yet."

"That's still incredibly impressive, Thor," Sif said. "Nobody but the Allfather has summoned
Mjolnir, I don't think."

Thor shrugged again, feeling unusually awkward. He distinctly remembered when he had been
first handed Mjolnir to train with. He had crowed about it for days until Loki got fed up and
somehow managed to magic it to the bottom of a large pile of manure baking in the sun, which
Thor had to dig through to retrieve the hammer. Thor still had no idea how Loki had pulled that
prank off, but Thor and Mjolnir had both been foul smelling for days after. It had at least succeeded
in shutting Thor's admittedly obnoxious grandstanding about the hammer for a while. Though Thor
still thought that there were better ways to tell him he was overdoing it than burying a priceless magical hammer under a load of cow shit.

Now though, Thor wasn't feeling all that much like bragging. He had used the hammer, yes, but explaining the full story would mean dragging what horrors Loki had endured out into the light of day, which Thor was no longer willing to do. Plus, in Thor's mind, he'd already used Mjolnir for centuries. The impressiveness had already faded for him.

"I haven't spoken to Sigyn lately," Sif said. "Has she been with Loki?"

Thor shook his head. "Not that I know of. He only came out of the healing wing yesterday, and I don't think Lady Eir even wanted to let that happen."

"He was hurt that badly?" Dagr asked in alarm.

Thor mentally cursed himself. He really should think about what he was about to say for more than two seconds before blurting it out. "He's recovered physically. I think Lady Eir was just being overly cautious," Thor said. He wasn't about to discuss any details.

"Well, that would make sense," Hogun said. "As a second Prince Loki's health is important to all of Asgard... and the Nine besides."

There was a heavy thud from the practice ring, and Thor looked over to see Fandral quickly getting up. "Astrild is getting better," Thor said.

"I'm telling you, it's those stupid flourishes Fandral puts on everything," Dagr said. "And his sword gives like... paper cuts more than a sword slash. Puny little thing."

"Hush up, Dagr," Sif said. "You're just in a bad mood because Father is making you learn swordsmanship first."

Dagr glared at his sister. "I already know how to use a sword. There's only so long you can beat a dead horse, you know."

Thor looked over at his friend. "What would you rather be using if not a sword?" As far as Thor knew, all three of Dellingr's children used swords. Sif had been the slight exception in the fact that her sword was double bladed, but considering how hard she'd had to fight just to get training in the first place it seemed natural she would be unusual with her weapon choice as well.

"In town, there is this war axe that Dagr has been swooning after for the past month," Sif said in a not very quiet whisper. "You'd think it were a shapely woman the way he gawks at it."

"Shut up, Sif. I do not gawk at it!"

Sif scoffed. "Sure you don't. That's why you're entirely alright with Father telling you no over and over again."

Dagr glared at his sister who didn't seem in the least bit impressed or intimidated. "Well, perhaps you will get it someday," Thor offered. "A warrior is always most effective when using the weapon that they prefer."

"Thank you, Thor. Wiser words never said," Dagr replied.

"Hence why you should stop insulting Fandral's," Thor added.
Dagr made a face, but Sif snorted in laughter. Even Hogun cracked a little bit of a smile. "Very funny, Thor," Dagr said as he crossed his arms.

"I wasn't attempting to be funny," Thor said. "Fandral will get better with his sword the more he practices. I doubt you will be any better when you first get your hands on the axe you covet."

"But he's been using that sword for ages, and he's not gotten much better," Dagr argued.

"That's not true," Hogun said. "He has gotten better. You just don't want to admit it." Dagr sent Hogun one of his golden-eyed glares but must have decided he wasn't winning and said nothing more about the topic.

The next several hours were spent sparring between the six of them, continually switching partners and occasionally sparring in groups of three or four against Tyr himself to work on their tactics. Thor greatly missed Loki during the group sessions as his brother's tactics were always surprising and effective. Although Tyr, being who he was, never seemed to have too much trouble in recovering and maintaining the upper hand in their sparring matches.

As Tyr called a halt to their training for the midday meal, Thor noticed Loki lingering nearby in the shadow of the barracks. "Loki!" Thor hurried over to where his brother was standing. "You should have said something."

"I'm not allowed to spar yet," Loki said with a shrug.

"You didn't have to train with us," Thor said even as the others started meandering closer to where the two Princes were. "But you could have come closer and told us how lousy we were being."

Loki smiled. "Why, Brother, I do believe you're trying to cheer me up."

"Maybe a little," Thor agreed.

"Prince Loki," Astrild said as the others came up behind Thor. "It is good to see you again. I hope you are feeling better."

Loki's smile grew slightly strained. "Better, yes. Thank you. Thor, Mother was asking after you. Come on."

Thor nodded and said goodbye to the others before hurrying after the already retreating Loki. Thor waited until they were well out of earshot before turning to his brother. "Did Mother really ask for me or did you just want to get away before the others asked you any more questions?"

Loki glanced over at Thor. "Yes, she asked for you... I might have oversold how important she said it was, but I wasn't lying," he said. Loki's tone was definitely defensive.

Thor lifted a hand to show he hadn't meant to offend his brother. "I would understand if you didn't want to be around our friends right now, Loki. I was just wondering." Thor understood a lot more now than he had the first time. Before he had assumed Loki was just being difficult for the sake of it, but after talking to King Loki and knowing what his brother had gone through it was almost painful how obvious it was to Thor how uncomfortable Loki was currently.

"So where is Mother?" Thor asked after several minutes of walking.

"At her tapestry," Loki said. "Where else?"

Thor nodded, and as they walked into the palace, Thor tried to figure out the best way to phrase
what it is he wanted to say to Loki. He didn't want to cause Loki to shut down, but Thor also wanted to show support. "... Loki?"

"Hmm?"

Thor sighed there was no real easy way to say what was on his mind but keeping it to himself wouldn't work either. "I overheard something that I know you wouldn't have wanted me to."

Loki stopped walking immediately. "You overheard something," he repeated.

Thor cringed at the tone his brother took. It seemed neutral enough on the surface, but Thor doubted very much Loki was feeling that way. Thor nodded, "Yes. And I would not feel right knowing something personal if you thought I didn't know it."

"What did you overhear, Thor?" Loki asked, his tone growing more dangerous by the second.

"That... you," Thor wasn't sure at all how to say it. Even trying to think of what phrase would be best was difficult. "Your situation," Thor finally settled on.

Loki's eyes widened and his hands clenched before he abruptly turned and stormed off. "Loki! Brother, wait!" Thor called as he hurried after Loki. "This is why I wanted to tell you that I knew! Because I knew you would not like it! But I didn't find out on purpose. Please, Brother, don't be angry!"

Loki whipped around immediately. "Don't be angry?" he repeated. "Did you honestly just say that to me?"

"I just meant, please don't be angry that I know when I did not mean to find out," Thor said as he reached out. Thor caught himself before he put his hand on Loki's shoulder but then moved his hand to the back of Loki's neck. "I just wanted you to know that you needn't hide it from me. And whatever happens, I am still here for you, Loki."

"That's awfully optimistic of you, Thor," Loki said.

"It's not optimistic," Thor denied. "It's the truth. Nothing can happen that'll turn me away from you, Loki. Not you stabbing me in the gut and certainly not this."

Loki was quiet for a moment and then took a deep breath before releasing it. "... they say I have to decide what to do within the next two weeks."

Thor almost recoiled. "That's not very long at all to make such a decision," he protested.

Loki nodded. "Father says... there's a way to fix it but... it has risks, and the longer I wait to make a choice the larger the dose would be and therefore the bigger risk as well," Loki said as he wrung his hands together. "I don't... I don't know what to do."

"Whatever you do, I will support you, and I'm sure Mother and Father will also," Thor said instantly. "You needn't worry about going through any of this alone. I swear it." Loki didn't look convinced but nodded. "Did you meet with Lord Ixtilton?"

Loki made a face. "Him. Yes, I met him. I don't know why Mother and Father think he will be of any help," Loki complained as he turned again and started walking. "He's never even seen a Jotnar before!"

"I am sure he is skilled in his own way," Thor said as he followed his brother.
"Him and his creepy face..." Loki muttered.

Thor hummed thoughtfully. "I thought it was a mask..."

"Well, whatever it was... I can see looking at that why he has abilities over nightmares," Loki said. "Though I'm not so convinced part of his role is soothing them what with that." Loki waved a hand over his face where Ixtlilton's mask covered. Thor couldn't help but to laugh and listened as Loki complained loudly about how he didn't need any sort of 'specialist' help in the first place. Loki seemed to be, if not coping entirely, at least functioning, so Thor was willing to just be there for when Loki needed him. Because Thor was sure that the usual explosion of tension would be coming sooner or later. It always did.

Chapter End Notes

Thor's Reasoning- Yes, Thor did think for more than a minute about if he really had to do this... he thought about it for TWO minutes! Be impressed! All kidding aside, Thor did consider just looking for Loki and quickly realized that would take a while and as he mentioned briefly they had already burned his body so he would have to be reincarnated anyway. Which would basically create another Young Loki from Young Avengers situation probably.

Frigga and Loki- I figure, Loki got his quick thinking from somewhere. Why not his dear mother? He's such a momma's boy after all. (Something I adore about him honestly so no shade)

The Ravens Babysitting- Eir did hint earlier that Loki shouldn't be left alone lest he accidentally harm himself again. You better believe as soon as Odin called the Bird Boys back he set them on Loki watching duty no matter how it annoys his son.

Ixtlilton- Whew... I had a little think to myself about how to make the Gods from Aztec Pantheon different but not so different from what we'd already seen that they wouldn't seem entirely out of left field. One of the main images I have found in researching Ixtlilton is one where he has yellow skin so I played homage to that by having little glimmers of yellow in his skin that sometimes poke through. Also, that mask of Ixtlilton is super key to his powers and well, his whole deal. Though pretty, I can't imagine a black obsidian mask being not creepy at first. Perhaps once they boys get used to seeing it, haha. Ixtlilton has domain over healing and medicine and, specifically for the situation here brings peaceful sleep to children.

Coatlicue- An Aztec Goddess who had 500 sons and a daughter. The stars and moon. These children tried to kill their mother when she got pregnant again but their next brother (a sun and warrior god) was born fully formed and battle ready and killed them all. Yep.

Odin's Offer- I'm going to write a one shot about this but Odin's of course talking about Loki having an abortion. Just for context here (I'll get more into it in said one shot) there is a medicinal herb that Loki can take that'll 'fix' the problem before anyone can even find out that it is a problem. But as he told Frigga, it is an option that Loki will have to decide on himself. He's not going to do the thing I've seen in a couple fics where he slips Loki some potion or something to end it himself. That's too dark for this
Odin.
Dream Business

Chapter Summary

Dreams that are not particularly pleasant plague Loki after his trauma.

Chapter Notes

So, you know that utter horror of having like 6,000 words into a chapter and the power going out... yeah. That's why there haven't been any updates in like any of my stories lately. But I'm over it and now I have a backlog... 0.0 I also really wanted to get the tone of Ixtilton right which was hard as I have certainly never been in therapy for being raped by a man who could turn into a horse.

ALSO! NOTE!
As mentioned in the summary of the chapter we're dealing with nightmares here so be aware that the italic words are all a nightmare and can be considered somewhat graphic if you're sensitive to talk of blood and pain. I suggest skimming/skipping if Abortions or blood makes you uncomfortable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crystal goblet was covered in a thin layer of frost, and cold mist rose from the faintly blue liquid within. As he watched, the liquid seemed to shimmer just slightly, changing to purple then pink and green and then rippling back to pale azure. And yet, the fluid wasn't actually moving, it seemed to be shining different colors from somewhere within as impossible as that was.

He reached out and took hold of the goblet, gasping slightly as his fingers seemed to freeze against the icy surface. It was far colder than he had thought it would be somehow. He picked the cup up and stared into the shimmering liquid. The faint colored tinge was still shifting with no warning as he watched. Why was it doing that? He couldn't understand it.

He didn't particularly want to drink the mysterious liquid but found himself lifting the goblet higher despite that. His lips stuck to the frozen crystal rim as he began to drink. The potion was cold, and yet it burned horribly against his tongue, the roof of his mouth, and his throat. His teeth sizzled loudly in his ears as he swallowed. He could feel the liquid flow down his gullet since it continued to burn like cold acid. Something trickled out of the corner of his mouth, and he wasn't sure if it was the potion or his own blood.

He could taste nothing but cold as he continued to drink without wanted to do it. Everything burned and sizzled and tears of pain escaped his eyes. The potion built in his stomach where it seemed to churn in mixture with his own stomach acids and rip into his tender insides. He would have whined in pain, but his vocal cords were seared beyond reason.

How was there still more of the burning cold potion left to drink? Why was he still doing it?

The pain in his abdomen built until it felt as if his entire core was being eaten away at. Muscles
spasmed horribly and cramped as he poured more of the caustic fluid down his throat. He could smell the copper of freshly spilled blood and the odd cold smell of acid as he swallowed more of the poison. He couldn't stop drinking it!

His teeth fell apart in his mouth and were washed down his throat in chunks that he barely felt through the raw and ragged insides of his neck. Everything was burning beyond what he could tolerate, but he couldn't stop drinking the endless supply of whatever it was. His insides twisted and heated until it was nothing but fiery mush.

Lightning pulsed through his nerves, and he lost the ability to stand. His knees felt like they had been made of glass as he landed on them hard. They broke apart into razor-sharp shards. The pain was so intense now, he had no idea how he was even still alive. The lightning ricocheted around his already ruined abdomen as the acid continued to burn its way lower. Tears dripped down his neck to mix with the blood that had escaped his lips. Why did it have to hurt so much?

The most ungodly pain yet ripped through him, and he would have cried out had he the ability. Still, he drank as the fire and lightning slammed through him.

Blood, hot and sticky, flowed down his legs in a painful torrent. A fresh wave of tears spilled from his eyes as the blood kept escaping. He wasn't even sure where it was coming from, but it was terrifying and painful. Soon he was kneeling in a puddle that was spreading out larger and larger. He was dying. He was sure of it.

Loki woke with a start and barely even registered where he was before rolling off his bed. He rushed half blindly across the room and to the toilet. The phantom pain and horror of the dream had him retching violently. Loki's eyes watered at the force of his heaves, and his nose was clogged so that he couldn't breathe at all.

Several minutes later, Loki managed to stop being sick and wiped his face on a nearby towel. His stomach was still churning unpleasantly from the horrible imagery as he tried to slow both his breathing and heart rate. Loki was trembling a little from the experience but tried to push that down. He had been having nightmares constantly since he was taken and even more since being offered the chance to end the after effects. Although, this was the first bad dream be so severe as to make him physically ill.

A cup entered his vision, and Loki looked up to see Ixtlilton standing there offering him the drink. "I didn't give you leave to enter," Loki croaked as he got to his feet.

"No," Ixtlilton said. "But you were in distress. So much that I could sense it from my room."

Odin had put Ixtlilton up in the Royal wing of the palace instead of regular visitor's quarters so that he would be close to Loki. Loki was still very much unhappy with that as he didn't want anything to do with the creepy mask wearing God. Loki was certain that he could figure all of this out by himself. He didn't need some stranger asking him questions. He just needed Ixtlilton to leave.

"Aren't you supposed to help with these nightmares?" Loki asked in a nasty tone as he ignored the offered cup and splashed some water on his face. Despite the lingering sourness in his mouth and the provided drink, Loki didn't think he could drink something after the nightmare that he'd just had.

"That requires you to trust me, as you well know," Ixtlilton said. It infuriated Loki some how calm the older God sounded all the time. Four days had passed since Loki had first met the mask-wearing God and Loki still found him aggravating. Ixtlilton would not rise to bait no matter what Loki said. In fact, he would not react at all and just stand there waiting in silence -something Loki
actually found very unsettling.

Loki wasn't used to people not talking. Thor usually filled silence nicely, allowing Loki to just listen and -if he so chose- to ignore what was going on with little notice. That wasn't as possible when the only other person in the room was quiet and staring at him. "What?" Loki demanded as he dried off his face with the towel from before.

"Do you wish to speak about the dream?"

"No," Loki said shortly. "I'd rather you get out of my room."

Ixtlilton hummed and put the glass he had offered down on the counter. "I know you do not trust me yet, Prince Loki. But I truly am here to help you. Speaking about what plagues you might prove to make it less disturbing. As things are, you are not getting sufficient rest."

"I'll manage."

"Perhaps you would prefer to speak with your mother about what is bothering you?" Ixtlilton suggested. Loki couldn't help the face that he made at that suggestion. The very last thing he wanted to do was discuss his dreams with anyone, and his mother -despite how wonderful she was- qualified as anyone.

Ixtlilton hummed thoughtfully again. "Well, it is still rather early. Would you like me to help you return to sleep?"

"No. Just leave me be," Loki said.

"Very well. If you change your mind-"

"I won't."

"I am only next door," Ixtlilton finished despite the interruption.

Loki rolled his eyes and didn't respond more than that. Ixtlilton left without any further offers of help and Loki splashed water across his face a few more times for good measure before returning to his main bedchamber. The bed was torn apart and damp from Loki's nightmare, and he quickly decided he didn't want to deal with that. So, he only changed out of his damp clothes and rinsed the sweat from his skin before changing into a fresh set of clothes, which helped him feel at least a little more comfortable.

Once he was dressed again, Loki unspelled and unlocked the door to his balcony. The lock was new, as was most of the things in Loki's room since Loki had not been able to even step foot in his chamber looking as it had been. Odin had also offered to move Loki to a different room in the wing, but Loki had refused -which he was regretful of now but wouldn't take back. To take back that decision now would be like admitting how affected he was by what happened.

Loki walked out onto the balcony and looked out across the gardens. He couldn't quite bring himself to go to the railing and had, in fact, spelled the surface so that the ledge would give a hazardous shock to anyone that grabbed hold of it. Loki leaned back against the door frame and watched the sky turning golden and pink along the edge of the blue cast mountains.

Loki was incredibly tired but knew he wouldn't be getting any more sleep even if he tried. The only time he was able to get to sleep after a nightmare was when he went to join Thor and he'd already done that far too often recently. He wasn't some child who needed his big brother's protection from not even real dreams. Loki could more than handle himself. He just had to get control of himself
and move on. Of course, the problem was thinking about the future still made him vaguely ill, so the getting control part was harder than Loki thought it had any right to be.

The dream had been specific enough -if horrifying- that Loki could realize what he'd been experiencing. The deep wrenching pain in his abdomen and the river of blood had made things somewhat inescapable, and Loki was far from stupid. Loki wasn't sure, with that pain and bloody imagery fresh in his head, that he could contemplate going through with ending the pregnancy. But, Loki couldn't really see himself having the baby either.

Loki had never felt such conflict in his life, and he wasn't sure how to resolve the different fears and consequences into something he could actually live with. Just thinking about either option left him fighting the urge to do something drastic although what that something was changed depending on the situation. Sometimes he wanted to rage and other times he just wanted to flee and yet others he felt like destroying something. Most times though, Loki ended up trembling and fighting to keep his breathing steady -which didn't seem to often work.

The sky was getting steadily lighter as Loki folded his arms over his chest. Thinking about things like that made him terribly uncomfortable, but he also had to come up with what he would do and tell his parents.

Odin had told Loki about the herb called Winter's Bite that was supposed to be able to end everything but that it was also dangerous and that had probably been why Loki's dreams had turned so terrifying lately. Odin hadn't even done more than tell Loki it was available to him, but that had apparently been enough to bring forth unpleasant thoughts in his subconscious. Frigga had assured him over and over that no matter what it was up to him. That they would support him no matter what the outcome.

Loki wished that the lack of pressure from his parents was more comforting than it actually turned out to be. Part of him knew that -if his parents had decided for him- he would eventually resent being told what to do even if it was a long while later, but another part didn't want to have to make the decision about this himself. His mind was a jumbled mess of conflicting thoughts and emotions, and Loki didn't feel remotely up to trying to sort through it all. He was exhausted from all the nightmares about what an abortion would be like and couldn't find the energy to decipher even how accurate the dreams were. They weren't all the same, but Loki could recall every vivid, bloody detail of each scenario without trying very hard. All Loki knew was every time he thought about ending it he remembered all the horrible dreams. He didn't believe that he'd be able to bring himself to do it if just thinking about it caused queasiness to rise up and bloody visions to float through his head, but Loki wasn't sure how he could possibly have the baby either.

There was a knock on Loki's door, and Loki turned his head. "... who is it?"

"It's me, darling," Frigga said.

Loki hesitated but then waved his hand at the door to command it open for her. Loki suddenly realized how much brighter the sky actually was. He hadn't noticed just how long he had been standing there staring at nothing. Frigga glanced around at the room and magicked his bed back into order. Loki looked away, but Frigga thankfully didn't comment and just walked to the open door where Loki was still standing. "I hear you had another nightmare."

Loki made a face. "I thought he wasn't supposed to tell you these things," he said. This was precisely why Loki didn't want to talk to Ixtlilton. He would no doubt tell everything Loki said directly to his parents.

"He didn't," Frigga said, easily following her son's thought process to know who Loki was talking
"Huginn told me you woke from a nightmare."

"Damn bird," Loki grumbled. He should blast the stupid thing.

"They are only doing their job, Loki."

Loki huffed. "Dirty gossips. The both of them."

Frigga sighed but didn't seem inclined to argue about it. Odin's orders weren't something that she could change even if she disagreed with it, which she didn't in this instance. Perhaps it was a bit invasive to have the Ravens keeping an eye on Loki, but after the incident in Thor's bath, Frigga felt better knowing that at least one pair of eyes were kept on her son during his recovery. Instead of fighting with Loki, Frigga just reached out and tucked a loose bit of dark hair behind Loki's ear. "Do you need anything?" she asked.

"I don't think so," Loki muttered as he turned his eyes back out across the sky. Nothing that she could actually do for him anyway.

Frigga didn't seem surprised and nodded. "It will be nearing first meal soon, Loki. You should come down and eat something."

"I am not particularly hungry, Mother," Loki said. Loki couldn't recall being all that hungry at any point since he was rescued.

"Even still you should eat something, darling," Frigga urged. "Come, perhaps a little bit of bread or porridge will not be too hard."

Loki sighed and lifted a hand to rub his sore eyes. The motion didn't help, and his eyes pricked and burned while watering. Loki blinked the tears away and wiped the edges of his eyes. "If you insist," Loki said. Loki knew that if he didn't relent that his mother would just bring him food herself and make him take a few bites before leaving him be. It was easier for everyone if Loki just agreed to go to breakfast.

Frigga brushed Loki's hair back and smoothed it down to his skull. "Thank you, Loki."

Loki nodded but didn't say more than that. Loki took a moment to retrieve his shoes from where they had ended up scattered to the far corners of his room the night before (how they had done that Loki wasn't sure, but his shoes always seemed to be the one thing never found in their designated spots) and followed his mother.

When Loki got to his chair, he slumped down into it and tried to find something on the table that looked at all appetizing. As Loki was staring without enthusiasm, the twins Hodr and Baldr came into the room. Hodr looked substantially more awake than Baldr did, but they both greeted everyone already at the table before taking their seats. Loki glanced at them but then let his eyes wander back down to the table. Loki wasn't sure how to react to the twins currently. Though Thor and Loki had spent years living with their brother Baldr and seeing Hodr practically every week, things were different now in a way Loki had yet to fully process.

Loki didn't doubt his brothers knew about what happened since both had returned to Asgard so soon after Loki's ordeal and for seemingly no reason were both staying. Loki wasn't sure how to react to that. Neither twin had said anything even remotely hinting that they knew - and Loki was glad for that- but it did leave a strange unspoken tension in the air that wouldn't seem to fade or resolve. Not knowing what else to do, Loki settled for pretending as if it wasn't even there.

After staring at the breakfast spread for several more minutes and Frigga catching his eye multiple
times, Loki finally reached over to grab a thick slice of bread despite not really wanting it. Trying to make it slightly more appetizing Loki picked up some honey and slathered the food with the sticky stuff. Doing that actually had the opposite effect though, and Loki wasn't upset when Thor sat down beside him, and Loki was able to ignore the bread under the guise of talking with his brother. Loki didn't really think he was fooling Frigga since she was frowning, but she didn't say anything about it either.

"So, Tyr was telling me that I should come down and practice with you all today, Thor," Baldr said suddenly. "Something about it being too long since I tasted the dirt of the training ring..."

"That's probably true," Hodr commented as he stirred some bits of dried cherries into his porridge. "You haven't done much in the way of training lately. Sister Nanna says you're getting... soft centered."

"She said no such thing!" Baldr said, clearly offended. Hodr just hummed and took a bite of his breakfast. Baldr scowled at his twin. "... even if she were to think that -which she doesn't!- Nanna wouldn't have told you that."

Hodr smiled but refused to say anything else to Baldr. Instead, he turned to Loki. "Since Baldr, Tyr, and Thor look to be occupying themselves on the training fields, shall we spend some time in the gardens, Loki? Mother says it's a wonderful day out."

Loki hesitated but then reminded himself that Hodr was the brother least likely to ask questions that Loki couldn't tolerate. "Yes, I want to start training Ofnir again anyway," Loki agreed.

"Excellent," Odin said from the top of the table. "It is good to see all you boys getting along and spending time together."

"It is," Frigga said. "It is hard being so spread apart from each other." If she meant by age or physical distance was unclear, but Loki didn't figure either would be wrong. "Speaking of Nanna, though, Baldr, are there any plans of her and Forseti coming to Asgard soon?"

Baldr nodded. "Nanna thinks that for Forseti's sixty-fifth it would be a good time to bring him here to Asgard for the first time."

"Good. Many are eager to meet your son for the first time after how much you've spoken about him," Frigga said, smiling widely. "In fact, I do believe that everyone in Asgard knows at least one story about him from all the talking you do."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Hodr said. "It is endless, truly."

Baldr sniffed but didn't seem offended. "He is a miraculous boy. It makes sense to brag about him a little."

"A little implies you stop at some point, which you don't," Hodr said.

Thor chuckled, and Loki felt his mouth curl slightly as well as the twins began bickering in earnest on the other side of the table. Loki dared to eat a little of his bread along with a bite or two of sharp-tasting cheese but couldn't bring himself to do more than that without actually being hungry.

Frigga obviously noticed that Loki hadn't eaten much because she was frowning when Loki got up from the table. But, much to Loki's relief, she didn't say anything and let him leave with Hodr.

Loki and Hodr took a long meandering path around the gardens talking about various innocuous things from the flowers to the frustrations of having such rambunctious brothers to even some
discussion on Loki's most recent spell work. True, Loki hadn't been working on much of anything lately, but Hodr was the only one of his brothers that had any interest at all in Loki's seidr studies so Loki would always take advantage of the willing ear when he could. Eventually, they made their way to Ofnir's pen, and Loki continued his efforts in teaching Ofnir how to do several commands.

Ofnir was not in a particularly pleasant mood, but then he had been rather growly and ill-mannered in general as of late. Several of the very few servants that had permission to go inside the pen were now even refusing for fear of being bitten. The situation was vaguely annoying, but Loki didn't honestly mind too much so long as Ofnir didn't start actually attacking anyone, which he hadn't. Plus, enough servants were still brave enough that Ofnir's pen was getting adequately cleaned and he was being fed regularly. Loki heard a rumor that they were doing it as a team now so that someone would keep an eye on where Ofnir was while the other worked. That seemed a perfectly acceptable solution to Loki anyway.

"He's nearly full grown now, isn't he?" Hodr asked as Loki used an illusion to let Ofnir practice his stalking on.

"Yes, just about," Loki confirmed. "And his wings are getting stronger. Apparently, he can manage to get from his pen to my balcony now with just a jump and flapping his wings. Mother said he nearly ripped the whole thing down." Loki wasn't sure if he was entirely happy they had repaired the damage what with how nervous the balcony now made him.

Hodr hummed a little. "Perhaps he would manage it if he had more altitude to work with. Some of the Fjords of Vanaheim are really quite large and could be a good training ground for him."

"Perhaps," Loki said. "But then the mountains could do that too..."

"The mountains are not easy to fly through for even the experienced," Hodr pointed out. "They might prove to be too much of a challenge for him to learn on."

Loki made a noise of thought but didn't say anything else. Considering he had just returned to Asgard so recently, Loki doubted he'd be leaving again anytime soon. Especially since Eir was being so restrictive about what he was and wasn't allowed to do. Honestly, Loki was rather fed up with Eir's rules because he physically felt fine -perhaps a bit tired but considering how poorly he was sleeping that seemed understandable.

After a bit of time letting Ofnir stalk and pounce on illusions to test his hunting skills, Loki allowed the giant lizard to go lounge in the large pool of water to one side of the enclosure. Ofnir seemed to very much like playing in the pond, but then that might have something to do with the fact that the water was cold. Combined with the charms on his collar it was probably pretty close in temperature to Ofnir's natural habitat when he took the occasional swim -no matter how awkward it was with a body not really made for being in the water.

Loki couldn't really blame Ofnir for wanting to keep cool. He had gotten too used to sleeping with the fresh air from outside drifting over him, and he just couldn't relax now with the balcony door open. Loki missed the comfortable breeze, especially since being just off of winter the servants kept the castle well heated. It was even worse for Loki when he'd give in and sleep with Thor. The young Thunder God was always running hot especially compared to Loki, and it was stifling for Loki to be so near Thor and under blankets. But the only other option was to do what Loki had just that morning and not go back to sleep at all. Loki couldn't very well charm his whole room to the temperature he'd prefer. Not at the moment anyway. That was magic on a level many steps above Ofnir's collar.

Loki frowned. He would definitely have to set to trying to figure it out because something had to
change and finding a solution to temperature seemed the easier problem to tackle. Trying to deal with the nightmares was not something he could muster anything vaguely approaching willingness or determination to do just yet. Loki would handle them at some point. Perhaps there was a spell to keep them away?

Loki latched onto that idea immediately. There were plenty of spells and items meant to help with dreams. Undoubtedly one of them Loki could manage to do at his level and would make it so that he could get some sleep.

"Loki?"

"Hm?" Loki looked over to see Hodr frowning slightly. "What is it?"

"I've been talking to you for five minutes now... I even set you up for several jokes at Thor's expense, and you said nothing. Is everything alright?" Hodr asked.

"Oh, yes, just thinking," Loki said.

"About what, if I might ask?"

Loki wondered if he should tell Hodr. Surely, his brother would know what had happened enough to realize the reason Loki would want to banish bad dreams but, did that mean that Hodr would approve or disapprove or perhaps neither? Loki didn't want to put up with either of the latter options right then. Hodr was rather open-minded though, so he was probably safe enough to talk with. "Dream magic," Loki said.

"Dream magic?" Hodr echoed. "As in... controlling dreams or something else?"

"Stopping them," Loki said. "Although controlling might work as well if it works properly... I've only just started on the idea, so I haven't had a chance to do much research."

Hodr nodded. "I see." There was a moment's pause. "Perhaps you should consult with Lord Ixtlilton about this."

"Why would I do that?" Loki demanded. The very idea of talking to Ixtlilton about anything was very much opposed to.

"Well, he is still one of the foremost users of Dream Magic. It seems... a waste to want to learn it and not consult with him for his knowledge and experience," Hodr said.

Loki scowled. "I'm not talking to him about anything!"

"My little brother not consulting with an available expert when he wishes to learn a new sort of magic?" Hodr asked incredulously. "Now I really have seen everything. I think you would be doing yourself a disservice ignoring Ixtlilton's presence, Loki."

"He wasn't brought here to teach me magic," Loki said as he turned his eyes over to where Ofnir was flapping his wet wings and sending water spraying wildly around him.

"No, but who says you can't use him to learn it anyway?" Hodr asked. "Surely he won't force you to talk about things you don't want to."

Loki frowned, still not entirely convinced about the whole idea. Although, Hodr was right that if anyone could teach him how to do any sort of dream magic, it would be a God who dealt heavily with dreams. Was that worth the potential of opening himself up to scrutiny? Loki had fumbled his
way through learning spells without a tutor before so having one wasn't strictly necessary, but it would speed things along immensely. "I'll think about it," Loki said after a moment.

Hodr nodded and seemed satisfied enough with that. The God of Winter then changed the subject to Ofnir who was pulling himself out of the water and shaking the excess off of his bulk. Loki tried to turn his thoughts that way as well and was only partially successful.

The brothers only spent another hour or so with Ofnir before Frigga came to find them. Loki was still forced to attend appointments with the healers for the foreseeable future, and Frigga was determined to ensure he arrived at each one. Hodr excused himself by saying he was going to go and make sure Baldr wasn't hurting too bad after his time in the ring with Tyr. Loki would rather go with him, but Frigga was waiting with an expectant look on her face, and Loki knew he wouldn't get away.

"I still don't see the point in this," Loki muttered as they made their way back into the palace.

"I know you don't but please just indulge me," Frigga said. "I want to be sure we are doing everything we can for you, darling."

Loki huffed but didn't say anything in response to that. Frigga led the way through the different corridors until they reached a small office near the healing wing that Ixtilton had arranged to use for his stay in Asgard. Ixtilton had said that making sure they met in a neutral place would be helpful. Although, Loki didn't find a nice -but impersonally bland office- any more comfortable to have a discussion in then he did the healing wing.

Ixtilton was already in the office when they arrived, and as Loki found his usual spot over by the windows where he could look out rather than at the healer, Frigga and Ixtilton exchanged a few hushed words. Frigga told Loki to have a good session and then left only a few moments later.

There was a long silence broken only by the fire at the other end of the room crackling. Ixtilton's office was always so warm. The mask-wearing God was the only person Loki could ever recall that said that Asgard was cold. "Are we talking today?" Ixtilton asked politely.

Loki scowled out of the window. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Very well."

Ixtilton didn't press and Loki, as usual, found the silence almost stifling. Loki knew that he was meant to be filling it with talk about what had happened, but he wasn't able to do that. He couldn't even think about what went on in that cabin much less put it into words.

Loki wasn't sure how long he stood there staring, but eventually, he decided that Hodr had a point. Loki was more than skilled enough at directing conversations so he should be able to ask about dream magic without getting into too much detail about what had happened. And if Ixtilton was willing to help with one thing he should, in theory, be willing to help with other far more interesting topics.

"Can you teach me about dream magic?" Loki finally asked. "Like how to stop or contain dreams, so you don't have to see them anymore?"

There was a moment's pause. "I can. Is there some dream in specific you're looking to stop?"

Loki scowled. As if Ixtilton wouldn't already know. "Plenty," Loki said shortly.

"What sort of dreams are we talking about?"
"Does it matter?" Loki demanded as he turned to face the other God. He wanted to stop them not talk about them.

Ixtlilton nodded. "It does, actually. Dreams can be many things. From dreams about what has already happened to vague impressions to nonsense disjointed things to things that have not happened yet," Ixtlilton explained. "Each one is slightly different, and you would go about stopping them in different ways. So I'm afraid I'll need to know at least the basics of what you're dreaming in order to help you stop them."

Loki scowled harder. "You say that as if you don't know."

"I don't," Ixtlilton said. "You have made it very clear you don't yet trust me so other than the fact that I can sense them happening, which is something I cannot help, I haven't invaded your privacy to find out what they are about. I have some educated guesses, of course, but that is all."

Loki wasn't sure he believed that but arguing probably wouldn't get him anywhere. "... it's a couple of those," he finally said as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Not surprising. I don't think I've ever met someone who only dreams in one way. Not even seers who get their information from dreams only ever have prophetic ones. The brain doesn't tend to work that way," Ixtlilton said. "Since each method is different... perhaps you should tell me what type you want to stop first?" he suggested.

Loki hesitated to answer. Which would be worse? Dreaming about what had happened or dreaming about his baby's life being violently and painfully ended? Neither was pleasant. Ixtlilton just waited as Loki mentally debated which dream was the more distressing. Finally, he gave up trying to figure which horror was more than the other and settled instead for which he'd been having the most. "Something that hasn't happened..."

"Oh?" Ixtlilton sounded surprised. "What are those dreams about?"

Loki sent the man a glare. "I don't see how that's relevant to stopping them from happening."

Ixtlilton held up a hand defensively. "It is surprising at all. I would have assumed that dreams about the past were what was keeping you up at night."

"They were at first," Loki admitted. "But now other ones keep happening and they need to stop."

"I see," Ixtlilton said. Loki hated that the mask kept Ixtlilton's facial expression from being seen because his voice was too deliberately neutral to get much of a reading off of. "Are they things happening that are impossible... like the man who hurt you coming back even though his head was bashed in? Or things that haven't happened that might?"

Loki looked away from that gleaming black mask to gaze out of the window instead. "... can't happen." After those dreams, Loki just couldn't bring himself to do that. It was too gruesome and painful. "I decided what to do with the baby so I don't need to dream about it anymore anyway," Loki added before he could stop himself. Saying it aloud felt necessary, however, affirming in a way that just thinking about it in his head hadn't.

"Oh?" Again, Ixtlilton seemed surprised. "They were dreams about the baby?"

Loki gave an abrupt nod. "I've decided to give the baby away," Loki said. He couldn't see himself raising it, but he couldn't bring himself to kill it either so giving it up was really the only remaining option. "So tell me how to stop seeing these dreams about bloody messes." Loki blamed lack of sleep for why he'd blurted that out. He'd had no intention of telling the man anything about the
content of his dreams.

There was a long moment of silence. "Alright," Ixtlilton said. "We can certainly manage that." Loki felt himself relax just a little when Ixtlilton didn't prod him for more details and turned his attention solely to learning what he could do to stop dreaming the things he was.

The city-state of Nornheim was just off the Eastern Coast of Asgard, and though it was technically under the purview of Asgard's King, it governed itself for the most part entirely separate from his rule. Ixtlilton hadn't originally had any plans on coming to Nornheim even though he'd had dreams about the place since his first night in Asgard. Ixtlilton recognized the strange dreams as someone trying to reach him through the dream plane, but he'd had no reason to actually come until he'd heard what Loki had said.

Now he most certainly did want to come here and not to sightsee or question the local seers. No. Now he had far more pressing matters. The images from his dream had been slightly disjointed, but as Ixtlilton got off the boat and stepped onto the docks of Nornheim, he recognized several images from his dream. They seemed to be leading him through the docks filled with fish and imports and into the city proper. It was like following the clues of a treasure map made entirely of pictures.

Nornheim was a city full of narrow winding streets that came together in many courtyards sprinkled throughout the cramped city. The main road through the town was by far the largest and nicest one with space large enough for multiple carts to be pulled side by side and each of the buildings lining it was kept neat and freshly plastered. Planters were overflowing with brightly colored blooms out in front of nearly every building. Monolithic stone pillars carved from tip to base were set at every crossroads, and Ixtlilton assumed they were signposts of some sort although he couldn't read what was engraved upon them.

Following the main road, Ixtlilton came eventually to a sizeable crescent-shaped plaza. There were many stone benches in ever expanding rings and fountains placed upon the walls. At the smaller side of the plaza was a raised dais framed with intricately carved columns. A set of stairs behind the dais led to a set of large doors. It took Ixtlilton a moment to realize that the golden twisting metal that went up the center of the doors was actually a stylized tree. The branches were so large that they came back down and linked together in a never-ending knot. Runes unfamiliar to the Aztec god were carved along the thick rim of the door and painted with some white pigment that made them stand out from the dark wood.

Two guards let Ixtlilton into the shrine with only a little fuss. He had not gotten more than a few steps into the first large chamber before he found out why they had let him in with barely a second glance. Ixtlilton eyed the approaching God warily, but the man seemed mild enough. His pale silver eyes were not harsh in the least. However, he didn't stay looking at Ixtlilton, and those pale eyes skittered off to the side. "You came."

Ixtlilton tilted his head to the side slightly. "I was supposed to be, was I not?" Dreams, even highly symbolic ones, were under Ixtlilton's purview and, as such, easy enough to figure out. He had been sure that was what the symbolism in the dream he'd been given was meant to convey.

The man lifted a hand to rub his thumb against his stubble covered jaw in a thoughtful manner. "Have you ever spoken to the Norns before?"

"I have not."

The man nodded and turned, his eyes seemingly following something that Ixtlilton could not also see or something that simply wasn't there. "Results are what matters not so much the method."
"So, I was right that they were the cause of the Prince's nightmares," Ixtlilton said. He had not had much doubt about it, but it was always nice for his suppositions to be proven correct. The pale-eyed God nodded almost absently. "Who are you, anyway?" Ixtlilton finally asked.

"Kvasir. And you are Lord Ixtlilton. You're here to help Prince Loki after he was raped. The Royal family is most upset about the situation," Kvasir said while making an odd fluttery gesture with his free hand.

"I think that understandable."

Kvasir nodded again. "I am not supposed to tell what the Norns do, but the Queen is a very nice lady. She has always been kind to me."

"What does one have to do with the other?" Ixtlilton said as he followed a step behind Kvasir.

Kvasir made another gesture that Ixtlilton didn't recognize. "I saw her crying, so I know she is upset. People cry when they're upset. So I thought I should tell someone what the Norns have been doing. In case that is what is making her cry."

"And you chose me?"

"You were the obvious choice."

Ixtlilton was surprised to hear that considering he wasn't even sure how many knew that he was in Asgard. How Kvasir would and then decide that Ixtlilton was the best person to contact was a mental leap that the Aztec God wasn't sure he was capable of understanding.

Kvasir stopped at the top of a large set of stairs that curved down into the dark. "They are down there. They don't like it when you interrupt, but they're always doing something, so you always interrupt."

"Thanks for the warning," Ixtlilton said before starting down the stairs into the dark.

The temperature dropped quickly as he made his way further down the spiraling stairs. Crystals wedged into the walls periodically cast everything in a silver-blue glow. Somewhere in the distance, Ixtlilton heard water gurgling and a faint musical whispering sound. He was almost reminded of chimes, but they were most assuredly not.

The stairs went down for what felt like far enough to be several floors below the shrine. When he reached the bottom, there was yet another large set of doors. This set was also decorated with a tree, but the golden limbs merged with real veins of gold and silver that were threaded through the rock walls and ceiling so that the design wrapped around every bit of the small antechamber. In the center of the door was a large silver disk with several runes carved into it.

Ixtlilton remembered it from his dream and pressed his palm against the center. The doors made a strange thud noise and then started to open. Light came pouring into the antechamber, causing the gold and silver veins to sparkle and shine. Ixtlilton stepped forward without fear and onto a floor that looked to be made pale marble.

In the center of the room, the marble suddenly ended in a ring of carved rune-laden slabs. In the center of the circle was a bubbling spring at least fifteen feet wide. Emerald green moss growing on the smooth black rocks that rung the pale blue water. Mist rose from the spring in gentle waves. The room's edges were impossible to see due to sudden darkness that fell outside of the disk of light that filled the area around the spring. Ixtlilton wasn't sure where the illumination was even coming from.
As Ixtlilton came to a stop just before the spring, several women stepped out of the darkness. All of them had the same pale silver eyes that Kvasir did, but other than that almost none of them looked alike. Many in the crowd were even different species entirely.

Three women, in particular, stepped forward and Ixtlilton noticed they looked like they might actually be related to each other. They were thin with skin that took on a slightly unhealthy grey tinge with dark geometric tattoos along their faces and what bare skin Ixtlilton could see. Their long hair was a blood red and held back with bits of black iron wrought to look like foliage. "The Norns, I take it?"

"We are," they said as one unit. It was an off-putting effect to hear so many different voices speaking at once in the exact same cadence. "What do you want, Lord Ixtlilton?" the many voices of the Norns asked.

"For you to stop," Ixtlilton said. Ixtlilton had a feeling he wouldn't need to explain much to a group of seers. "He does not need your torment on top of what he has already suffered through. It is cruel of you to give him visions such as you have."

Luckily, the Norns did him the favor of not pretending to not know what or who Ixtlilton was talking about. "It was necessary."

"How, exactly, is sending gruesome visions of bloody abortions necessary to send to an underage rape victim?" Ixtlilton asked, his voice echoing slightly with his suppressed anger. His patient had more than suffered enough, and the Norns had no business making his recovery even harder. "How is it necessary to send to anyone?"

The Norn in front -Ixtlilton wasn't sure what her name was and didn't particularly care to find out considering the situation- tilted her head slightly to the side. There was an odd lack of empathy in her pale eyes, and Ixtlilton had to remind himself of what he was told before entering the chamber so that he didn't get more upset. "Because the babe was necessary. If his life ended, then he could not perform the tasks he was meant to do."

"And terrifying a child was the only path you saw to that end?" Ixtlilton asked, folding his arms over his chest.

"It was sure to achieve the babe's continued survival," the Norns said.

Ixtlilton tried his best to keep his temper. He felt as if he was failing at doing so, but he did attempt it. "I suppose simply telling us how an abortion was not ideal escaped you as a possibility?"

"Knowledge of the future must be carefully guarded and entrusted only to a few. If many people knew that the child will be important there is no telling what the repercussions might be," the Norns said. "It is our job to safeguard the future as it should be."

"And who says the future you see is as it should be?" Ixlilton asked.

"We would not have been gifted foresight if it was not our sacred duty to ensure the weft remains whole and as they should be," the Norns said. "All are given the tasks they were meant to have. It is one of the unshakable truths of the universe."

Ixtlilton scowled behind his mask. "Well, now that you've succeeded in terrorizing and bullying the boy to have the child, stop sending him such visions or I will find some way to stop you myself," he said.

"There is no longer a need for them," the Norns said.
"... you play a dangerous game, ladies," Ixtlilton said. "If the Prince has complications from what you've pushed him towards I am sure that the King will be holding you responsible." Ixtlilton and Lady Eir had had many discussions about the inherent dangers of Loki's condition the first-day Ixtlilton had arrived in Asgard so he was well aware that Loki might be too physically small due to his genetic condition and too young even if that turns out to not be an issue.

The Norns were silent for a moment, and Ixtlilton saw their eyes glisten like pools of silver liquid. "He will survive the birth."

"Survive," Ixtlilton repeated, entirely unimpressed. "That is the barest minimum level of concern. There are far more things that could arise that could hurt him severely, and he still survives it."

"He will survive," the Norns repeated.

Ixtlilton was entirely too disgusted and turned away. "I hope we never have to have this discussion again because if we do, I shall be far less pleasant. I promise you, that will be something you'd rather not experience."

"We will do what we must to ensure the timeline," the Norns said.

Ixtlilton paused and glanced over his shoulder. "Then I will do what I must to protect my patient." As Ixtlilton left, he realized that despite what the Norns had said he very much doubted that they would cease interfering with Loki's recovery. That, combined with the boy's physical and mental condition, made Ixtlilton think that Asgard was not at all the right place for the Prince currently. Besides, if the royal family wanted to maintain the secret of Loki's pregnancy, which Ixtlilton was confident that they would, they would either have to keep Loki confined to the palace to stay out of sight of the general populace, or he would have to leave Asgard. It would be better to move him now before any complications had a chance to arise. Ixtlilton didn't think he'd have much trouble convincing the All-Mother and All-Father.

Chapter End Notes

**Winter's Bite**- The herb that Jotnar use for abortions. Odin can get it from Laufey if Loki wants it.

**Dream Magic**- Magic that, as its name suggests, deals solely with dreams. Everything from Lucid dreaming with the aid of spells and potions to things like dream catchers and little statues made to ward off bad dreams would fall under this category. It's one of the more hand wavy schools of magic in this verse rather like how divination is sort of wishy washy in the Harry Potter verse. It's a legitimate thing but not a whole lot of people practice it and very few are any good at it. Most people have no real use for dream magic in their day to day lives. The most common form of dream magic would probably be warding them off. Ixtlilton has a leg up because his powers dwell within the dream realm. Most foremost users of dream magic are, in fact, Gods and Goddesses that deal with dreams as part of their divinity.

**The Dream Realm**- One of those hard to describe places that you can't physically go to. Think of it sort of like Wonderland where really anything can happen and sure that makes sense because, well, dream. Most people access the Dream Realm for short periods at a time when they are actively dreaming (day dreaming is pure imagination
and not part of the Dream Realm). Powerful users of Dream Magic can access the
Dream Realm at will and manipulate it to decipher things, block others, and send
people specific dreams either Prophetic in Nature or instructional.

**Kvasir**- This wasn't too clear the last time we saw Kvasir and I wanted to make it so I
added a few more quirks to his interactions here. But, Kvasir is a bit spectrumy. He's
definitely high functioning but he's got some Autistic traits like a tendency to look
away from people and not answer questions in ways that make sense. I picked this up
from part of his dialog in the Eddas where he says he'll be back because he has yet to
figure out the mystery of the net to which everyone goes... huh? He's talking about the
binding of Loki which in that point of the Eddas hadn't happened yet so everyone was
lost. He offers no clarification to it though and justpeace out to go explore. And I just
went... that's socially awkward of him, let's ratchet it up.

**The Norns**- What a bunch of B*tchs, right? In the Eddas there are a lot more Norns
than just the three named. There are Norns for every people, Jotnar, Dwarves, Elves,
men, everything listed in the Nine realms has a group of Norns for them. So, I decided
that the three sisters named as 'The Norns' (Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld) were the three
that specifically handle the royal family of Asgard. So even though Loki isn't
Asgardian by birth he'd still be under their purview, which I'm sure he's super happy
about. The Norns are almost identical to the Fates from Greek Mythology. They are
even often depicted with threads like the Sisters of Fate would be. Coming up with a
look for the Norns was hard, by the way, I wanted them a bit creepy because they are
but not gruesome or hideous to look at. Hence I went on an art hunt and found some
really lovely haunting images of them which I took some inspiration from. The Norns
are concerned pretty much solely with their duty of making sure things happen like
how they see them happening. To heck with other people's happiness. They see this as
the 'right' course because they trust that if they follow the blueprints they've been
given everything will end up equaling out at the end. A very unsatisfying explanation
to those that are currently being hurt, I'm sure.

This Story!
In case you're curious... We are in the second arc of ten... yeah. The Second arc is due
to end at chapter 60 btw. We've crossed 450 pages and I have up to chapter 90 outlined
in detail and up to arc five figured out but not to the detail as I have up to chapter 90. I
think I might have bitten off more than I can chew... I'll probably be writing this until I
die.... >.>
The Void and Aztlan

Chapter Summary

It is decided that Loki should not remain in Asgard during his pregnancy and so they send him away where he can have privacy.

Chapter Notes

So, I did it! I managed to get another chapter out before Endgame! Not with a whole lot of time to spare mind you, but that's not important!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thor woke up to the sound of retching, and, once he realized what it was, cringed in sympathy. Thor got out of bed and made his way through the door linking his cabin to Loki's and then over to the partition that separated the wash area from the main sleeping area. He knelt down beside Loki and put a hand to the back of Loki's neck. Loki had flushed royal blue in patches, but his skin was a little feverish, so it resulted in Thor's hand not being very chilled at all as he massaged the nerves there at the base of Loki's neck.

Loki was too busy vomiting to react much to Thor's attempts at comfort. Loki had been getting physically ill very often on this trip whereas he hadn't at all on the journey they took to Vanaheim. Thor had been utterly baffled by his brother's sudden travel sickness until his Mother had pulled him to the side on the third consecutive day of Loki being too ill to venture far from his cabin to explain it wasn't the travel that was giving Loki trouble. Thor had felt quite foolish after that, but in his own self-defense, Thor had never been around a pregnant person before so that reason hadn't been high in his mind as a possibility.

Thor wasn't sure exactly what had happened, but Odin and Frigga had decided that Loki should spend his recovery someplace other than Asgard. They must have told Loki privately because when Thor had turned to look at Loki after that announcement, Loki had just kept staring at the breakfast he wasn't eating and wouldn't look at Thor at all. Frigga was sharing more with Thor now that she knew the truth, but she still hadn't said much about why the move had been decided other than it was for Loki's well-being.

The logistics of the move had taken a few weeks to plan out and arrange because, for some reason that nobody saw fit to explain to Thor, Loki was not going to any of the Nine Realms of Yggdrasil. Instead, Ixtlilton had suggested his own city of Aztlan, to which everyone eventually agreed. Even Lady Eir, who had not wanted her patient leaving her care had ultimately agreed with the provision that she be given leave to join the Prince for his seclusion. That had caused some ruckus as never before had the Head Healer of the Palace left for any extended length of time before, but Odin had agreed and the council had little recourse but to allow it as well.

Loki could not currently take the Bifrost and travelling through Ginnungagap was going to take some time. Baldr had loaned them Hringhorni for the trip, but since he had sent the ship back when
he arrived in Asgard, it had to be summoned from Vanaheim before they could even start their journey. That had taken only a few days, but then Hringhorni had to be stocked for a much longer trip than it usually took. The estimate was that the journey through Ginnungagap to Aztlan would take about three weeks and, to be safe, they had gathered the resources for a full month's trip across the nothingness of the void, which had taken some time to arrange.

Then there was the question of Ofnir. Ofnir couldn't be left in Asgard without Loki, it had been decided, because he would not remain well behaved without his owner nearby -as had been proven when Loki was missing. Ofnir did not travel particularly well either. The length of time he would be kept on Hringhorni made drugging Ofnir, like they had for the trip to Asgard, not feasible. A special room had to be cleared of any furniture or supplies and then enchanted to help keep Ofnir calm for the trip, which had taken several days to work out all on its own.

A month of planning had passed since making the decision to go to Aztlan and the actual beginning of the trip. Thor had used that month to convince his parents to allow him to also go, if only for a bit of time. Because the trip was ostensibly for Loki's healing Thor's presence wasn't considered needed. Something Thor vehemently disagreed with.

The blue rippled across Loki's skin. Loki lifted his head slightly but kept his face angled away from Thor. The ill Prince wiped his mouth with one hand. "Should I get you something?" Thor asked.

"I think I would just throw it back up," Loki said. "But water at least."

Thor nodded and got up to go get the water pitcher that was nearby and fill a goblet. By the time Thor had turned back around Loki had managed to pull his glamour back in place entirely and the blue rash-like areas of his skin had turned pale and fair. Loki was sitting against the wall of the cabin looking quite miserable. Thor held out the goblet, "Here, brother."

Loki murmured thanks and took a careful sip of the water so that he could rinse his mouth out and then spat it back out. "I hate being ill," Loki murmured.

"Mother says it won't last forever," Thor offered as he knelt down beside Loki again.

"That doesn't much help me now," Loki said.

"Should I get Lady Eir?" Thor asked.

Loki shook his head. "No, it'll pass eventually," Loki said. "Besides, she'll just tell me to eat, and everything makes me nauseous so I'd really rather not."

Thor nodded and thought for something else that might help. Loki leaned over to the side to rest his head on Thor's shoulder. Thor wrapped an arm around his brother and gave a slight squeeze to try and bring what comfort he could. "Do you want me to help you to bed?"

"Being horizontal only seems to make it worse," Loki said.

"Is there anything that helps?" Thor asked.

"Sleeping. Well, when I'm not dreaming at the same time," Loki said.

"Then sleep," Thor urged. "I will be here if you need something."

Loki grumbled something indistinct but turned more into Thor's side. "... thank you," he said after a moment.
"Of course, brother," Thor said.

The two princes sat there for what Thor thought had to be at least an hour. Loki had fallen asleep quite quickly, and Thor was able to keep himself occupied as he served as Loki's pillow. Loki's pregnancy had been wreaking havoc with the young Prince. The morning sickness, in particular, seemed to give Loki the most trouble and more and more often Loki's glamour was having difficulties. Thor knew better than to point out the times Loki's skin would tinge blue or grow chilled. Thor also was certain that pointing out when Loki switched to female, which was also happening with far more frequency, would get Loki upset.

Thor kept his arm around Loki even as he felt his brother's form shifting into a softer slightly curvier one. Thor still found it odd but was quickly getting used to Loki's shape and appearance fluctuating. His brother had always used illusions and constantly shapeshifting so perhaps that was helping Thor adjust to these changes more naturally as well.

There was a knock, and Thor heard the creak of the cabin door being opened. "Darling?" Frigga called.

"Over here, mother," Thor said. He leaned far enough to the side that he could extend his hand and be relatively certain that Frigga would see from the other side of the partition. The movement did jostle Loki though, and the younger prince woke up with a little noise of protest. "Sorry, brother."

Frigga appeared just as Loki was rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Loki. I take it this morning isn't any better either?" Frigga asked as she knelt down beside them and brushed her fingers over Loki's head.

"No," Loki said. "This is the worst. I feel like never eating anything again."

"We will find something that helps you, Loki," Frigga said. "It's just a matter of some experimentation. Everyone is different, after all."

Loki's expression was sour. "At least, when you get married and are expecting you will be able to understand your wife's pains, brother," Thor said cheerfully. Thor didn't much care that Loki's face turned even less pleased than before.

"I shall stab you. Don't try to look on the bright side around me right now, Thor," Loki said.

Frigga sighed and shook her head. "Come along, you two. Breakfast will be soon, and you're still in your bed clothes."

"I don't want to go to breakfast," Loki said instantly.

"You'll feel better with food on your stomach," Frigga said.

"You keep saying that, but it never works that way," Loki complained although he allowed Frigga to all but pull him to his feet. "Food only ever makes it worse."

"Again, we'll find something that you can manage sooner or later," Frigga said. "And I'm not at all happy with the weight you've lost, Loki. You didn't exactly have a lot of it to spare."

"Won't I just be getting fat later?"

Frigga did not seem amused. "Loki."

Thor got to his feet and brushed the seat of his sleep pants off. "I'll go clean up and change and
then meet you out in the hall," he said before going to the connecting door that he'd left open earlier. Thor didn't want to get somehow caught up in what looked to be a quickly brewing argument.

Thor was quick about washing his face and changing into real clothes as opposed to his sleepwear. Loki always took longer, especially in instances like they were in currently where he didn't really want to be pulled from his room for whatever reason. So, Thor was left waiting outside in the corridor. Thor could hear Loki speaking in his familiar complaining tone although none of the words were coming through.

When Frigga and Loki finally appeared, Loki was looking a little flushed and rather than his usual form-fitting attire, he had on clothes that hung loosely around his body. Thor assumed the extra looseness was to hide if his glamour shifted again into a female form without Loki's control. Loki was still frowning but didn't protest as Frigga led them through the ship to the dining hall.

Loki most definitely appeared nauseous as he eyed the table piled with different dishes as they sat down. Thor felt mildly bad that his brother was having such a hard time, but didn't stop himself from feeding his own appetite with plate after plate of food. Loki was coaxed by Frigga into eating a few milder dishes, and Loki drank copious amounts of a herbal tea that Frigga and Eir insisted would help with his morning sickness.

Loki only lasted trying to eat for half an hour before he was fleeing the room with his lips pressed together tightly. Thor couldn't help but wince, but Frigga went after Loki so Thor figured he would only make a crowd. Besides, Thor didn't think there was much he could do to make Loki feel better in this instance.

Loki reappeared perhaps twenty minutes later looking even paler than usual. Frigga was with him and managed to get Loki to eat again. Loki only ate a few bites of some things before excusing himself to go take a nap. Thor was a little confused as Loki wasn't usually one to take naps, but then he recalled what Loki said about sleeping being the only relief from nausea currently and realized that Loki was simply trying to not throw up what little he'd just eaten all over again.

Not wanting to disturb his brother as he was trying to rest, Thor went wandering after breakfast. He'd already explored Hringhorni with Loki, but Thor found being on board very tedious, especially without Loki to distract him.

Thor eventually found his way onto the top deck. Though all the propulsion of the ship happened below deck, navigation still had to be done where one could see the sky they were sailing through. As such, there were still sailors milling about up on the deck when Thor stepped out onto it. The void was all around them as endless and empty as it ever was and that made Thor shiver.

The slight atmosphere of the top deck was cold enough that Thor could see his breath in front of his face. Near the center of the bridge, Baldr was discussing something with the head navigation officer and Ixtlilton. Probably the path that they were taking through the void and how to remain on it. Travelling from Asgard to Vanaheim was one thing -that was a route well travelled by Asgard and as safe as any trip through the void could be- but to Thor's knowledge they'd never gone through the Void to reach Aztlan before.

Thor went to the rail of the ship between two of the large circular shield generators that ran down either side of Hringhorni. Not only did they shields protect the ship from actual attack but it was also the source of the atmosphere that everyone was currently breathing. Thor was careful not to knock into either of the disks as he stared out into the black.

Travelling through the void was undoubtedly Thor's least favorite way to travel. Not only did it
take longer and was more dangerous than the Bifrost, but it reminded Thor of how his brother had fallen into it and suffered in an entirely unnecessary way. If only they had found Loki... things could have been fixed. Thor was sure of it. Seeing how cold and empty and endless the void was, Thor supposed it was no wonder that it had driven his little brother mad. Being trapped in such deprivation could easily do that to even the strongest minds.

Thor shook his head to try and dislodge the unhappy thoughts. That would not happen this time. Thor was certain of it.

As Thor stared out at the fathomless blackness all around them, he swore he saw movement in the distance. Seeing how there was no light, it was most likely a trick of his mind or his strained eyes. Nothing was in the void to be moving.

"Brooding, little brother?" Baldr asked as he came over to where Thor was standing.

"No. Just thinking," Thor said as his eyes scanned in front of him again. Sure enough, there was nothing there and certainly nothing moving. "Was Sister Nanna's sickness this bad?"

Baldr shrugged. "I think that's hard to say. Especially for me. Nanna didn't seem to get sick as often as Loki has been but she also couldn't eat anything with even a hint of onion in it or would get terribly sick."

"That does sound unpleasant," Thor said. Onion was used in so many different things after all. "Hopefully Loki will find something he can eat soon."

"Oh, I'm sure he will," Baldr said. "Mother is quite determined to find something he can stomach long enough to fully digest."

Thor nodded absently and looked out at the void again. "I don't like this sort of travel," he said. "It's unsettling going through so much nothing."

"It can be. But I'd rather the nothing of the void than dealing with the monsters that inhabit it," Baldr said.

Thor turned immediately. "What? I thought nothing could survive in the void."

"The void is the realm of monsters, Thor," Baldr said. "Hideous, primordial things that do not conform to the natural order of the universe. They do not have to here. However, that also means they would not survive in normal space. Their structure, or lack thereof, would collapse when exposed to gravitational forces, the radiation of stars, and other spacial forces. I have only ever seen the small ones, but there are legends of ones far larger roaming Ginnungagap."

"How large?" Thor asked even though he wasn't sure if he wanted to know.

"Large enough that ships have reported suddenly being in creatures' stomachs because they flew down the beasts' open gullets," Baldr provided. Thor must have made some sort of expression because Baldr grinned. "Never fear, brother. They reportedly just cut a hole and flew back out again. No damage was done."

"That does not actually make me feel better," Thor grumbled. He looked out at the darkness again, but it remained as featureless as it ever did. Thor had never known about any monsters in the void, and now that he did, he was even more amazed that his brother had ever reemerged from it in his previous life. Thor had always thought being lost in the void and being unable to get out again was the biggest danger.
Baldr's grin widened. "Sorry, little brother."

"You don't seem sorry," Thor said.

"Well, we do have defenses against anything too big," Baldr said as he clearly fought his smile back down. "So you needn't worry about big bad monsters in the dark."

Thor scoffed. "I'm not worried about them," Thor said. "More worried about them destroying the ship and leaving us stranded."

Baldr hummed thoughtfully. "Marooned in the void does sound the worse of those two fates, I'll grant. But never fear. The leviathans of the void tend to dislike me immensely." Baldr held up his fist, which began to glow gold and white like the heart of a star. The light was warm bordering on hot, and Thor was careful to not look directly at it for fear of damaging his eyes. Baldr wasn't using hardly any of his power, Thor knew but even slightly tapping into his power of light could be damaging to others if they weren't careful. "They have no defenses against the light."

Thor rolled his eyes and held up his own hand and made lightning crawl across his skin. "I assume they'd have no defense for this either, brother."

"If you're both quite done."

Thor looked over to see Ixtlilton standing there with his arms folded over his chest. "It is rather cold out here, and I would prefer to finish our discussion so that we can return indoors, Baldr."

"Ah, of course, excuse us, Thor," Baldr said before stepping back over to Ixtlilton. Thor watched them go back to the navigator's side and began speaking again and then turned his attention back out to the void spread out in front of them. They still had a long way to go yet and the utter blankness, Thor had to admit, was rather daunting.

Thor was still standing out on deck twenty minutes later when Loki joined him. "I thought you were sleeping?" Thor asked.

"Couldn't manage it," Loki said as he leaned on the railing to look out at the void. "It's rather horrible isn't it?" Thor glanced over. "Having nothing around you. Leaves you too much time to think and imagine."

"Yes, I suppose it does," Thor agreed. "How is your stomach?"

Loki made a face. "Not improved."

Thor hummed thoughtfully and went back to staring. The silence between them was peaceful, but Thor could feel his thoughts starting to circle dangerously around topics he'd rather not dwell on. The void truly did leave one with far too much time with nothing but one's own mind. "Shall we go and play some rounds of Tafl, Loki? To pass the time?"

Loki seemed to think about it for a moment but then nodded. "Alright. Just don't complain when I beat you."

"I will win one of these days."

"Of course, you will, Thor. I have immense faith in you," Loki said. Although he sounded very insincere, Thor noted.

The brothers went back down to their joined cabin and started to play. Loki swept the games with
little effort until they got bored with Tafl. Tafl could only occupy them so long when they kept ending the same ways. Loki spent the afternoon with Ofnir reading while Thor treated his leather shoes with some new polish just for something to do.

Travelling through the void was uncomfortable but so very dull. Nothing ever happened, and Thor was struggling to keep himself entertained. Especially when Loki would be locked away in his cabin fighting his morning sickness or sleeping because he was tired.

Two and a half weeks of nothing passed by and Thor was nearly ready to poke Ofnir in the eye to get some excitement. Loki would probably not like it, but at least something would be going on at least. "Are you going to stop any time soon?" Loki asked without looking up from his book. He was reclining across his bed with the massive spell book open to somewhere in the middle while Thor tossed a crystal of some sort from one hand to another. "Because if you drop that, I'll be very upset with you. It took me three weeks of work to grow those crystals properly."

"I won't drop it," Thor said as he tossed the dark cerulean crystal up in the air even higher than before.

"You say that now," Loki said as he flipped a page. "But I remember that seeing orb that you broke after you said that exact same thing."

Thor made a face. "That's not fair of you. You're the one that made five of them appear at once. How was I supposed to know which one I was meant to catch?"

"By paying attention."

A quick flick of his wrist and Thor had the crystal sailing through the air at Loki. The stone landed on the book in Loki's lap. Loki looked up with a very unimpressed expression, and Thor grinned. "Pay attention, brother."

"Oaf," Loki said as he picked up the crystal and took a moment to examine the long angular shafts and sharp faceted planes. Thor could tell that his brother was looking for any damage. After a moment, Loki seemed satisfied and dropped the crystal onto the bed beside him and then turned back to his book. "You're lucky."

Thor sighed and got up from his seat to flop down on the end of Loki's bed. "Oh, come, brother. Even you must be bored after all this time just stuck inside reading!"

"I am not."

"Loki."

"It's a fascinating book," Loki defended.

"You've read the thing six times!" Thor argued. "You must have it memorized by now!"

"That doesn't mean I can't read it still," Loki said. "Now leave me be."

Thor sighed and flopped back down to stare up at the ceiling. Surely they could do something to pass the time. No matter what Loki said, Thor was positive he too was growing restless stuck on Hringhorni. It was just a matter of finding the right activity that they could actually do on the ship that wouldn't also cause too much trouble. Loki suddenly closed his book and put it off to the side. "Shall we play a prank on Baldr, brother?"

Thor lifted his head. "A prank?"
Loki smiled, and his eyes sparkled with mischief. Thor couldn't help but smile back and agree with whatever Loki had in mind. He was just too glad to hear Loki suggesting anything to do and ecstatic that it was something that the Loki from before the feast would recommend.

That was how, twenty minutes later, the two sons of Odin were carefully slipping into Baldr's cabin with arms full of supplies. "How is this even going to work?" Thor asked as he watched Loki silently close the cabin door behind them.

"Alone the ingredients are harmless," Loki said as he laid out what he'd brought onto Baldr's bed. "But mix them together, and that's when the reaction takes place."

"And what is the reaction?"

"Foam mostly. Of a very obnoxious orange color that tends to stain one's skin," Loki said. Loki picked up a bottle off of Baldr's dressing table and examined it. "This should do."

Thor couldn't help but snicker as Loki carefully put drops of different liquids into different parts of Baldr's bathing kit. "The foam isn't harmful is it?" Thor thought to ask as Loki poured some into potions used on teeth.

"No, though I don't imagine it tastes good," Loki said while working.

Thor giggled at the mental image of Baldr's face when he went to clean his teeth. "He will be so furious with us."

Loki grinned widely and put the cap back on the now tainted potion. "Perhaps a bit," Loki agreed.

"How long will the stai-"

Thor was abruptly cut off when the ship gave a lurch and sent both brothers off balance. Thor caught hold of Loki's arm even as he heard the sound of something sharp on metal. There was a crash of glass and liquid splashed over both Thor and Loki's shoes. Both brothers stared at each other for a moment even as the sound of people shouted up on deck reached them.

Without a word, both Thor and Loki rushed from Baldr's room. The ship lurched again, and the screeching noise of metal being scratched filled the air even over the shouts of the men. A loud thud from several spots echoed through the vessel as well.

Thor and Loki arrived up on deck and were met with the sight of pure chaos. Sailors were rushing to and fro while some monster made of absolute nightmares wrapped around Hringhorni. "Asgaedia Wept..." It was pure black with bulging eyes scattered all along its bulk. No two eyes were the same in color or pupil, but all gleamed wetly from inside holes that didn't appear to even be proper eye sockets. The skin, if it really was skin, slumped off it in thick unappealing wads. The only reason Thor could see the beast was that lights from the ship lit up the front of it.

Holes in varying sizes went straight through the thing in places where Thor would have normally assumed organs to be. A giant maw -that didn't look like it could entirely close due to the wickedly carved beak it possessed- filled with teeth drooled onto the deck. There was another smaller mouth inside of the first with even more teeth and mandible like claws on either side. It reminded Thor of a squid that had gone horribly, horribly wrong and then gone wrong even more.

Tentacles of inconsistent length, width, and placement waved to and fro. The arms didn't even end the same way -some had smaller mouths while others had stingers or suckers or even nothing at all. Several limbs wrapped around Hringhorni and the mouths bit deep to try and tear parts of the ship away.
Sailors hacked at the beast to no avail. A tendril came flying across the deck and the brothers Odinson had to duck behind several boxes so that they weren't struck. "Do something!" Someone hissed.

Thor looked to the side to see it was a sailor talking to Ixtlilton. "I am a healer, not a warrior. What am I supposed to do? Give the nightmare nightmares?" Ixtlilton asked.

Just then Baldr stepped forward glowing bright and white hot. He let out a cry of effort as he blasted the creature with energy. The thing recoiled with bits of its horrible flesh seared and smoking. But then the surface rippled in an entirely unnatural way. The thing seemed to turn to stone for just a second in a wave and then returned to normal and altogether unharmed. Baldr was clearly taken aback by this, but he just sent out another beam of pure light.

Men were still hacking at the creature but were proving even less effective than Baldr's power. Another limb, this one with a stinger, came flying forward and Baldr had to jump back to avoid being hit. The wickedly sharp point of the stinger went straight through the deck and seemed to get stuck. Baldr took the chance to slice the tentacle off. "We should do something," Thor said as he felt his electricity building in his body.

Loki caught Thor's arm and shoulder. "Wait."

Thor looked back at his brother and then followed his eyes over to the stairs. Their mother had appeared on the deck already aflame with pure power. Thor felt his eyes widen as his mother stepped forward entirely calmly. A tendril from the beast lashed forward but slammed into a shield of gold and was deflected.

Frigga's eyes blazed, and she lifted one arm. The monster was pried off of the ship bit by bit and squirmed where it was held. "I have never seen Mother use this much power before," Loki breathed as the flaming energy spread out from Frigga and sent sparks flying off into the Void.

The creature continued to flail as Frigga stepped closer. Thor could only stare as the energy his Mother wielded seemed to flare to the most enormous amount yet. The power was blinding bright and hot, and Thor saw bits of the creature beginning to sear and smolder. The monster rippled and regenerated again, but Frigga's energy just flared again.

Thor swore he saw the spreading of wings around Frigga and heard the distant cry of a bird as the wind whipped past and then the beast was disintegrated until there was nothing left. For just a split second Thor saw the bird-like shape again, and then the energy retreated into his Mother, and the too bright energy faded, leaving everything seemingly darker and greyer than it had before. "What was that?" Thor asked.

"Mother's power," Loki said although he was still staring in awe. "She is one of the strongest beings in the universe you know..."

Thor turned to look at Frigga again who was checking on Baldr to see if he was hurt. "I didn't realize..." he said. Yes, Thor had always known his mother was powerful, knowing something and seeing it was two very different things.

Frigga seemed to then notice Thor and Loki a few steps behind her. "Are you alright? You two shouldn't have been up here."

"We're fine, Mother," Loki said as he got to his feet. "Besides... you took care of that rather handily..."
"You did," Baldr agreed. "But I could have handled it, Mother. You needn't have gotten involved."

Frigga shrugged. "Perhaps it was unnecessary, but I was attempting to save your ship more damage. I dislike travelling the Void in the best of times, I'd like it even less if Hringhorni were creaking from damage and bearing patched holes," Frigga said.

Baldr sighed but then nodded. "You are as wise as ever, Mother. Once we evaluate if there was any serious damage and if anyone was hurt, we'll continue on." Baldr leaned over and gave Frigga a kiss on the cheek before going to talk with his men.

"Well, while they do that, how about some lunch, my darlings?" Frigga suggested to Loki and Thor. Thor found himself nodding in agreement and letting Frigga guide them back down into the ship while Baldr tended to the cleanup.

The rest of the trip through Ginnungagap was uneventful and, though Hringhorni was damaged some from the attack, it was nothing terribly serious. Thor stepped out onto the deck of the ship as Aztlan came into view and had to admit he was somewhat surprised at what he saw.

Most of the scenery in front of the ship was the top of a mountain—or perhaps more likely—a dormant caldera. Inside the rim of the peak was a lake of sparkling sapphire blue water and lush greenery covered what seemed to be every inch of the rocky sides of the mountain. Thor looked over the edge and realized the mountain continued down until it disappeared into clouds. Conceivably there was a planet or something far below, but Thor couldn't see it through the white water vapors below.

Loki stepped up beside Thor to see where they were going as well. "I wonder how deep the water is..."

"It goes down about fifteen hundred meters at the deepest point," Ixtlilton said as he stepped up behind the brothers. "It supplies the city with all of the water we need."

"Impressive," Loki said even as he craned his neck to see further.

The city itself was coming into view. Thor was impressed by the network of rings and walkways and intricately planned sections all surrounding a massive stone pyramid in the center. Several of the clearly manmade stone sections of the city was overflowing with greenery, and Thor wondered if they were meant to be parks or something of that nature.

Thor couldn't quite tell if the city itself was floating on the water somehow or was just overshadowing whatever land it might be built onto. Either way, as Hringhorni slowly descended into the caldera, it felt as if they were entering a completely different world. The rim from the new angle felt like a mountain range surrounding them rather than one mountain top, and the lake felt far larger when they got closer. Aztlan had many bright colors painted everywhere, and the sunlight gleamed off of golden detailing and the surface of the water.

The atmosphere, however, was dreadful. The very air seemed wet and cloying, and the intense sun was unforgiving here above the clouds. Thor was almost instantly wishing to jump into the water below to cool off while Loki was already wiping a bit of sweat from his forehead. Thor had no idea how his brother was meant to be parks or something of that nature.

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The atmosphere, however, was dreadful. The very air seemed wet and cloying, and the intense sun was unforgiving here above the clouds. Thor was almost instantly wishing to jump into the water below to cool off while Loki was already wiping a bit of sweat from his forehead. Thor had no idea how his brother was meant to spend any time here in Aztlan at all if this was the temperature it always was. There was a breeze at least, but that didn't seem to help all that much. "Is it always this humid?" Thor asked.

"Not always, but frequently enough," Ixtlilton said. "It is better actually in the city. We've designed it to help create more air flow, so there is almost always a breeze."
"That's comforting," Loki said though he didn't sound that sincere. "I shall boil alive here..."

"I have sent word ahead that you'll need a cooler room and one has been prepared with enchantments to help with the heat of Aztlan," Ixtlilton said. "You'll be no more uncomfortable here than your pet was in Asgard."

Loki harrumphed that but Hringhorni was pulling into a long pier, and the sailors were preparing to secure the vessel, so the group had to step back from the edge to allow them to work. Thor saw people with a range of earth-toned skin from near black of fertile soil to dusky tan, but on all of them, they had threads of intense color running over them that caught the light of the fierce sun. The variation of colors was truly mindboggling, and Thor was reminded oddly of exotic birds that attracted others with their plumage. The number of feathers that these people used in their clothing certainly didn't help with that mental image and Thor just couldn't seem to shake it out of his head.

After Hringhorni was secured, Ixtlilton guided them through the stone walkways and deep canals of Aztlan until they reached the central pyramid. Thick bands of bright red, green and gold wrapped around each layer of the pyramid and colorful blue decorations framed the steps. Thor had no idea how they had achieved such intense pigments but with how they seemed to shimmer as they moved past Thor had to wonder if the paints weren't made up of crushed gems. That would have taken a fortune of jewels to manage, but Thor didn't think it particularly impossible.

There were far too many stairs to reach the top of the pyramid, Thor thought. They just kept climbing up and up so many stories under the glare of the sun. Was this what Loki felt like on Asgard? As if the sun were trying to burn his skin off even though they were doing so little? Thor hoped not.

By the time they finally got to the top of the pyramid Thor was sweating heavily, and Loki looked nearly ready to pass out. But Thor put the steep climb out of his mind as he saw who was waiting for them at the top level. Ixtlilton introduced him as Quetzalcoatl.

Quetzalcoatl wasn't as tall as Ixtlilton, but he seemed somehow -impossibly- to take up twice the space. He was imposing with so many veins of aqua running through his skin as to make the dark coffee color of his skin seem nearly black from the contrast. His eyes were intensely yellow with a ring of venomous green around the pupils that were slit like a snake, and the headdress he wore was a mass of every color Thor had thought feathers came in and a few more he hadn't. Even more oddly what looked like gold and green scales ran along the sides of Quetzalcoatl's neck and the tops of his shoulders before merging into his skin. "I do hope you appreciate your stay in our city," Quetzalcoatl said. His voice was smooth and rich and had that same odd accent that Ixtlilton had. This, Thor recognized instinctively, was a King and demanded the respect that title implied.

"Thank you for allowing us to do so," Frigga said. "It is very generous of you."

Quetzalcoatl inclined his head. "Ixtlilton said that you will be well behaved. I hope that to be true."

"We will," Thor assured him. Even if Thor had to tie Loki's hands behind his back to keep him well behaved he would somehow do it. As if he knew what Thor was thinking, Loki cast his brother a slightly incredulous look.

"If we could move this inside," Lady Eir said. She stepped forward fearlessly and even though she was smaller than Quetzalcoatl by about a head, she looked him dead in the eye with defiance. "Prince Loki should not be in this heat and humidity." Thor saw Loki frown, but he didn't protest either.

Quetzalcoatl tilted his head, and Thor was again briefly reminded of a bird at the angle. "Very
well. We've prepared a set of rooms for you that should be cool enough."

"I will take you there," a new voice said.

From behind a nearby pillar stepped a beautiful young woman with flowers woven into her long dark hair, bright green feathers upon her head and ruby-veined through her relatively light copper skin. She had a piercing through her nose that was decorated with a gem-laden spike of some sort, and though Thor didn't personally find it all that attractive, he had to admit the jewelry did seem to suit her for some reason he couldn't put his finger on. "Xochiquetzal," Quetzalcoatl said. Quetzalcoatl turned to the Asgardians. "This Xochiquetzal, my brother's wife."

Xochiquetzal gave a charming smile. "It is a pleasure," she said warmly. "Come, let us get you out of this heat. Though Quetzalcoatl likes to pretend he isn't affected even he will most likely rush off somewhere cooler the moment we're downstairs."

"Xochiquetzal," Quetzalcoatl said in what Thor recognized as the same tone he himself used when exasperated with Loki.

Ixtlilton chuckled. "I would think by this point you would be used to her irreverence, Quetzalcoatl," the mask-wearing God said as they walked past.

"One never ceases to hope," Quetzalcoatl grumbled.

Xochiquetzal just smiled wider and led the group of them down a set of stairs and into the dark and already much cooler interior of the pyramid. Thor was a bit annoyed because what was the point of climbing up all those stairs just to go back down another set? They could have had a door at the bottom and made this far more convenient. "Tlaloc has helped with spelling your rooms cooler," Xochiquetzal said. "He has a natural gift of such things. If it is still too warm, do let us know. We wouldn't want you uncomfortable."

"That's very thoughtful of you, and you have our thanks," Frigga said.

"Think nothing of it," Xochiquetzal said breezily.

Thor studied the deep carvings on the walls as they walked past depicting brilliantly colored Gods and Goddesses doing all manner of things only some of which he recognized. "Chalchiuhtlicue also wished to meet you, but we thought it best to wait until you were settled a bit more," Xochiquetzal said.

"And who is that?" Loki asked.

"Tlaloc's wife. She is a Goddess of many things, like most of us are, but she helps her husband very much with the waters and even helped with your room when she had the time," Xochiquetzal said. "And Ixtlilton said her help might be needed later on."

"Only possibly and if it is requested," Ixtlilton said firmly. "Do not get ahead of yourself Xochiquetzal."

Xochiquetzal huffed a bit but said nothing else. Instead, she opened the door to a large room at the end of the corridor they had been walking. A rush of almost shockingly cold air washed over them, and Thor heard Loki actually sigh softly. The group followed Xochiquetzal inside the room even as she explained that this would be Loki's quarters. There was a bed in the middle of the room with pale yellow netting of some sort draped around the mattress. Several fountains were bubbling along the walls and on the right side of the room, between two of these fountains, was a long heavy table piled high with platters of exotic fruits. A sizeable woven curtain was across one wall, and
Thor could just see through the gap at the edge that there was another room beyond. A washroom perhaps.

Thor went across the room to where a giant set of open windows faced the water of the lake and the greenery covered mountainsides. Though the air coming in was cold, it had not escaped Thor's attention that Loki had kept his balcony locked since returning to his room in Asgard. "Is there a way to close these?" he asked Xochiquetzal.

The young Goddess looked over instantly. Xochiquetzal looked surprised that Thor was indicating the windows as if being able to close them never even occurred to her. "Oh, well, there isn't, but I suppose we could arrange something to make it possible."

"That would be best," Frigga said.

After a few more moments of showing them around and how to work a few of the mechanisms, Xochiquetzal left to go arrange for some way to seal the windows of the room. Loki laid back onto the bed and sighed. "The spell on these rooms is impressive," Loki murmured as he closed his eyes. "We should replicate it in Asgard."

"That shouldn't be too hard," Ixtlilton said. "I'm sure that Tlaloc will be more than happy to show you how he did it."

Loki sighed and put one hand up onto his forehead. Thor knew he wasn't asleep, but it was clear that Loki wasn't up for being social. Eir and Frigga also recognized it and asked Ixtlilton to show them around further. Thor thought briefly of going with them to give Loki absolute privacy but his need to make sure that Loki was safe overrode that, and he stayed behind.

Thor sat down on the edge of Loki's bed and forced himself to remain quiet. "Do you think they shall see me as a freak here?" Loki asked after several long minutes of nothing.

"I doubt it very much since you aren't one," Thor said.

Loki hummed but didn't open his eyes. Thor looked down at where Loki's other hand was resting across his abdomen and then back up at the mage's face. "Do you regret your decision?" Thor asked.

Loki did open his eyes then and lifted his head enough to look at Thor. He looked mildly confused, so Thor gestured to Loki's hand and ostensibly what was just under it. Loki looked down at his stomach as well, and a thoughtful expression crossed his face. "...I'm not sure," he said. "But I couldn't bring myself to kill it so... I suppose I had no other choice left."

Thor nodded even though he couldn't imagine. "It will be difficult for you to be here so long." Both for Loki and Thor. The last time Thor had been parted from his brother for so long, Loki had been falling through the Void and returned crazed. The idea of leaving him here even under the protection and care of other Gods left Thor uneasy, to say the least.

"I know," Loki said.

Silence fell between the two brothers and Thor wished he could give some advice or help beyond what he had been. But this was very much beyond his life experiences in either timeline. King Loki wouldn't even be of much help here as he'd admitted to not remembering much of the time he when was carrying Sleipnir. In fact, there was really only one person that Thor thought would have the information that might be vital to Loki's well-being and also be someone Loki would trust enough to take advice from. "Shall I ask Mother to call Gerd?"
Loki's head shot up at the mention of the half-Jotnar that had spent two years off and on teaching them about the Jotnar people. "Gerd?" Loki repeated.

Thor shrugged. "With the full-blooded Jotnar unable to leave Jotunheim except by Father's summons... Gerd would be the only one that has any knowledge of what you might be facing," Thor explained. Well, Thor was pretty confident that there were other half-Jotnar out there, but he didn't think many of them would be trusted like Gerd was.

"Thor, since when do you have good ideas?" Loki asked.

"I have good ideas all the time, Loki," Thor said. "Honestly, I'm not a complete idiot!"

Loki grinned. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, I'm sure, you brat," Thor grumbled.

Loki's grin widened before abruptly falling. Thor didn't get a chance to ask what was wrong before his brother was nearly tumbling from the bed and rushing away. A moment later Thor heard Loki retching again and winced. Thor sighed and went to get a cup of water for his brother.

When Thor entered the bathing chamber where Loki had fled to, he saw Loki with one arm wrapped around his abdomen and an uncomfortable expression across his face. "If I knew what this thing wanted me to eat, I would. Just to stop vomiting all the time," Loki grumbled.

"Here, brother," Thor said as he held out the cup.

Loki opened his eyes and then sighed but took the drink. "Thank you, Thor," he muttered.

"Of course," Thor said as he sat down beside Loki. "I am sure the baby does not intend to make you so ill."

Loki snorted. "I know that, but still. Surely there must be something..."

"Would you like to try some of the fruit?" Thor asked. "We didn't have much of that on the trip, and it was out of season on Asgard. Perhaps it being fresh and not preserved will help?"

Loki didn't look convinced but agreed anyway. Thor thought his brother too exhausted by inadequate sleep and constant illness to bother trying to talk himself out of trying it. Still, Thor would take that over a continual need to be contrary any day. Thor came up short when he reached the table of fruit, however.

What even were these bizarre things? Were they edible at all? That one looked like some strange armored egg or something. Thor looked up and down the table until finally settling on something that looked like they were probably blueberries.

Thor returned to Loki who looked at the berries skeptically. It was only then that Thor recalled he hadn't had blueberries until he'd ventured to Midgard. Asgard didn't have blueberries. "What are these?" Loki asked curiously as he picked one up and examined it.

"I'm not sure... but of all the things on the table, these looked innocuous enough," Thor said. "Some of those so-called fruits I'm not even sure how you would eat them..."

Loki snorted but then cautiously put the berry he was holding in his mouth. Loki took an inordinately long amount of time to chew and swallow the single berry and then he paused for almost a full minute. "I'm fairly certain that the Aztllans wouldn't be poisoning you, Loki," Thor
said once he realized what Loki was doing.

"Well, not on purpose," Loki replied. After that though, he did eat a little more normally. Once he was finished with the handful, he sat back against the wall. "I guess we'll see if fruit is the magical cure to my stomach troubles."

"Have some faith, brother!"

Loki gave Thor a sour look, but the young thunder god didn't take it to heart. Unfortunately, Loki's pessimism was proven correct when not even ten minutes later he was throwing up again. Thor could only rub his brother's back and hope that they found something he could eat soon.

Chapter End Notes

**Monster** - I'm calling that thing the Lovecraft-Kraken. Or the Lovecrakin' rofl (yes, I'm lame). Sea monsters are such a big part of mythology, especially a sea faring people like the vikings that I had to make my own version of it. The Void is essentially the Asgardian's version of the dangerous unknowable sea. It seemed natural to stick a Kraken in there. Especially since the Kraken comes from Norse mythology in the first place.

**Frigga's Power** - Did ya notice?! It's a bird! With fire bits.... what could it be?! ... it-it's the Phoenix Force. I mean, not a hard question there... (And no not being included because the movie is coming out soon) Playing a bit fast and loose with the origin/history/nature of the Phoenix Force in this verse. The Phoenix Force is depicted differently depending on who is writing about it (especially mixed with Jean) but generally it is agreed that the PF was created at the time of the Big Bang within the void and is never really able to be destroyed -it just keeps being reborn. From what I can tell the oldest cases of Phoenix taking a physical host is either the Shi’ar warrior Rook’shir or (and I think this one is probably older) the unnamed human woman that just went by Phoenix during the Stone Age Avenger’s storyline of 1,000,000 B.C Earth. In that, Phoenix had a little love affair going with Odin though how that ever actually ended is unknown because that would have happened after the story line. However, my story here doesn’t go back that far in Earth’s history (because I hadn’t even heard of that particular incarnation of Phoenix when I plotted out the history of Asgard for this story) so even though that idea was intriguing it didn’t work. So, Frigga. I don’t know how many of you caught on to all the flame imagery I have been using for her on the occasions she shows her temper but it’s definitely been there even if it hasn’t taken the shape of a bird before now. Odin even calls Frigga his sun which is often associated with the Phoenix (and other similar birds) of mythology.

This might lead you all to asking well if Frigga has Phoenix power how did she go out to that punk arse Dark Elf in the inital timeline?!? Well, never fear… I’ve got plans to explain that too. But just know that I’m taking that Phoenix Force/Odin love history and running with that shit, lol. Because oh yes. Phoenix Force and Odin Force coming together to make the most kick ass Power Couple that ever Powered? What better thing for the rulers of the Gods to have? (As a side note: the Phoenix Force does have some temporal manipulation elements to it and it’s not like anyone was actually there during the Big Bang to confirm when/how it was made so that could still be the common thought later on… it would just be wrong. That also is how the Phoenix
Force could be involved with a few other things primarily dealing with the Shi’ar Empire and the M’Kraan Crystal which is supposedly old as time itself. We’re not getting into all that Time Shenanigans that the PF gets into but be aware it’s probably happening).

**The Aztec Gods**- Mmmmm so many. Of course the most famous would be the Feathered serpent himself, Quetzalcoatl. But I also mentioned the rain god Tlaloc and his wife Chalchiuhtlicue (who once flooded the entire world to wipe out humanity, which should sound familiar from a certain biblical story). And also the precious flower of the gods Xochiquetzal. Xochiquetzal actually sometimes starts out as Tlaloc's wife and then has a Persephone type story where Quetzalcoatl's brother kidnaps and marries her instead. His brother being God of Night and lots of other things.

**Fruits**- I research sometimes weird/minor things for this story... The one draw back of being in a time where produce can be shipped everywhere and grown where it wasn't before is you don't realize that vikings most likely didn't have blueberries. That's a North American fruit. Also, the fruit that Thor likens to being armored is a dragon fruit. Also, it wasn't a blueberry Loki ate but an Acai berry. Because again, Blueberries are North American.

**Earth-24125**- For organization and simplicity sake every Marvel universe incarnation is given it’s own number. The MCU for instance is Earth-199999 while the main timeline of the Comics is in Earth-616 for some reason. The numbers seem pretty random compared to DC that used, well, Prime for their primary universe (also Earth 0). I decided to follow this example and have given this verse it’s own Earth # as well. I checked on the Marvel Wiki and 24125 hasn’t yet been taken so I’m going to be using it. (Hopefully Marvel never decides to use that number and ruin it) Also, the initial timeline Thor comes from is Earth-199978 and the timeline King Loki is in is Earth-46283. In case you were curious. None of this will come up ever but I thought I'd throw it out there that I decided on something entirely useless that nobody asked about lol.
After discussing the enchantments of Loki’s room, the Aztlan Gods figured that it would take about three hours to rework everything so that Loki could block the windows and also still get the cooling effects of the spell. Thor hadn’t been able to follow most of it while they were talking, but Loki had been listening avidly as the adult Gods went back and forth about the topic. All Thor had been able to discern was that the spell they used sucked the absolutely murderous humidity out of the air before allowing it to enter the chambers and that somehow cooled the temperature. But, that still left three hours in which Loki would have to put up with Aztlan’s climate.

They waited until the next day-hoping for a break in some of the humidity- and while it was a little better Thor was sure it was still far too hot and muggy for his little brother to be in for very long. Loki hadn’t slept hardly at all in his room the night before, which only added to his irritability as they tried to find somewhere that would be a bit better.

Loki was sprawled out on a thick windowsill with sweat already clinging to his pale skin and his eyes closed. There was a noticeable breeze coming through the opening, but Thor was worried that wouldn’t be enough. Loki had already shed his usual dark colors and close fitted jacket in favor of a cooler loose linen tunic in a pale yellow color. Thor frowned as he thought about how he could help his brother who was looking downright miserable. Too bad Ofnir’s room on Hringhorni hadn’t been enchanted to be colder since the Wyvern had his own personal enchantment attached to his collar - enchanting the room as well had been deemed a waste of magical energy.

Thor racked his brain for anything and then realized the only way to keep his brother from overheating would be utilizing the water down below. "Loki." His brother opened his eyes and looked over with a tired gaze. "How about we go swimming?" Thor suggested. "It'll keep us cool."

Loki frowned. "I don't want to," he said.

Thor huffed in frustration. This again. Thor had been hoping to avoid this. It had been centuries since Thor had managed to get Loki swimming since in Asgard that was mostly done at most in small clothes and quite commonly completely nude. There wasn't much shame in Asgard regarding nudity. Thor understood now -after having seen the wounds on Loki’s back and from talking to
King Loki- why Loki was so against it, but Loki couldn't afford to get too hot in his condition.

Thor thought about the problem for a good few minutes before the obvious solution smacked him in the face. "You could keep your shirt on, Loki," Thor said.

Loki lifted his head to better look over at Thor. "What?"

"In the water," Thor said to clarify. "You don't have to show anything you don't want to." Loki frowned more and looked away from Thor. "Loki, you'd be more comfortable in the water, don't you think?"

Loki clenched his hand tightly into a fist. "I look disgusting..."

"You do not look disgusting," Thor said firmly. "Don't talk about yourself that way, Loki."

"How would you like me to talk about myself, Thor?" Loki snapped as he pushed himself up. He glared at Thor darkly. "I wasn't exactly pretty before, and now I'm... like this!"

"Like what, Loki?" Thor asked. Loki pursed his lips tightly together into a thin line. Thor sighed. "You survived something horrible, Loki. But that's no reason to hide now."

"But-"

"No," Thor said before Loki could get started. "I'm not going to let you hurt yourself by being stubborn and not cooling off when you can. Nobody will be able to see your body if you wear your shirt. Come down and swim with me, brother."

Loki twisted his hands in his tunic nervously. "If someone sees me-"

"Nobody will see you, Loki," Thor said. Loki still looked anxious. "Brother... it's only me."

After another few minutes, Loki finally nodded. "Alright."

Thor flashed his brother a huge smile and took Loki's hand so that he'd stop twisting his own shirt into a knot. "Good. Come on, you'll feel better when you're cooler. You'll see."

Loki still looked apprehensive but followed along as Thor led the way down the central pyramid and then along a path that he had seen from some windows. The walkway led through the city and off to one side of the caldera where a tiny cave sat half below the waterline. Under the shelter of the rock, they would be protected from the sun, and hopefully, the water would be even more refreshing.

By the time the brothers made it to the wall of the caldera, Loki was panting and sweating heavily. Loki's face was quite red, and Thor was immensely glad they were almost there because Thor was starting to worry his brother would collapse. Loki could easily suffer heatstroke in Asgard much less here in Aztlan.

The water was a truly remarkable shade of blue -that fair nearly begged to be swam in- which stood out even more where the lush greenery from the cliffs draped down into it. The ancient volcanic rocks looked nearly black from the contrast with the pale aqua color. From somewhere deep in the cave, Thor could hear water dripping.

Thor quickly stripped down to his small clothes and jumped into the water. As he resurfaced, Thor wiped the water off of his face. "Come on, Loki! It feels much better in the water!" Loki was lingering on the rocks at the cave entrance, looking very uneasy. "Loki! There was no point
coming if you won't even get in!" Thor shouted as he tread the water to keep his head above it.

Loki still hesitated for a minute before sighing heavily and sitting down on the rock that he was on to pull off his shoes. Thor swam around aimlessly as Loki took off his pants as well, and only then slowly slipped off his rock and into the water. He did as Thor had suggested though and left his tunic on to hide his upper body. Loki let out a sigh as he sunk deeper into the water. Loki slipped entirely under a moment later, and Thor grinned widely.

Loki resurfaced after about a minute and used his hands to push his hair back. "Better?" Thor asked.

"It is nice," Loki said before wiping the water from his face.

"Come over here into the shade," Thor said. "It's even cooler."

Loki swam forward with a sort of grace that Thor envied. Loki might not be as physically strong as Thor, but he definitely had speed and dexterity that Thor couldn't match. It was a genuine pity that more people didn't notice that about Loki.

Thor and Loki swam inside the cave for quite a while before starting to grow a little tired. Thor made his way over to the rocks and climbed back up to take a rest while Loki just leaned back to float on top of the water. Thor had never been able to float like that -his muscles just took him straight under if he wasn't moving. Thor watched Loki for a few minutes as he got as comfortable on the rock as one could.

After several minutes of watching, Thor wrapped his arms around his knees. Loki had his eyes closed as he floated there, looking surprisingly content. "You know... this is actually helping my stomach settle too," Loki said lightly.

"Good," Thor said.

"I have no idea why, though," Loki said. "It's kind of odd."

"Gentle motion?" Thor suggested. "Like... isn't that why you're supposed to rock babies or something like that?"

Loki lifted his head a little to look at Thor. "I don't know. I haven't ever studied babies before. Why would I?"

"Well you know everything else, why not this too?" Thor asked.

Loki scoffed, but Thor caught a little bit of a happy smile before he laid fully back down in the water. Thor shook his head but was glad his brother was in such a better mood. A miserable Loki was no fun to be around. He was definitely a firm believer in the adage of misery loving company.

Thor watched as Loki idly moved his hands to direct his floating body to spin in giant circles. As Loki floated there, Thor couldn't help but notice something very different about his brother. With the wet tunic sticking to Loki's skin and the fact that he was on his back, it was evident that his stomach was starting to slope where before it had been flat.

Thor bit his lip as it suddenly hit him full on in the face. The idea of his brother being pregnant had been somewhat abstract before just then. Now it seemed so much more real and Thor couldn't help but worry as that also made the danger of this situation real. Loki should not have to be doing this and yet he was and Thor just couldn't lose his brother. He couldn't. Thor tried to remember that King Loki said his younger self would survive but that didn't really assuage Thor's worries.
"Loki."

"Hmm?"

"You know... no matter what happens I'm here for you right?" Thor questioned.

Loki opened his eyes and looked over at Thor. "What brought this on?" Loki asked.

"I just... I wanted you to know," Thor said. "Especially since Mother will be sending me back to Asgard in a few weeks."

Loki straightened and then swam over to the rock that Thor was sitting on. "I do know, Thor. And I'll miss you, but... I can't say I'm going to be that upset with you not seeing me like that..."

"I'm going to come back," Thor said. "I'm going to visit you as often as mother and father will let me."

"Don't do that," Loki said instantly. "You'll spend all your time going back and forth when you should be training and studying and... things like that..." Loki's voice faded off near the end, and he looked down at his fingers with a frown. "You'll fall behind..."

"I won't fall behind," Thor said confidently.

"You will. You won't be able to help it," Loki said softly. "I'll be here, and you'll be in Asgard with your friends, and it takes so long to travel here without the Bifrost. It's not practical to go back and forth. Asgard's so far away..."

Thor was not entirely sure that they were still talking about the same thing with the discomfort on Loki's face. But, Thor liked to think he was a little bit better at reading his brother now than he had been. "Loki. I won't fall behind," Thor said sincerely. "And I will be visiting you. I can do both."

Loki looked up at Thor looking slightly heartbroken. Thor had hit a tender area, clearly. Before Thor could comment on it or even try to make it better, the expression was masked entirely and Loki gave a less than impressed stare instead. "Thor, you fall behind all the time if it's anything other than training."

"Well, you'll just have to help me not fall behind when I'm here," Thor said, matching the once again casual tone that Loki had adopted. If matching Loki's mercurial moods was what it took then Thor would do his best to actually manage it for once. And Thor would absolutely not be talked out of visiting his brother while he was here in Aztlan. No matter who tried to do it.

Loki looked entirely too exasperated. "Thor! I'm going to have my hands full trying to not fall behind myself!"

"But you're such a good tutor!"

"That's no excuse to put off your school work until you're around me!"

"I won't put it off," Thor said. "But I understand things better when you explain them anyway."


"I know," Thor said. "But that's why you love me. Right, Brother?" There was a moment of silence as their eyes met. Thor could almost see the answer before it was quickly covered up.

"I suppose," Loki said with a long-suffering sigh. "Now move over. I want to get out."
Thor shifted to the side to give his brother room. Loki heaved himself out of the water and onto the rock. The two of them sat there on the boulder for a little while and enjoyed the breeze off the lake. Loki was looking so much more comfortable even if he was soaking wet. "This was a good idea wasn't it?" Thor asked. "Even though you wanted to be difficult. I had a good idea."

"Don't gloat, Thor," Loki said as he closed his eyes and leaned back on his arms. "It's unbecoming. Besides, everyone is entitled to a good idea sometime in their lives. They're called flukes."

Thor frowned. "You're so mean, Brother. Besides, you gloat all the time."

"Oh, relax, Thor. I'm only teasing," Loki said with a casual wave of his hand.

"I'm so glad you're feeling more like yourself," Thor said, only being partially sarcastic. "Perhaps we should make a habit of going swimming while we're here."

Loki hummed a little. "I'm not sure if I'll want to once I'm too deformed..."

"You're not going to be deformed," Thor said.

"Easy for you to say," Loki said. "You're not growing a... thing in your guts."

Thor sighed and leaned over to wrap an arm around his little Brother. He had no idea what to say or how to comfort Loki other than that. Loki, for once, didn't protest the action and just allowed Thor to give him a one-armed hug.

The brothers stayed by the cave for the entire three hours it took for Loki's room to be fixed. They only returned to the pyramid when their mother came looking because Loki was due at a meeting with Lady Eir. Thor could tell just from the expression on Loki's face he would much rather be anywhere but in an appointment with Eir. That did inevitably mean something about the baby after all. Thor would have willingly gone with Loki, but when they got back to the pyramid, Frigga sent him off to their rooms instead. Thor grumbled about it but gave his brother the privacy he no doubt would want.

"Alright, My Prince," Eir said. "Lay down on the bed, and we'll check you over."

Loki sighed but got onto the bed and laid down like he'd been told. Loki had tried to get out of these checkups before and it had never actually worked out for him. His mother would just reschedule it to the next day or sit there with Loki so that the appointment couldn't get derailed by any number of Loki's ploys. Eir normally was able to thwart them herself since Loki had never been overly fond of healers or being prodded, but she was using a somewhat more gentle hand with him than she normally did. Loki was both glad for it and shamelessly took advantage of it when he could.

The pillow Loki laid back against instantly turned damp as Loki's hair hadn't remotely dried from their time swimming yet. Loki tried to remain calm and unaffected as he let Eir lift up his shirt and examine the bulge that was growing there. Loki hated that he had to start wearing looser clothes to disguise the slope of his stomach now and resented every inch it increased in size.

Loki turned his eyes to the ceiling to trace the veins in the stone up above rather than pay any attention to what Eir was doing. Unfortunately, it wasn't all that easy to block out what was going on during the exam. Eir was talking more to Frigga than Loki, but he still picked out keywords and phrases that elicited fear. Apparently, the baby was growing large already, and Eir was worried about if Loki would even be able to carry to term. It was a three-quarters giant, after all, and was definitely growing like it was.
Eir summoned her magic and Loki tried harder to only focus on the ceiling as the room was filled with the glow of Eir's seidr. Loki took several deep breaths to remain calm even as the sound of a fluttery heartbeat filled the room much too loudly. Much too real, Loki nearly choked and felt his eyes burning but he wasn't sure why. Everything was jumble in his head and he couldn't place what about that constant beat yanked tears from his eyes. Loki didn't know what emotion was causing it - if only one was even responsible.

"Eir," Frigga said. "What is that?"

Loki blinked his tears away and looked down before he could stop himself. His eyes widened at the scrunched up shape made of glowing lines of light wrapped up in flowing energy. That was... Loki was sure his heart stopped. It was... it was so small...

"It looks like birth defects," Eir said.

Loki’s gaze snapped over to Eir for a moment and then back at the image of the baby growing in his womb. Even for Loki's untrained eyes he soon realized that the baby did indeed not look entirely right. There were just too many limbs. "W-what?" What was wrong with it?!

Frigga took hold of Loki’s hand and gave it a squeeze. "They're not life-threatening, I don't think," Eir was saying. "I don't believe any organs will be affected. And the limbs may not fully develop."

Loki could only stare in shock. Eir and his mother were talking but Loki couldn't be bothered to listen. The baby, curled up so tiny, had an entire other set of arms and legs tucked in right beside the ones that were supposed to be there. How... how was he supposed to give the baby away now? Who would ever take in a baby with four arms and yet another four legs? Loki had never even seen such a thing. Loki wasn't aware his breathing had been picking up until Frigga was there brushing his hair back. "Loki, darling, it's alright. Everything is going to be fine," she said. "Come, my love, calm down. Easy breaths now. Slow and deep." Loki tried to follow her direction but was only marginally successful.

Eir halted the spell, removing the image of the baby from the air above Loki's abdomen. Frigga bent down and wrapped her arms around Loki to rock him gently. "Everything is going to be alright. This isn't insurmountable. You'll see," Frigga said.

Loki turned his head into Frigga's shoulder as he tried to process everything and was only partially successful. Frigga was still brushing his hair back with one hand as Loki slowly managed to get his heart back to something closer to normal. A sudden, horrible thought occurred to Loki as Frigga tried to comfort him. "... it's my fault. Isn't it?" He was a runt. The book said that he shouldn't have children because of deformities and here the baby was with twice as many limbs as it was supposed to have.

"No, darling. This isn't your fault," Frigga said.

"But the book said..."

"I would not take what that book says as the definitive answer, my Prince," Lady Eir said. "It was written centuries ago for old home remedies. And it was written by those who were both superstitious and not inclined to be fair in their claims. Do you know some of the strange thoughts that Midgardians have about what causes babies to turn out certain ways? That Tome of Queen Bestla's can be considered about as reliable as those old wives tales of the Midgardians."

Loki wasn't sure about that. So far everything that the book had said was turning out to be frighteningly accurate. "Loki, my darling, I promise everything will be alright," Frigga said yet again. Loki couldn't bring himself to argue aloud, but he doubted everything would actually be 'alright' as Frigga wanted him to believe. "What else could be the cause, Eir?"

Eir hummed thoughtfully. "There could be several, and we may never know the cause for certain. But, I do have some ideas." There was a pause that Loki found very uncomfortable. "My Prince... I know you don't wish to discuss it, but did you recognize any of the spells that man used on you? Or did any seem to target your abdomen?"

Loki couldn't help but cringe away from the memory. He hated thinking about that. Loki adored magic and loved picking spells apart, but having them used on him like he was some interesting experiment had shaken that fundamental part of himself. Not helping in the least was that it had been strange magic Loki didn't recognize and in the context of experiencing it while kidnapped had been terrifying. "Darling, please?" Frigga asked as she brushed his damp hair back from his face.

"T-there... one," Loki muttered. It had been the first spell that monster had done and Loki still wasn't sure what it had done to him. "It... he drew on me and... it hurt. I tried to get away, but he was too heavy!"

"Shh, it's alright," Frigga said as her arms around Loki tightened. "We know you tried to get away, my dearest."

"Did anything else happen, My Prince?" Eir asked. "I know you don't want to say, but it might be dangerous if we don't know."

Loki grimaced and closed his eyes. He didn't want to think about what had happened. Not even for a second. Frigga murmured some more words of comfort and encouragement. "He... I bled... all over the bed. It hurt so much..."

Eir and Frigga exchanged a glance. It wasn't as if they hadn't seen the bloody bed in Loki's room the morning after he was kidnapped. Eir had worried about the amount of blood soaked into the sheets, and now it made a little more sense as to how it got there. "Did the man say what he was doing, Prince Loki?" Eir asked.

Loki shook his head. "... no. Just that... that he was making me better." Loki felt sick remembering the man from his nightmares whispering his boozy breath against Loki's face. "... that he was giving me a gift."

Eir frowned. "It sounds like he used Ymir's Gift on you," she said. "That moron."

"What is that?" Frigga asked.

"It is a spell that the Jotnar developed. Since they value carrying their children more than siring them... should a Jotunn be forced to remove their womb or if they are found to not be conceiving, then they can use Ymir's Gift. But it's not an easy spell to perform. Only their most skilled healers ever attempt it. And it most certainly isn't meant to be used on a healthy womb. It could quite easily be causing the abnormalities in the babe," Eir explained as she reached out to lightly squeeze Loki's shoulder.

"Why would he use such a spell on Loki?" Frigga asked.

"Most likely because he did not realize Loki was a Jotnar and already had a womb," Eir said. "The spell has regrown the necessary organs for conception before so, in theory, he could force an Aesir
boy to conceive through that spell. Honestly, Loki is quite lucky he is Jotnar because I have no idea if such a thing would even be survivable for a non-Jotunn. It was extraordinarily reckless on his part."

Frigga frowned. "I somehow doubt the health and safety of his victims was something that beast ever considered. Will this... continue to effect Loki?" Frigga asked.

"It's hard to say," Eir admitted. "I'm not overly familiar with this particular spell. It might be better to consult with an actual Jotunn healer in this regard. In fact, we might want to do that anyway. I've researched something about Jotnar pregnancies, but there is no replacement for experience."

Loki cringed at the thought of some unknown Jotnar prodding him. It was bad enough when Eir would do it, and Eir had been Loki's healer as long as he could remember. "Thor... Thor suggested contacting Gerd..." Loki murmured into Frigga's shoulder.

"What was that, darling?" Frigga asked.

Loki lifted his head just slightly so he would be better heard. "Gerd might know," he said hopefully loud enough now.

"Gerd isn't a healer though," Eir said.

Loki cringed. "But..."

"What is it, darling?" Frigga asked.

"I... I don't want a stranger," Loki said. "Please, mother... I can't just..."

"Shh, you don't have to deal with anyone you don't want to," Frigga said soothingly. She kissed Loki's forehead while continuing to rub his back. "If you're more comfortable with Gerd, I will send a message to them immediately."

Loki wasn't sure that was actually what he wanted, but if it were between Gerd and some mystery person, Loki would take Gerd every time without hesitation. Gerd had a ridiculous amount of patience and, after so many lessons with Gerd, Loki didn't feel uncomfortable around them. "... thank you, Mother."

"Oh, darling, you don't have to thank me," Frigga said. "I don't want you to be more uncomfortable than I know you already are."

Loki nodded and, after several minutes, pulled away from Frigga's comforting embrace. "Are... are we done now?"

"... yes, my Prince. But we will have to keep an even closer eye on how things progress now that we know what we do," Eir warned.

Loki nodded again and pulled his tunic down. He slid off the bed and made his way out of the room to head to his own. Loki still wasn't sure how to process all of this. The baby was... Loki didn't want to use the word 'monster,' but he also wasn't sure what else would fit. Not only did the poor thing have to face being more Jotnar than anything else but also it was deformed? Either through Loki's own deformities passing on or some magic that Loki should have been able to counter or do something against. Loki had the training to protect himself against unwanted magic - yet he hadn't used it. So either way, this was Loki's fault. Was it even fair to condemn the child to a life like that?
He didn't know.

Several days into the stay on Aztlan and the sons of Odin had explored most of the common areas of the city. Loki particularly liked the floating gardens and the cave that they often went to. Ofnir spent a good portion of his time perched on the tall stone buildings. Unlike in Asgard, Aztlan's buildings weren't quite as close together, and Ofnir seemed able to climb up them easier. Ofnir was steadily getting stronger with his wings as well. More than once Thor had seen Ofnir climbing up the sides of the Caldera to then jump off and almost manage to get enough lift from his wings to go from gliding to flying. Thor had a feeling that by the time they were back in Asgard Ofnir would have unlocked the last bit of knowledge of flight he seemed to be missing.

Loki's sickness was not improving, however. A fact which worried everyone as he was losing weight while his stomach grew. The young trickster looked downright gaunt, and Eir was giving him special mixtures to help fight weight loss and malnutrition almost constantly. Loki couldn't smell meat without getting immediately and violently ill. Fruits and vegetables managed to stay down better but still almost always came back up. The only thing that seemed to help at all was the now routine visits to the cave for Loki to swim. Usually, after a swim, Loki could struggle down some food and keep it down so long as he didn't try for too much.

In fact, Loki often decided that they were to go to the cave whenever he was feeling particularly queasy. That was where Thor and Loki were headed currently. Thor didn't think he'd ever spent so much time swimming as he had over the past few days but if that was the only thing Loki could do to soothe his stomach then swimming it was. Still, Thor wished they had waited another hour or so. The city had been hit the night before with a terrible storm -not one of Thor's although Loki kept teasingly insisting it was his fault- and there was much debris in the streets. More than once they had to climb over tree limbs that had been ripped off from somewhere or splash through puddles that hadn't yet drained away into the lake.

"You know, I doubt the Aztlans are impressed with your storm calling abilities, brother," Loki said.

"For the last time, it wasn't me, Loki," Thor said. "Say it again, and I'll push you off this walkway."

Loki grinned widely -quite obviously not taking Thor even a little seriously. "You wouldn't do that, Thor. Ofnir would eat you." Loki said with a slight gesture over his shoulder to where Ofnir was perched on top of a nearby building watching their progress. The people of Aztlan seemed fascinated with Ofnir, and rather fond of him if how often they fed him snacks was anything to go by, so they seemed to have no qualms whatsoever with his antics all over the city. But then lots of reptilian creatures were carved into the walls of Aztlan so maybe they just really liked scaly things? Thor wasn't sure because he'd never had too much interaction with Aztlan before, but he was pretty sure lizards were important here.

"Brat," Thor said as they continued to walk. "See if I take you swimming again."

"You will," Loki said with confidence. Thor huffed but couldn't very well argue that. They both knew he was terribly weak-willed when it came to denying his brother.

Despite the storm the night before the sun was again bright and hot in the otherwise clear sky. The air wasn't as humid thankfully, but Thor still worried it would be too much for Loki to be outside in. He'd already gone through several jars of the skin ointment meant to protect him from burning.

"Where do you think all these branches even came from?" Loki asked as he stepped over a broken one in his path.
Thor shrugged. "The gardens?"

"There's too many," Loki argued although his voice was oddly soft. Thor wasn't sure what he was thinking of, but then Loki shook his head. "There wouldn't be a tree left standing in the garden if that's where they came from."

"There's vegetation on the cliff faces... perhaps there are trees up there large enough to own these limbs," Thor said. He still wasn't sure where the odd pause Loki made had come from, but there would be better times to pry out whatever was bothering his brother.

Loki hummed thoughtfully at that. "I suppose... Perhaps a combination of both." Loki didn't even look up as Ofnir hopped from one building to another, causing the stone structures to groan and rumble at the impact. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any damage, and Ofnir crawled around it like a serpent to keep following their progress through the city.

"Loki. Your pet is going to break something," Thor warned.

"Oh, he's fine," Loki said dismissively.

Thor rolled his eyes. "You really should train him not to climb buildings, brother."

"These walkways are too narrow for him," Loki said with a casual wave to the path they were on. Thor supposed that was true. While the space between the buildings was generous the actual stone walkways were only large enough for perhaps three people walking side by side. Ofnir's rocking gait would mean he wouldn't be able to stay on the walkway itself and since the one the brothers were on was currently between two spans of water, that was an important factor.

"But that's not every path," Thor said.

"Oh, let him have his fun."

"You indulge him too much, I think, Loki," Thor said. Loki didn't even bother to respond to that. In fact, Thor wasn't a hundred percent sure Loki was listening to him anymore. That was odd. Because, while Loki often elected to ignore what Thor told him for any multitude of reasons, Loki rarely didn't at least listen. Even Thor knew that. Loki was too focused on wordplay and the hoarding of knowledge to simply dismiss what others said to him. He might misunderstand it or misinterpret it -as he had done so much near the end of his first life- but Thor could always count on his brother hearing him out first. To test how much Loki was listening Thor said, "Perhaps you should lock Ofnir in a room somewhere... keep him from causing a ruckus or wanton destruction."

Loki hummed without looking up. Thor raised an eyebrow at the non-reaction. Definitely not a normal thing for his brother. "Loki?" Thor said a little more forcefully than normal.

Loki looked up sharply. "Hmm?"

"Is everything alright?" Thor asked. "You seem... distant of late. Is something bothering you?"

"Bothering me? Of course not, Thor," Loki said with a flash of a smile.

Thor frowned. "You're usually a much better liar, Brother."

"Who says I'm lying?"

"The fact that you're not acting like yourself," Thor said. "I suggested locking Ofnir in a room, and you didn't even react. Come now, can you say that's normal?"
Loki made a face. "Tell me?" Thor asked.

They walked for a moment in silence with Loki staring at the ground. Then, Loki abruptly stopped by a column that held up a walkway that spanned the canal they were walking down. "There... There's something wrong with the baby," Loki murmured.

Thor nearly recoiled. He had not been expecting that. "What? What's wrong with it?"

Loki bit his bottom lip and chewed on it for a moment before looking up at Thor properly. "The last scan that Lady Eir performed showed... showed the baby is deformed."

"Deformed how?" Thor asked as neutrally as he was able. He had a sneaking suspicion knowing Sleipnir as he does but Thor couldn't just say that nor would it be wise to assume that was what Loki was talking about.

"It... it has too many limbs," Loki said looking uncomfortable and edging nearer to frantic. "Twice too many. Four of both arms and legs."

Thor nodded. That was Sleipnir after all. "What does Eir say?"

Loki almost grimaced. "She does not think it life-threatening... but-but it'll never be adopted if it looks like that!"

Thor was a little startled to hear Loki mention adoption at all. With how it had hurt Loki himself was to learn that he was adopted, Thor wouldn't have thought that option acceptable to his little brother. But then again, Loki's situation now was far different than the one that led to his own adoption. Still, Thor would have thought that Loki would have at least mentioned this to Thor before now. "I don't think the people of Asgard are quite that shallow, brother."

"Not that shallow?" Loki echoed. "Thor, do you not remember when I nearly seared all my skin off trying to get a tan so that I would be closer to your skin color?"

Thor nodded uneasily. They had been quite a bit younger at the time -only around the Midgardian equivalent of seven- and Loki had been forced indoors with terrible sunburns for weeks after that incident. It was the very reason Frigga had come up with the ointment for Loki's skin. "You think I did that for no reason?" Loki asked. "Bjarke and his annoying group of cronies had been teasing me for ages about how pale I was."

"You never told me that!"

"I'm not going to go running to my big brother about every little comment, Thor," Loki said. He folded his arms across his chest and looked off to the side. "That would only make them call me a coward more than they already do..."

Thor vividly and suddenly recalls seeing his brother run a dark Elf twice his size through with a sword and activating a grenade whilst impaled by that same Elf. "You are no coward, Loki. I know that as I know my own name."

"You've called me a coward before yourself."

Thor cringed. He had said that and he regretted it immensely. "Out of frustration not any real belief in the words," he said. "Nobody that is facing what you are and doing as well as you are is a coward."

"You think I'm doing well?" Loki asked in bewilderment.
"Much better than what I would be in the same situation," Thor said as he reached out to grasp the back of Loki's neck. "Far better than Bjarke or any of his stupid friends too."

"Better than Bjarke doesn't seem that high a bar to clear," Loki muttered.

"Perhaps not," Thor admitted. "But that doesn't change the fact that you are doing so much better than anyone could expect." Thor leaned over to rest his forehead against Loki's.

The brothers just stood there for a moment, and Thor slowly felt the muscles of Loki's neck and shoulders relaxing under his hand. "... thank you, Thor," Loki said softly. "But I don't feel as if I'm really doing all that well. I feel more like a walking disaster."

"You're too hard on yourself," Thor said firmly.

Loki sighed and allowed Thor to move from clasping the back of his neck to wrapping an arm around his narrower shoulders while starting to walk again. "What else did Lady Eir have to say about the baby?" Thor asked. "There's nothing else wrong with him is there?"

Loki frowned. "What makes you think it's a boy?"

"Just a feeling," Thor said as casually as he was able. "But you said she doesn't think the condition life-threatening?"

"No... and the extra limbs might be able to be removed," Loki said as he turned his attention to watching the ground they were walking over. "She will have to wait and see how they develop... if they develop. If they are fully formed, then it would be more difficult with all the veins and bones, but if they stay small, she thinks it quite possible."

Thor hummed a little. He had only ever known Sleipnir as an eight-legged horse so the idea of them removing the extra limbs was uncomfortable to say the least, but they had no way of knowing what Thor did. Thor couldn't even say he'd told Frigga what form Loki's child would take. Thor hadn't thought to do so, although that probably would have been important information to impart.

But then, Loki had said arms and legs -not just legs. So, did that mean Sleipnir was not a horse this time? Thor assumed Loki would have mentioned his baby being a horse. Plus, Loki wasn't stuck as a horse like King Loki said he had been.

That wasn't a situation that Thor had considered. Would Loki's children be more normal looking this time? That would change so much, and Thor isn't sure how to feel about it. On one hand that would make both Loki's life and the life of the children much easier, but on the other hand, after the initial shock of his nephew's forms, Thor hadn't really minded it either. They were powerful, fearsome, and strong -which were all qualities that Asgard lauded. If it weren't for the fact that they had not been a standard Aesir shape, the boys would have no doubt been well liked.

"Well, I suppose we will have to wait and see. So long as it's not life-threatening, this condition, I would say try to not worry about it, brother," Thor said.

Loki nodded, but Thor had a feeling Loki hadn't really taken what Thor said to heart. Thor bumped Loki's shoulder lightly. "I'm serious, brother. Don't think about it so much. You will stress yourself, and that is not good for the baby."

Loki huffed. "When your wife is expecting I will remind you of that little gem of wisdom, shall I?"

Thor smiled. "By all means, brother."
They walked another few hundred yards, deliberately not discussing the serious topics they had been moments before. Thor didn't want to push his brother away by pursuing unpleasant topics - especially when he was already probably not feeling his best. Thor heard another heavy crash of Ofnir jumping to yet another building.

"What's that?" Loki suddenly asked, coming to an abrupt stop.

Thor stopped as well and looked around. "What's what?"

"That," Loki said as he moved closer to a particularly large branch crossing the walkway. Thor narrowed his eyes as Loki slowly approached the debris. It took a moment, but then Thor realized there was something small and dark sticking out from under the thick branch.

"It's a hand!" Thor realized after a moment. A tiny hand. Like that of a child!

Loki cursed and both brothers hurried forward to pry the large tree limb up. Just as Loki was reaching for the small hand, Thor realized that it didn't look quite right. Loki's fingers only brushed the oddly hairy surface before the hand was yanked back far too quickly. There was a chattering noise followed by a hiss and Loki stumbled back as a strange creature darted out from under the tree. Both Odinsons stared as the bizarre little thing whipped back around a few feet away and bared its teeth.

"What is that?" Thor demanded as he dropped the tree fully.

"I don't know!"

The creature was about the size of a small dog and looked like a strange cross between that dog, an otter, and a monkey. The creature stood on four legs sprawled out enough to raise its hackles at them. It had small but sharp looking teeth and clever paws with human-like digits and webbing between them. Little ears like an otter were laid back to be almost invisible. Short dark fur covered its body and, since it was wet, clumped together making it almost look like it was covered in spikes at a quick glance. The creature's face and paws were also dark but not quite as furry as the rest of it. A long powerful tail swayed behind the thing and the oddest feature ever was on full display. A fifth hand was on the end of the tail, obviously larger than the others yet the fingers looked fully formed and perfectly capable of grip since they were flexing just slightly. It was one of the oddest and most off-putting things Thor had ever seen.

"Easy, precious," Loki said softly. He extended a hand towards the creature with his palm up. "Easy, we won't hurt you. Your hand looks hurt, precious. Can I take a look at it?"

Thor frowned and looked closer. Sure enough, the fifth hand at the end of the powerful tail was scraped up. That was probably the one that had been stuck under the tree then. "Loki..."

"Quiet, Thor. The poor thing is terrified," Loki said without looking away from the creature still snarling at them.

"Poor thing?" Thor echoed. "Loki, no! Not again!"

Loki glared up at Thor. "What do you mean, not again?"

"This is just like what happened with Ofnir!"

"So?"

"Mother will kill you."
Loki ignored that and turned back to the small creature that was leaning close enough to sniff at the tips of Loki's fingers. "That's it. I won't hurt you..."

Thor rolled his eyes but didn't protest again as the little creature moved close enough for Loki to touch. The thing's tiny ears had moved forward and the big black nose flared as it sniffed the air around Loki. Loki smiled and green seidr wrapped around his extended hand. Loki stretched just slightly to brush his fingers against the scrape on whatever-it-was' tail-hand.

The creature whipped around quickly to snarl at Loki's hand but Thor's brother remained perfectly calm. "It's alright," Loki said soothingly. "I'm just going to heal your tail."

"Loki, if that thing bites you--"

"It won't bite me," Loki said as he gently ran his fingers down the creature's back, smoothing the spiky wet fur down along its spine with ease. The water-dog-monkey-thing turned again to sniff Loki's hand some more. Loki managed to lay a hand against the slightly bloody scrape, and his green seidr quickly healed the wound.

The action seemed to startle the creature though, and it sprinted off. With a quick jump, the creature dove into the water. The thing disappeared immediately under the water with the speed of a fish. Thor wouldn't have thought it would be that quick without fins. "Well, that was... odd," Thor said as the water stilled again.

"Indeed," Loki said as he lowered his hand. "But, at least it seems alright now."

Thor cast Loki a sideways glance. "You weren't going to try and adopt the thing were you?" he asked.

Loki rolled his eyes and stood up. "You act like having pets is a bad thing."

"Your pets are always strange, though," Thor said.

"You're just jealous," Loki said. "Now come on. I want to cool off already."

Thor shook his head but followed along behind Loki. The cave wasn't that far off by now, and Ofnir sprawled himself out nearby to seemingly promptly fall asleep. Loki was a lot less hesitant to get into the lake now, but he still kept the shirt on to cover his upper body. Thor and Loki could spend hours upon hours out by the cave just relaxing and talking about whatever popped into their heads.

Sometimes it led to very strange conversations like when Thor mused aloud wondering if the Dwarves could ever make a weapon that surpassed Mjolnir in power. That launched Loki and him into quite the back and forth that devolved into a water battle of epic proportions. Thor nearly drowned as Loki sent a huge wave washing over the rocks Thor had been clinging to. That had put a halt to the visit for the time being as coughing up a lung was never a fun experience. Loki had apologized for the near drowning with a huge grin that sort of undercut the sincerity.

When Thor and Loki returned to the main pyramid where they were staying Ixtlilton was waiting for Loki. "Enjoy your swim?" he asked. Loki nodded a little even though he was frowning. "That's good. Did you forget however that we were supposed to meet this morning?"

Loki's frown darkened into an all-out scowl. "I didn't forget," he said.

"I see. So you simply didn't come," Ixtlilton said. "I do understand your unwillingness to open up to me, Prince Loki, but I'm not simply going to go away just because you ignore me. You'll find I
can be quite stubborn as well."

"I'm fine though," Loki said as he crossed his arms.

"Your night terrors have stopped then?" Ixtlilton asked lightly. Loki looked away. "Mmm, ignoring a problem does not make it go away."

"I know that," Loki said. "But I don't want to talk about it."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Thor felt as if something needed to happen to break the tension. "We saw a strange creature," Thor blurted out. Why that was what popped into his head just then, Thor wasn't sure, but the declaration did what he wanted it to do.

Ixtlilton tilted his head. "A strange creature?"

Thor nodded. "It was like a little dog, but it had a long tail and a fifth hand on the end of it," Thor said while holding his hands apart at the approximate size the creature had been.

"Ah. An ahuizotl," Ixtlilton said. "I take it you didn't spot this creature in the water."

"No. It was trapped under some debris from the storm," Thor said.

Ixtlilton nodded. "That makes sense as they are almost never seen in the water. They are too quick and can hold their breath for a very long time. Usually, if one sees an ahuizotl underwater, you're already in the process of being dragged down to your death. Or they are going for your eyes. Ahuizotls have a special fondness for eating eyes, you see."

Thor felt his own eyes widen. "... how very pleasant."

"Mm, yes, that is what they use the larger hand on the end of their tail for. They grab the unsuspecting and then drag them to the bottom of whatever lake or river they are living in," Ixtlilton explained. "But, enough distraction, I think. We will be having our session today, Prince Loki. And I think it would be better to do it now rather than later."

Loki scowled darkly but begrudgingly went off to his room with Ixtlilton right beside him. Thor was left standing there with Ofnir looming above from where he was half hanging off of a large column. After a minute, Thor decided to go find his mother and see if she needed any help with anything. Hopefully, for once, Loki wouldn't be in quite such a horrible mood after his session with Ixtlilton although Thor was somewhat doubtful.

Later that evening, Thor supposed it had been too optimistic to hope that the therapy session would leave Loki as anything other than incredibly snappish. Loki locked himself away in his room and would only let their mother in. Unfortunately, Thor had grown used to this reaction after his brother's sessions with Ixtlilton. Thor did spot Loki a bit later but his brother had obviously been about to go to sleep and considering how poorly Loki's rest had been lately, Thor didn't dare bother him.

Loki got up from his bed, tossing the lightweight covering off of himself in frustration. Though he was trying his absolute best to just go to sleep that was not looking likely. And not, for once, because of nightmares. Frigga had convinced him to eat some native fruit before bed, and while it initially had sat as well as anything had lately, Loki's stomach was no longer tolerating it in the least. Loki felt as if he would throw up any second.

So far, the only thing that had helped at all with his sickness was floating in the water. It probably
wasn't wise to go to the cave that Loki favored alone -especially now that he was aware of a creature that would want to drown him and eat his eyes- but Loki was so utterly done with being sick all the time. He just might cry if he threw up yet again. He couldn't eat anything, and it was so frustrating and just...

Loki took a deep breath and pulled a thin linen robe over his nightclothes. He would just go down to the water long enough for his stomach to stop rebelling so much. Then Loki would return to bed and hopefully get some rest. He was so tired. Loki really would like to sleep through the night undisturbed for the first time in probably a month.

The thought to wake Thor occurred to him, but Loki dismissed it a moment later. He didn't want his big brother around looking at him with those big concerned puppy eyes of his. Loki just wanted to feel better.

So, Loki silently made his way out of the pyramid and down to the water. The night was crystal clear with a giant moon casting everything in a silvery glow. Insects buzzed around, and Loki could smell flowers -that were actually mildly nauseating but everything was nowadays- on the breeze that never seemed to fully die down. Loki spotted Ofnir sleeping on top of a smaller pyramid than the one that Loki and his family were staying at mostly because his blue scales stood out brilliantly against the tan stones. Loki did his best to not run -since he wasn't convinced that would help- but also hurry. He felt as if he might be losing the battle to not be sick.

By now, Loki knew the quickest route to the cliff face and the trail that led to the cave so it shouldn't take him more than ten more minutes to reach the water. Loki was pretty sure he'd be able to make it.

Loki made it to the trail that went along the waterline of the caldera without incident and quickly turned in the direction of the cave. He didn't make it more than halfway there before nausea made him stop and press his fist to his tightly closed mouth. Why was everything so damn difficult to keep down!? Loki felt tears pricking at his eyes and slowly found a rock to sit on to try and just breathe through it. He pressed a hand to his stomach and tried to will himself to make it through the wave without vomiting what he'd eaten onto the ground.

There was a nearby noise, and Loki looked up quickly. His stomach was still rolling unpleasantly. Big brown eyes were staring at him from the nearby water line. Loki was confused but didn't move as the ahuizotl that had been trapped under the tree earlier climbed out of the lake. Loki could tell it was the same one because it had the same pale markings on its neck that looked like a child had tried to finger paint a tree. Loki fought to keep sitting still despite his discomfort. He didn't want to accidentally trigger the creature into attacking him and dragging him below the surface.

The ahuizotl cautiously moved closer to where Loki was sitting, and then it's fifth hand -the one at the end of its powerful tail- was in front of Loki's face. But it wasn't going for his eyes. It had something clenched in its clawed fist. Loki blinked and hesitantly took what turned out to be a large clump of seagrass from the creature which bounded away a few steps immediately. "Um... thank you?" Loki managed to get out.

What was he supposed to do with this? Was it just an animal's show of appreciation? Most likely.

The ahuizotl was watching him far too intently. Loki glanced at the grass again. He didn't want grass of all things, but Loki also didn't think tossing it would be the smartest thing he'd ever done. The ahuizotl crouched down beside the rocks it was perched on and gnawed at a few long strands of grass that had managed to grow there. Then it looked at the dripping grass Loki was holding and over to Loki again.
"Oh, um, I don't eat grass... but it's very nice of you," Loki said. He felt mildly stupid because well, he was talking to something he had no idea understood him or not. Plus, he was holding a clump of grass and about to be sick all over himself.

Ahuizotl let out a strange noise that sounded something like a growl and Loki almost recoiled. "Now don't get testy," he said. "Not my fault I don't have any use for it!"

More growls and the ahuizotl moved closer in a distinctly predatory way. "Alright, alright, calm down!" Loki said, recoiling back for real this time. Perhaps this was some weird social behavior for the thing, and it was getting offended Loki wouldn't eat what he brought. Well, since Loki was most likely about to throw up anyway, he figured it wouldn't be eaten for long. With a little cringe Loki bit into the grass. The ahuizotl immediately stopped and sat up with its tail swaying and its fifth hand waving slightly in the air. "Happy?" Loki asked in annoyance as he swallowed the bit of grass. It was not his favorite texture and more bitter than he'd expected, but he got it down -which probably wasn't actually a good thing.

The ahuizotl was staring still and looking at him expectantly. "Oh come on," Loki sighed. "One bite was bad enough..." The creature didn't seem to think so, and Loki took another bite of the greenery to keep the thing from going growly again. The second bite was a bit easier to tolerate than the first, but Loki still wasn't a massive fan of it.

Much to Loki's annoyance, the ahuizotl sat there and stared at him until Loki had eaten it all. Then it pranced over like a puppy seemingly perfectly happy. "I can't believe you made me eat grass," Loki muttered as he risked holding a hand out to the creature. The ahuizotl purred and jumped up to rub its head against Loki's palm. Loki smiled some. "But I guess if that's what it takes for you to like me... it's better than losing an eye."

The ahuizotl was playful now, and it only took about ten minutes of pets and scratches for it to climb into Loki's lap for a full-on belly rub. "A pushy little girl are you?" Loki mused as he scratched through the thick fur. It was rather obvious as the ahuizotl squirmed and sprawled out for more rubs. "Well, how about we call you Huld, hmm?" There was obviously no protest from the ahuizotl. Loki chuckled some and continued to rub the creature's belly. Really, once you got past the oddness at the end of her tail, she was the cutest thing.

It wasn't until Huld ran off into the water perhaps fifteen minutes after she first appeared that Loki realized his stomach wasn't upset any more. He didn't have time to ponder it as Huld splashed back up with something in her jaws. She dropped it into Loki's lap, and he realized it was a large shiny rock. When Loki picked it up, Huld practically barked and bound back towards the water. With a raised eyebrow Loki tossed it into the lake where it disappeared into the depths. Huld dove down immediately. Loki chuckled to himself, and sure enough, she returned the rock to him only a few moments later.

Chapter End Notes

Aztlan- I couldn't fit this in last time because of character limits so here it is now. Aztlan is the name of the legendary origin city of the Aztec people. This version that Thor and Loki are visiting currently is the God's version of the mortal city. The gods helped the Aztec people build that first city and so they appear very similar and are named the same, they are technically two different places though. It's like if someone named a city Olympus now. Yes, there's a mythical one but there would also then be a
real Olympus that shares a name and probably some aesthetics with the home of the Gods version. Also, it's in a lake because the city Tenochtitlan was built on an island in a lake as well and was the Aztec capital.

**Sleipnir's Limbs**- So, yeah, Sleipnir is well known for having just *too many* limbs and he's going to keep them. Though this won't ever be stated in the actual story as the mystery of if it was Loki's condition or the spell can't really be solved, I will state it here for anyone who needs to have these answers of it being the spell's fault. Also, for those curious Loki would be about midway through his first trimester at this point in the story. And yes, Loki only survived that spell because he was already Jotnar. If he had been Aesir he would have hemorrhaged internally and died.

**Loki, Mother of Monsters**- I feel like I've seen this title for him before but I have no idea where... or if it's just one of those bizarre popculture-y type things I feel like I've seen but haven't. I don't know but I'm going with it. Loki just has a proclivity for picking up strange/dangerous creatures. In the comic's this happens too when he gets a puppy that is a literal hell hound and is well... savage. He also names it Thori after Thor.

**Ahuizotl**- A mythological creature from Aztec lore and what I wrote about them up there is true. They use the hand on their tail to drag people down and eat their eyes first. Yup. Loki has such good taste in pets. Also, apparently there's a My Little Pony character based off this guy? Which I found with google images? I'm assuming they tone down the eyeball eating in that version. Also, look up some images of ahuizotls if you haven't already. Some are really sick looking. Sick in a good way of course.
Thor and Frigga

Chapter Summary

Thor and Frigga have a few important conversations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After the talk with Loki about the scans of the unborn Sleipnir, Thor realized he hadn't mentioned much about Sleipnir to his mother aside from the fact that he existed. If he had, then she probably would have been able to comfort Loki more about the unusualness of his baby. Thor hadn't really meant to keep his nephew's unusual form a secret, but it hadn't occurred to him to make a specific note of telling her either. To him, Sleipnir simply was Sleipnir, and it was frighteningly easy to forget his mother didn't have the same context behind his existence as Thor did. He had always been a horse, and for the longest time, Thor hadn't even realized Sleipnir was his nephew. Although that did add an uncomfortable tinge to all the times that Thor had seen his father riding Sleipnir in his first life. Thor didn't want to think about that so much. Though he did hope King Loki was wrong and their parents did not at any point become aware of the truth like Thor hadn't. Otherwise, that was quite an unpleasant prospect.

Thor decided he would have to go and clarify things with his Mother because, while Sleipnir seemed to be a human currently -albeit with too many limbs according to Loki- there was no saying what might change with magic in the mix. Not that there wasn't magic involved before, but Thor had a feeling it was different magic this time, or at the very least different amounts of it since Loki was his own form. The situation seemed dangerous even with Thor's limited knowledge of magic and babies, and if the only help he could offer was in telling his mother what little he knew of a future that no longer was valid, well, he would do so.

Loki was still asleep when Thor poked his head into his brother's room to check in. Thor frowned at the five-handed beast that was curled up against Loki's lower back. The tail hand was clutching a large wad of covers and pulling it close so that the creature could bury its furry face into it. Its smaller fore paws were pressed over its closed eyes. Thor hated to admit it, but the thing was sort of adorable all curled up like that. When had it started sleeping with Loki, though? It had been just the other day when it had snarled at them. And it could rip out people's eyes to snack on, which was always something to be cautious of.

Thor shook his head and resigned himself to dealing with another of Loki's pets that would no doubt also be vicious to everyone but his brother. Hopefully, this one wouldn't get as big as Ofnir.

Since Loki's sleep had been less than stellar lately, Thor let his brother alone. No doubt Loki would wake on his own before too long. Thor silently closed the door to Loki's room and started his search for his mother in earnest. Judging by the position of the sun in the sky, it was several hours past dawn so Thor was sure that their mother would be up and about by now. He even had a few thoughts as to where Frigga might be.

Thor's first guess of the room that a dining table had been arranged for them to eat at turned out to be wrong, so Thor grabbed some large pieces of fruit to eat for his breakfast as he continued his search. Thor quickly devoured the odd-looking but rather pleasant tasting fruit as he made his way...
out of the pyramid. The day was promising to be hotter than the one before, but the humidity hadn't yet gone back up to the level of that first day, so that was something to be happy about.

While Thor walked, he finished off the pieces of fruit and tossed the skin, which he hadn't liked and peeled off, into the water he was walking past. The bright yellow skin sank down and would probably become food for fish or something. Thor wasn't worried.

Near the southern edge of the caldera, there was a decent sized island that curved slightly to follow the same line of the cliff face. Within the curve of the islet, there was a fountain that bubbled over a pyramid of carefully sculpted stones. Two hills of different sizes were at either end of the long island. The Eastern mound, which was made entirely of sand, soared upwards to nearly half the height of the buildings of Aztlan despite the fact that some of the loose material sloped down into the water. Thor had been warned that that hill was magical and to not try climbing it, but not exactly what it did. The whole mound had apparently been carried grain by grain from the mortal's Aztlan by ants of all things. Why they had decided on that method of transport, Thor couldn't say, it seemed terribly ineffective. Perhaps they just hadn't wanted the mortals to panic when their magical sand pile went missing?

But Thor wasn't interested in sand hills. No, Thor was much more interested in the smaller knoll on the other side of the island that a massive tree was growing on. The roots were a gnarled tangle over the hill to the point that it looked as if the tree were climbing onto the islet from the waterline. The tree was made of a thick twining trunk that resembled two lovers curling around each other and was a tad thicker at the bottom but as it twisted became more slender until it broke into many long branches. These branches overshadowed at least half of the island and the fountain bubbling away. The leaves of the tree were oblong and slightly shiny on one side, they clumped together in groups of three and rustled in the near-constant breezes of Aztlan. Mixed among the bright green leaves were many large flowers of brilliant colors that spread their fragrances to everywhere nearby. Often Thor had smelled this tree even from the central pyramid, and it had taken him a few days to realize the wind had carried the fragrance so far. Ripe fruits hung temptingly from the tree limbs all over and weighed the branches down.

Along with not climbing the sand pile, Thor had been warned off taking anything from this tree and so ignored the fruits and flowers that hung down low as he walked across the soft mossy grass that grew underneath the tree between each of the knobbly roots. Frigga was sitting there by the trunk with several of Aztlan's Goddesses with a stretch of colorful fabric in her lap that she was embroidering something into. Thor thought that what he could see of the pattern looked somewhat familiar to him but couldn't place why that was precisely and put it out of his mind. "Mother?"

Frigga looked up. "Thor, Darling. You're wandering about early. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, I just need to speak with you," Thor said.

Frigga hummed a little and slid her needle into the fabric she was working on to then put to the side. "Well, let's have a walk then, shall we? I'll rejoin you, ladies, shortly." The other Goddesses didn't seem bothered, and Frigga carefully picked her way through the group to start walking with Thor. The two of them began to walk down a small sandy path that led between the hills of the island and then turned into a wooden dock. The dock went from the islet, wound between the different floating garden beds that were spread around it in ever-expanding circles, and to the stone walkways of the city proper. The day was still young enough that nobody was working the beds closest to the island, so the two Asgardians had plenty of privacy.

"Now, what is bothering you, my Dear?" Frigga asked after they had been walking for several minutes.
"It's... Loki's son," Thor said. "You remember I told you a little about him?" Frigga nodded. "Well, I realized the other day that I hadn't told you probably the most important thing. I sort of... forgot that you wouldn't know it already."

"And what would that be?" Frigga asked.

Thor sighed this was going to be uncomfortable to talk about, and Sleipnir wasn't even in that form currently it didn't seem. "Sleipnir was born a horse," he said, not having any easier way of saying that very awkward fact. "Eight-legged and very powerful, but still a horse. I didn't even know for most of my life he was Loki's son... the other Loki said he had erased that knowledge from Asgard. Although it was still a rumor going around that Loki fought tooth and nail to bury. He got very upset when anyone mentioned him and Sleipnir. Which is understandable really..."

Frigga frowned but did not look as surprised as perhaps Thor thought she might be. Seeing Thor's confused look, she offered a tight smile to him instead. "We have been worried about the babe's form since we discovered the pregnancy. We do not know exactly when during Loki's kidnapping he was conceived, or in what form either of them was in while it happened, so there was always uncertainty. So far Sleipnir appears to be maintaining a humanoid shape aide from the excess of limbs, but there is no guarantee he will remain that way."

"The other Loki said he was stuck as a horse for his whole pregnancy. Would that have something to do with Sleipnir's form?" Thor asked.

"Perhaps," Frigga said thoughtfully. "Or perhaps he was trapped in such a form to ensure he didn't die from carrying an infant so large."

"That sounded like what Loki thought happened," Thor said. "He said something about his body instinctively stopping the shift so he wouldn't get hurt."

Frigga nodded. "That would make sense as one's body will often try to preserve one's life... especially through the unconscious portion of the mind. It is not at all unheard of for mages to get stuck in other forms when injured to prevent further damage... although not many mages have Loki's gifts of shape-changing."

"Do you think that Sleipnir could change his forms before he is even born then?" Thor asked.

Frigga sighed. "Most unborn children, even those who are naturally shifters of their shape, would not change their forms before they are even born. It would put too much strain on their still-developing bodies. However, Sleipnir is not what I would consider 'most' by any stretch of the imagination. His... sire," she made a distinctly displeased face at the title, "being half-kelpie naturally had a much stronger affinity for being in horse form, and required magic to keep his humanoid form stable. Add to that Loki's own shape-changing powers... I would not feel comfortable guaranteeing that the babe will stay as he is currently."

"Part of my concern is also from the fact that Loki does not seem to shapeshift the way other mages would," Frigga continued thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" Thor asked.

"Loki's shapeshifting is different from most mages. He doesn't seem to use a spell at all, as evidenced by how he was able to do it as a newborn," Frigga said. "If Loki were using a spell, the change would happen practically instantaneously while when Loki does it, the change is extremely fast but is not done in one massive shift. If it were to happen that way, then all of his skin would turn blue at once, and it does not."
Thor frowned, not entirely sure where his mother was going. "So..."

"Lady Eir, your father, and I all believe that Loki's shapeshifting is not due to his magic but rather his biology. Much like your lightning calling. That being the case, the baby also would be predisposed to developing the same ability and would be less able to control it at such a young age. Instinct and emotion tend to drive those powers in the beginning."

Thor recalled distantly that Loki had once told Thor he felt as if changing his shape was different from his magic but at the time he hadn't been able to really describe it so well. Thor supposed this was what Loki had meant. "Is this going to be a danger to Loki?" Thor asked.

"If Sleipnir changes his form while still in Loki's womb he will undoubtedly rip Loki apart," Frigga said with a frown. Thor felt his blood run out of his face. "We already were worried about how large the babe was already growing. He will be a large baby, which is not surprising given his genetics, but that will make things harder. I am just glad that Loki has asked for Gerd, I was trying to think of a way of broaching the idea of having them nearby."

Thor was a little surprised. "He's already spoken to you about that?" Thor was expecting to need to bring it up with their mother when he'd suggested it to Loki.

"Yes," Frigga said. "I think, despite what Loki says, he does take some comfort in Gerd's presence whenever Jotnar are brought up. I thank you for suggesting it to him."

"There's nothing to thank me for, Mother. I want what's best for Loki. Heillr Gerd taught us a lot about Jotnar," Thor said. "I thought that perhaps that had helped to forge a certain amount of trust with Loki."

"I hope so," Frigga said. "It has been hard enough convincing your brother there is nothing wrong with being Jotnar before he was taken from us. I cannot imagine how horrible it would have been for him if he had to try and process all of that after."

Thor swallowed hard - he could imagine it. Thor had seen the result of that confusion and hurt. "Have you spoken to Gerd about coming already?" he asked, not wanting to remember his brother letting go of Gungnir or him coming back leading an army of Chitauri.

"Yes," Frigga said. "They have something still to do back home. The protests and unrest between Alfheim and Vanaheim are only growing more volatile, and they are trying to calm things to a more tolerable level before coming. Gerd does not think it will take more than a week to reach some consensus on the latest issue."

"What is it this time?" Thor asked. The tensions between Alfheim and Vanaheim seemed to be in a never-ending roller coaster of issues that would get worse and then better and then worse again.

Frigga sighed heavily. "There was a very unfortunate mix up that involved a dam and resulted in the flooding of several Alfheim barrows," she said. Thor cringed. "Exactly," Frigga said when she saw his expression. "Though, I suppose we should consider it lucky that the water didn't rise far enough to reach the village nearby as well."

"That would have been even worse, yes," Thor agreed. Though the ruination of many graves was horrible, nobody had actually lost their lives it didn't sound like, so hopefully, everything could be repaired or at least a recompense to families could be made. "I hope Gerd and Freyr can handle things."

"Oh, I'm sure they will cool their subjects' tempers," Frigga said. "They have practice with it."
Though the Elves like to act as if they are above emotional outbursts, they certainly have enough of them."

Thor nodded and looked down at the water of the lake as they walked. "I hope Gerd has some idea of what to expect. I do not at all like the dangers already in Loki's condition."

"Nor do I," Frigga said. "I do not know how knowledgeable Heillr Gerd is about pregnancies, but whatever they do know could only help."

"Do you think Loki will have to take horse form?" Thor asked. "The Loki I knew in the future had always hated doing so. I had never even seen Loki as a horse until I saw him in that shack."

"I don't know," Frigga said. She looked so very heartbroken and was wringing her hands the same way Loki sometimes did. Thor reached out to take one of her hands and laced their fingers together in a show of support. Frigga smiled slightly and squeeze his hand in thanks. "I hope not. I don't wish to bring him back to his trauma."

"I should have asked Ki—the other Loki more," Thor said as he looked across Aztlan. He was finding that he was regularly wishing he asked more questions or found out about things before they became problems. Despite his efforts, Thor was simply not able to foresee everything he needed to know far enough in advance.

Frigga was quiet for a moment. "Perhaps I should speak with him."

Thor stopped immediately in his tracks. He didn't want their mother to see what that Loki had become—sitting in a destroyed Asgard with bones all around his broken throne—and Thor had no idea how King Loki would take to seeing Frigga again. Had Frigga died the same way as she did in Thor's life? He had no way of knowing. He hadn't asked. "I... I don't know if you could, Mother," Thor said. "I am not certain how the magic works."

"Well, there must be some sort of tether between you and there," Frigga said. "I do not think it would be too hard to use that same link to guide myself."

"I... will bring it up to him next I see him, Mother," Thor said uneasily. "I do not know how he would feel about seeing you again after... everything that happened."

Frigga frowned but then slowly nodded. "Very well. Now, was there anything else you suddenly remembered you needed to tell me?" she asked, sounding vaguely amused.

"Ah... just, I wish for a promise," Thor said. "In the future... Sleipnir was known as Lord of Horses because he was the best ever born. That makes sense now knowing what I do... but, because he was the best, Father... Father took Sleipnir as his mount. And I do not want that again. Even if he is born the same way, in the form of a horse... I do not think I could see him treated as just a common war mount, knowing he is Loki's son."

"A simple enough promise to make. If Sleipnir's form remains as it was in your first future, then it will only be by his own will that he is ridden," Frigga said. "As you said, my darling, he is no mere war mount, no matter what his form."

Thor felt some tension in his shoulders ease at the promise. "Thank you, Mother."

"There is nothing to thank me for, Thor," Frigga said. "Now, run along and see if your brother is up yet. If he isn't, don't wake him, he's been sleeping so poorly lately, but if he's up, remind him to eat."
"Yes, Mother." Thor started to leave, but then a thought occurred to him and he turned back to face Frigga. "Oh, did you know he found a new... predator to baby?" Thor asked. "It was sleeping in his bed when I looked in on him earlier."

Frigga sighed heavily and lifted a hand to her forehead. "What is it this time?"

"Um, I forget what Lord Ixtlilton called it, but if I remember it drowns people and eats their eyes," Thor said.

"Eyes," Frigga repeated.

Thor nodded. "And it has a hand on the end of its tail."

Frigga gave a helpless gesture with her own hand. "But, of course, why wouldn't it? I truly do not understand your brother's fondness for the most dangerous of things. The very first spell he tried to do was setting poor Fulla's broom on fire. It was a miracle I was able to convince him that illusions were more fun to cast or we wouldn't have had a palace left." Not that that had kept Loki from exploring fire spells all on his own where Frigga couldn't see, Thor noted to himself. "Fulla still double checks to make sure Loki isn't in the room before she picks up her broom."

Thor managed to suppress his smile at his Mother's utter exasperation but only barely. He had all but forgotten the broom incident when Loki was just learning his magic. "I couldn't say what his fascination is, Mother. Only that I don't think he ever loses it," Thor said.

"Your father will be less than thrilled," Frigga said with a sigh as she turned to go back to the tree he had found her under. "This is going to be like Freyr and his strange fondness for boars all over again," she murmured.

Thor felt his lips twitch as his smile fought to escape again. "I don't think it'll be that bad, Mother."

Frigga sighed again. "I do hope not."

"I've been thinking about getting goats," Thor offered lightly.

"Goats? Whyeever for?" Frigga asked as she looked over her shoulder at him in confusion.

Thor shrugged, and this time, his smile broke free. "I just like them. Especially the Jotnar Mountain breed that grows larger than oxen. I had them before."

Frigga turned around fully. "Where in the nine did you get Jotnar Mountain Goats? I thought they were extinct."

"Found them," Thor said, even though that was the shortest possible way of explaining. Really he had discovered them orphaned at a slaughterhouse and had convinced the owner of the establishment (who had no idea what he really had) to sell him the pair. "But they were lovely. I'll have to keep an eye out for them again."

Frigga shook her head. "Of all the problems I predicted from having five sons... the need for a zoo to hold all their pets was not one of them," she murmured as she started walking back towards the sizeable sacred tree again.

"Sorry, Mother," Thor said although he couldn't manage to make his voice sound particularly sincere.

"I'm sure. I know this is probably a futile request but try to keep Loki from adopting anything else
while we're here?" Frigga asked. "I'd rather not have a dangerous predator from every realm in the Nine at our palace."

"If he ever listened to me, Mother. I would do so," Thor said. "But I fear that is a fight I shall never win."

Frigga laughed a little and Thor finally turned to go check on Loki again. Loki didn't usually sleep this late in the morning. However, with the windows closed to keep out the sun and the cold air being funneled into the room he was staying in, Thor also wouldn't be entirely shocked if Loki was taking full advantage of the comfortable arrangements. Thor still very much wished that the pyramid had any other easy entrance because he was so tired of going up and down the massive stairs. Well, then again, Thor was almost positive there had to be other hidden entrances that he just wasn't aware of because he was a guest. Unfortunately, Loki wasn't in the mood to explore much lately, and he really was much better at finding little secrets like that than Thor was on his own.

As Thor climbed to the top of the pyramid, he heard the familiar roar of Ofnir. Thor looked around at the rooftops and frowned when he didn't spot the blue lizard, but then he saw a part of the sky move and looked further up. Ofnir was flapping hard but was succeeding in actually keeping himself aloft.

Then from over the mountainous rim of the caldera, a large form rose up into the air. It looked like a brilliantly green snake at first with a jaw full of long fangs and yellow scales spiraling from its jaws down the side of its long neck. But it only took a moment for Thor realized that, besides the enormous size the snake would have to be for it to lift its head over the side of the caldera as it had, it also had a thick ornamental headdress of gold and gemstones like a crown, and behind that a rainbow crest of different feathers. The headdress looked familiar, but Thor could not immediately place it. The giant snake kept rising, and Thor had a hard time telling what was scales and what was feathers. Massive yellow wings spouted from somewhere in the creature's feather-laden back and swept across the sky to propel the serpent even higher into the air. It's long body curled and spiraled as it rose up above Ofnir, who let out a roar before shifting his angle of flight.

Thor continued to watch in awe as the serpent actually flew up into the sky like some living swirling rainbow of scales and feathers. It was beautiful, and Thor admired how the serpent moved, and the sunlight bounced off its slender body. Ofnir swooped down to land hard on top of one of the nearby buildings, and his claws dug in to keep the young wyvern from then overbalancing and toppling off the thing. The serpent let out a great hissing noise that sounded remarkably like the roar of a jet engine and then spiraled down to wrap around the very pyramid that Thor was halfway up the side of.

The wind kicked up, making Thor narrow his eyes against the sudden gale, and tearing the feathers and scales of the serpent away like dead leaves. It was a cloud of every color imaginable, much like being in the Bifrost, and then every trace of the giant snake was gone. Thor blinked in surprise and looked further up to the top of the pyramid. Judging by the feathered headdress (that Thor now was able to recall) and the bright lines through his skin, Thor was able to identify Quetzalcoatl standing at the top of the stairs. Ofnir let out a trill and slithered down the side of the building he had landed on.
A little confused but also intrigued, Thor climbed the stairs to where Quetzalcoatl was standing. Ofnir was making his way closer as well. "He was only missing a good example to follow," Quetzalcoatl said as Thor got closer. "He had nearly taught himself everything he needed to know already and caught on remarkably quickly."

"That was you?" Thor asked as Ofnir scampered up the levels of the pyramid to wrap around the top section as if he himself was the giant feathered serpent. Thor had already mostly realized that fact, but it was still surprising due to the pure size that the serpent had been.

"It was," the older God confirmed.

"You were so large... you wrapped around the pyramid," Thor said, still slightly in awe of the sight. It reminded him of Jormungund only with a riot of colors and feathers. Jormungund was not dull, per se, but to see the variety of colors in his scales the light had to hit them at the right angle otherwise he appeared as black as night.

Quetzalcoatl smiled slightly and patted Ofnir's snout with one hand. Ofnir snuffled and pushed closer to get more of a pet. "I have some of what you would call wind giant blood in me. Just a small percentage, and it seems to only come out in the size of my other form, but it is there. Many centuries ago we had a small population of giants here, but they were wiped out. We don't even..."
"Oh, that makes sense," Thor said. From the lessons that Gerd had given Thor and Loki on giants, Thor knew that when a giant has a unique ability or power, it tended to be centralized around their physical form and that was linked with the same gene that made giants so... well, gigantic. Hence giants that could change their physical bodies tended to get even larger in other forms than was natural. So to know that Quetzalcoatl had giant's blood would definitely make the pure size of his serpent form make sense. The wings were still slightly odd, but Thor had seen far stranger.

"He is quite a fascinating creature," Quetzalcoatl said as his reptilian eyes moved over Ofnir's muscular form. Ofnir's dangerous tail swayed behind him and scraped over the stones of the pyramid. "Not entirely unlike my serpent form although his legs, I would imagine, make it easier for him to take off than it is for me."

Thor shrugged but supposed that was probably true. "He lacks feathers though which I'm sure makes it harder to control his flight," Thor said.

"He seems to manage well enough," Quetzalcoatl said. "I have noticed that his collar seems to be heavily enchanted..."

"It's to keep him cool. Wyverns are from cold realms so Loki enchanted the collar so that Ofnir would remain comfortable," Thor said. "Enchanting an entire room, though, is another matter I suppose. I don't know, magic is not my forte."

Quetzalcoatl nodded. "I shall have to remember to compliment your brother on his skills when next I see him. The enchantment is quite solid from what I can tell. Not something I thought one his age would be able to manage."

"He'll be happy to hear it," Thor said. "Loki takes great pride in his seidr craft. Anyway, I should be off. Mother has asked me to check on Loki."

"Ah, well, do not let me keep you," Quetzalcoatl said as he stepped to the side.

Thor nodded to the older God before hurrying past and into the cooler interior of the pyramid. It was impressive, Thor thought, how through mostly ingenious architecture they had managed to keep so much heat out of the stone construction. The ambient temperature was still hot, make no mistake, but compared to outside, Thor thought it much improved.

Thor made his way back to Loki's room and found that his brother was awake although he hadn't gotten out of bed. Loki was sitting up in the middle of the mattress and was petting the dark fur of the creature sleeping soundly beside him fondly. "Good morning, Brother," Thor greeted as he came fully into the room. "How was your sleep?"

"Mmm, better than I expected," Loki said. "I only had a few nightmares," he said as he got out from under the thin sheet that he had been using as a cover. Loki paused for a moment and closed his eyes.

"Alright, Brother?"

Loki took a deep breath and opened his eyes again. "I'm... as well as can be expected," he said before swallowing hard. There was a moment's pause. "Excuse me, Thor," Loki said before hurrying to the bathing chamber.

"Alright, Brother?"

Thor sighed and went to follow. The five handed creature jumped off the bed near soundlessly and rushed past Thor to follow Loki through the curtain. Thor wasn't even that surprised when he got to
the doorway and saw the creature rubbing up against Loki's side as he spat to clear his mouth of sickness.

"I see you found a friend," Thor said. "What's this one's name, Brother?"

Loki wiped his mouth with the back of one shaky hand. "I... have been calling her Huld."

"I see. I'm not even going to ask how she came to be in your room. Are you hungry?" Thor asked as he went to kneel down beside Loki. Huld, unlike Ofnir, seemed to ignore Thor and just nuzzled Loki's leg for attention until Loki reached down to scratch her behind her small silky ears.

"Hungry? Not particularly," Loki said as he pushed himself to his feet. "But I suppose I should eat something..."

"Try not to sound too enthused, Brother," Thor said. "Although, you might be happy to know that Ofnir seems to have mastered the art of flying finally."

Loki looked over quickly. "What?"

"I saw him just a few minutes ago flying in the air with Lord Quetzalcoatl," Thor said. "Well, maybe 'mastered' is a little strong yet, but he was keeping himself in the air and not just falling or gliding so I think that qualifies as having figured it out finally."

"That's fantastic... I shall have to find him some nice treats for having made so much progress," Loki said.

"You spoil him," Thor said although he was not particularly shocked by that.

Loki sniffed a little. "And?"

Thor shook his head. "Come on, Brother. I'll let you get dressed, and then we can go get you some breakfast."

After Loki had gotten dressed, the brothers made their way to the makeshift dining room with Huld trailing along behind Loki. Thor was glad when Loki managed to get through an entire bowl of sliced up fruits and even a small chunk of bread. Although it still wasn't as much as Loki would typically eat it was more than he had been eating at any one time for weeks. "I think there is some herb here that is medicinal," Loki said when Thor pointed it out. "Huld here gave me some last night, and my stomach is much improved," Loki added.

Huld crawled across Loki's lap and reached across the table with her tail to grab an egg that Loki had ignored entirely. Her big brown eyes studied them carefully as she quickly took the egg in her fore paws and sat back on her hind legs. Huld cracked through the shell with her sharp teeth and lapped up the gooey insides while her tail looped around Loki's arm. "You have a way with animals, brother," Thor said as he watched Loki again pet the creature affectionately.

"In a lot of ways I prefer animals to people," Loki murmured, still running his fingers through Huld's thick, dark fur. "They don't judge." Loki made a face suddenly. "Unless we're talking shapeshifting Ravens, I suppose..."

Thor chuckled. "I don't think Huginn and Muninn are the ones doing the judging, Brother. They just report to Father."

"Yes... little spies is what they are," Loki continued to grumble.
Thor rolled his eyes but didn't take Loki's complaints too seriously. If Loki really blamed the Ravens, then he would most likely throw more things at them. "If you are feeling better, shall we take some time to explore this place more thoroughly?" Thor asked as he picked up a freshly baked roll and put a thick slice of cheese on it.

"Mm, I have something else in mind, actually," Loki said softly. Thor lifted an eyebrow as he watched Loki fiddle with his fork. "You'll be going back to Asgard by the end of the week..."

"Yes," Thor said. He didn't want to do so, but his parents were insisting he didn't need to be in Aztlan with Loki.

Loki continued to play with his fork as Huld picked up another egg to eat on his lap. He didn't seem to notice the crunching of shells or the mess that dripped onto his pants. "I... want to ask a favor of you, Thor."

"Anything, Brother," Thor said instantly.

"I want you to pass along a letter," Loki said. "To Sigyn..."

Thor was mildly surprised that Loki would want to contact Sigyn so soon after what had happened. As far as Thor was aware they hadn't exchanged even a single word before Loki had been ushered out of Asgard. Thor decided it was a good thing. "Of course," Thor said.

"She deserves an explanation... even if I don't know how to... what I'm going to say yet," Loki said as he kept staring down at the remains of his breakfast.

"You don't have to tell her everything, Loki," Thor pointed out. Sigyn knew that Loki had been badly hurt. The extent and nature of those hurts wasn't necessarily something she needed to be fully aware of.

Loki shook his head. "If I don't, then she won't understand why I can't be with her anymore."

Thor felt a jolt that was something near panic go through him. "Loki, no," Thor said quickly as he reached out to take his brother's hand. "You needn't do anything like that."

"I do," Loki said, and his eyes looked watery. "What kind of a woman would want to be with me after this?"

"A good one," Thor said. "Which Sigyn is."

"It would dishonor her," Loki said. He quickly wiped at his eyes.

Thor squeezed Loki's other hand in an effort to give him support. "No, Loki. Don't let what he did destroy something that means so much to you. He has done you far too much hurt already."

Loki was silent for a few moments and wiped at his face again. "I... I don't want to but... if I don't and she finds out later-"

"Then nothing will happen," Thor said firmly. "Sigyn is not the type to abandon someone for having been hurt. You do not give her enough credit, Loki." Loki still looked on the verge of breaking into tears, and Thor realized that Loki must have already gone mentally spiraling down into the worst case scenario like he tended to do. "Write to her, Brother. But you needn't mention anything about what happened. Write to her like you did when we were in Vanaheim."

"I am not certain I can write such letters now," Loki said.
Thor shrugged. "I am sure she would like to just know you are well and hear your complaints about the weather if that is all you are up to writing," Thor said. "And maybe tell her that you miss her."

Loki scratched Huld's ears. "... I never said I missed her," he muttered.

"But you do," Thor insisted. When Loki's cheeks flushed pink, Thor grinned in triumph. "I will deliver your letter when I return to Asgard, Loki. And I expect she will be delighted to read it."

"I wish I had your optimism, Thor," Loki said. He made a face and lifted his hand to his mouth. "But I should lay down now... it seems that herb is starting to wear off," Loki said from behind his fist.

"I could see if I could find you more?" Thor suggested.

Loki shook his head. "It grows underwater, I think. Huld can fetch some for me. Can't you, precious?" Huld looked up at Loki with her big eyes before leaping off of the younger prince's lap and scampering off.

"Hmm, I believe I may have to correct myself," Thor said as he watched the fifth hand of Huld wave back at them before she disappeared out of a window.

"About what?" Loki asked.

"Earlier I said that you were babying Huld... but it looks as if she might be babying you," Thor said. A roll bounced off his temple a moment later, and Thor couldn't help but laugh at the annoyed look on his brother's face.

Loki spent most of the rest of the morning resting while nibbling at something that he steadfastly refused to show Thor at all. Thor didn't mind since whatever it was he was getting Huld to fetch for him kept Loki from running to throw up every five minutes. In fact, Loki only physically threw up twice more that whole morning. As such, Loki was in a markedly better mood than he had been in several weeks.

Ofnir was delighted when Loki played with him in the water with Huld that afternoon and Thor had to admit seeing both animals vying for his brother's attention was more than a little amusing. Thor soon got dragged into the water battle when Ofnir knocked him into the lake with his wing. Ofnir looked far too pleased with himself as Thor resurfaced sputtering, so Thor and Huld teamed up to take the more massive creature down. Loki thought it all very hilarious when Ofnir just lifted his head and long neck as if Thor and Huld weren't even holding onto him. It was remarkable how much stronger the lizard had become.

With Loki's physical discomfort at least partially alleviated by whatever herb he kept eating, Loki was steadily improving. He hadn't yet regained the weight he'd lost from the days where he couldn't keep anything down, but the bags under his eyes had reduced a bit. Loki still had nearly daily meetings with Ixtlilton and also with Lady Eir, which tended to take up several hours of his afternoon, but Thor thought his brother was less upset after those meetings than he had been.

Four days after Huld started following Loki around like a puppy, the sky lit up from a familiar shaft of rainbow-colored energy. The beam of light slammed into a large flat area that Thor had seen several games involving a ball being played since they'd been in the city. The Bifrost carved it's usual markings into the stone slabs for a moment and then vanished into the sky again.

Loki and Thor were sitting at the top of the main pyramid when the Bifrost landed, so they
watched with curiosity but were too far away to see who had arrived. "I wonder who that is..." Loki mused as he ripped the thick crust off of a slice of bread. Now that he had a better handle of his nausea, Loki's appetite was finally coming back, and he'd been nibbling on and off all day long.

"I think Gerd," Thor said as he popped a berry into his mouth. "Mother said that they would be coming once things between Alfheim and Vanaheim settled some."

"Mm, I hope you're right," Loki said. Huld, who had looked up at the flash of the Bifrost, settled back into where she had curled into Loki's lap and licked the fur of her tail back down. "As fascinating as this place is... some more familiar faces would be nice."

Thor nodded absently, but despite how he knew how helpful having someone like Gerd around would be, he was a little saddened. Thor knew that once Gerd was here, their mother would most likely send Thor back to Asgard. He didn't begrudge Loki extra support (was glad for it, in fact) but Thor wanted to stay and make sure everything was well. Despite every reason he could think of, Frigga had been adamant that Thor staying by Loki's side the entire time would be the wrong thing to do. Loki needed to recover mentally and emotionally and because it might be too telling that Thor knew things that he shouldn't. Thor wasn't entirely convinced it would be such a giveaway but since he'd already promised to go back didn't keep arguing about it.

"Should we go down and meet whoever it is?" Thor asked after a few moments.

Loki seemed to think but then shook his head. "No. I don't feel like going up and down these dratted stairs..." Loki said with a distasteful look at the several flights that stretched from the ground up to where they were sitting. Thor couldn't quite stop the chuckle at the expression on Loki's face. Loki just ignored Thor and pulled a strip of bread apart to put in his mouth.

The brothers waited for nearly twenty minutes before the recognizable slate colored figure of Gerd came up the stairs with Frigga and several others in tow. Loki nudged Huld who jumped off the darker prince's lap but didn't go very far at all. Loki and Thor quickly got up, and Gerd stopped a few steps down so that they were more or less at eye level with each other. "Heillr Gerd," Loki said as Huld wrapped her long tail around one of Loki's legs and stared up at the giant.

"Prince Loki. Prince Thor," Gerd greeted. Gerd looked slightly off color, and little dots of moisture were building across their mostly exposed skin from the heat of Aztlan. "I am glad to see you both looking... whole."

Gerd's very deliberate word choice almost made Thor cringe as he expected Loki to protest. The younger prince didn't argue with what was said, though. He seemed otherwise distracted, which Thor supposed was fair enough. The last time they had seen Gerd the situation had been so much different, after all.

Loki opened his mouth as if he was going to say something but then closed it again a moment later. The silence that lingered was oppressive, but Gerd continued to smile and offered their hand palm up to Loki. "Shall we go inside where it is not so horridly hot?"

Loki nodded. "That would be best, I think," he agreed. Loki's eyes were fixed on Gerd's hand, and Thor wondered what exactly his brother was thinking. Whatever it was, Thor didn't think it was anything particularly good. Loki almost reached out to take Gerd's hand but then stopped himself. Gerd luckily didn't press and just gestured with the extended hand for them to lead the way.

"I've been told that your room is much more tolerable. How about we go there?" Gerd suggested.

Again Loki nodded, and he turned to silently lead the way into the pyramid. Thor watched Gerd's
soft smile drop before they followed Loki. Thor definitely understood that sentiment. Frigga came
along as well as they headed down to Loki's room. Huld scampered around their feet carelessly
and, if Gerd thought the five handed animal was odd, they didn't say anything about it.

Gerd audibly sighed when they reached Loki's room, and the cold air washed over them. "This is
indeed much better than outside. I'm glad that they aren't forcing you to try and live in such
temperatures," Gerd said as they patted some of the sweat from their brow.

"The Gods of Aztlan have been very accommodating of all we've needed for Loki," Frigga said.
"He will be well taken care of."

Gerd flashed a small smile. "I'm sure." Then Gerd turned to Loki. "Come sit with me for a while
and tell me about this little creature you seem to have found. I saw your Ofnir outside. He's gotten
quite big even since I last saw him."

Loki relaxed some and walked with Gerd over to a set of low wooden chairs while already
explaining what Huld was and how they had found her trapped under a log after a storm. Frigga
relaxed as well and sighed just slightly. "Gerd being here is good for him," she said so softly that
Thor thought himself the only one to have heard her. "Perhaps with their presence, Loki will be
able to open up to Lord Ixtlilton finally."

"I wouldn't count on it, Mother," Thor said in an equally soft voice.

"I know you don't wish to return to Asgard," Frigga said after a moment. She turned more
completely to face Thor and put a hand on his shoulder. "But Loki will be well cared for here. You
needn't worry so."

"He's my little brother. I'll always worry for him," Thor said honestly. "I didn't do it enough
before... I forgot what was really important. I won't do it again."

Frigga hummed thoughtfully. "It is not just Loki you need to worry about, Darling." Thor was
somewhat confused by that. Frigga looked over at where Loki and Gerd were sitting. "Loki, dear,
we'll leave you and Gerd to catch up and see you at dinner?"

Loki glanced between them for a moment before nodding. "Yes, Mother."

"Good. Gerd, thank you again for coming," Frigga said before guiding Thor out of the room with
the hand still resting on his shoulder. Gerd nodded as they left before turning their attention back to
Loki, who was petting Huld.

Thor waited until the door was closed to Loki's room. "What do you mean Loki isn't all I need to
worry about?" Thor asked.

"Darling, your intentions are very good, and I'm very proud of all you've risked for the sake of your
brother, but this is not a burden you should feel you are solely responsible for." Frigga started
walking, hooking her arm with Thor's so that they kept pace together. "From everything you said it
was hardly just growing further apart from you that led to Loki's troubles. It was also caused not in
the least by the mistakes of your Father and me as well. You need to make certain that in your
effort to protect your brother, you don't lose sight of your own well-being in the process. You are
not alone in your love of Loki, and now you are no longer alone in knowing what our mistakes
could create," Frigga said.

Thor thought about that for a moment. "I don't mean to imply that you don't love Loki, Mother. It's
just... if I cannot do this..."
"Thor," Frigga reached out to tilt Thor's head so that the Thunder God was looking at her instead of the floor. "No matter how strong we are, support is necessary for all of us. And it is my job as your Mother to support both you and Loki. It could not have been easy finding Loki like you did or fighting that brute that hurt him, but I know you, my son, you have not stopped once since it happened to try and process it yourself. Take this time you are in Asgard to do so. I value your health just as much as I value Loki's. I'll not see you run yourself into the ground in an effort to fix something that will take time and patience and the help of those wiser in the ways of such trauma than us."

Thor looked back down the hall to Loki's room. "The last time we were parted... he was imprisoned and hated us all. He had done such horrible things and did not seem to care. Then he was gone," Thor said. He knew that was so far from likely to happen here as to be ridiculous, but his nerves didn't exactly follow logic at all times.

Frigga hummed thoughtfully. "Well, I will be staying here with Loki." There was an odd note in her voice, and Thor looked at her again to see an inferno burning in the depths of her eyes. Her power was leashed, but Thor was abruptly reminded of the monster in the Void that she had destroyed so effortlessly. "And there is nothing that will hurt my son again, Thor. Not while I can stop it. Any that try will find out what the Wrath of the Gods truly means." Thor felt a shiver of fear run down his spine even though he knew the threat was in no means directed at him.

Thor slowly gave a nod. He would still find it hard to leave Loki behind, but he knew his Mother was serious and more than powerful enough to back up her threats. There was probably no safer being in the universe than Loki right now.

Chapter End Notes

**The Sacred Tree** - Really a thing in Myths. Nobody was ever allowed to take anything from the tree. When one of the Goddesses did (Xochiquetzali, I believe) the tree split in two, everything went pear shaped and she was banished from Aztlan. I think the sky even turned red or something quite dramatic. Anyway, she wandered the world crying until she was literally rendered blind from how long and hard she'd cried for and her name changed to mean Ash-Eyed or something like that.

**The Sand Pile** - Also a thing! The reason Thor is not allowed to climb over it is because depending on how far up or down you climb it will adjust your age. Hence the mortals of Aztlan could stay forever young/alive by going up and down the hill of sand. I don't know if it has a name all it's own... probably, but I haven't come across it. Also the little thing about ants moving it grain by grain is a reference to the myth of discovering maize when an ant carrying a single kernel of corn led the way back to the mountain it was found in. The idea of having the ants take all the corn out kernel by kernel was tossed out because it would take too long. As an aside... the ants didn't actually move the sand pile in this story, that's just a story. Mythological figures can have myths too lol.

**Thor's Goats** - I swear he is going to get them... they just haven't been born yet. I have a few thoughts on a pet Thor could have to fill that hole they've left until they are but he's somewhat preoccupied at the moment. Also, yes, in the comics those goats are freakin' massive. So I decided they were from Jotunheim where everything is massive.
Giants in Aztec Myth- There are giants in Aztec mythology, though they don't feature nearly as prominently as they do in Norse myth. During the myth of the five suns, where the world is made and destroyed with different Gods being the sun each time, one of those worlds was populated by giants. They were all killed. So, because Quetzal up there turns into a giant feathered serpent and is a god of wind I thought it made perfect sense to claim that in this telling he had Wind Giant blood in him. In the family tree of giants I posted a while back it listed Wind Giants as one of the extinct subraces.

Thor's Baggage- Because he has a lot of it. He's got so many issues all tangled up together from guilt, to anger, to sadness, to his own pride, to a sprinkle of fear, a hero complex, and also he's a wee bit co-dependent. Thor needs to be needed and Loki has always needed, in some way, Thor. So Thor has a really hard time stepping back (hence this whole trip into the past in the first place). He needs Loki to need him and Frigga now sees this by the fact that Thor threw himself into the past so recklessly. So, she's trying to start getting Thor to realize he can take a step back here and there and let others do things. It's a small start but Frigga also knows how stubborn the men of Odin's line are, lol. She'll take what she can get.
Apart

Chapter Summary

Thor and Loki have to spend some time apart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Leaving Aztlan was far more difficult than Thor felt it had any right to be. Well, Thor supposed, if he were to be fair, it was leaving Loki behind that was harder than it was supposed to be. Thor tried to take comfort in Loki's utter exasperation and bits of teasing, but that was hard when it didn't seem like Loki was fully invested in what he was saying. Perhaps he was just projecting, but Thor didn't think that Loki particularly wanted to separate either.

Because Loki wasn't travelling with him, Thor was able to take the Bifrost back to Asgard. Therefore the trip took moments rather than a month. Odin and Tyr both were there waiting in Heimdall's observatory when Thor was deposited from the swirling shaft of rainbow light. "Thor. Welcome home," Odin said as Thor stepped forward. "You handle the Bifrost surprisingly well."

Thor was confused until he remembered that, up until this point, all of his trips had been by Hringhorni. What was that expression Midgardians had about the ease of riding bikes? Something about not being able to forget it or something, Thor thought. Thor supposed that the Bifrost was like that because he had readjusted to the sensations and forces involved without thinking about it. He hadn't even stumbled as he exited, which Thor had definitely done on his real first trip through the Bifrost. In fact, Thor remembered almost face planting onto the gleaming tiles.

"How did you enjoy Aztlan, Thor?" Tyr asked as he put a hand on Thor's shoulder.

"It was nice enough," Thor said. "Very lush vegetation and lots of water. Hot and humid, though. Loki found a new pet that eats people's eyes. But his illness seems to be starting to recede, so he's cheering up."

Odin hesitated for a moment, but then he slowly nodded. "That is good... and I suppose I should not be surprised your brother has found something dangerous to take in. He has an unsettling affinity for anything that should be left well enough alone. His lot as God of Chaos and Mischief, I suppose..."

"Father, who decides what we are Gods of?" Thor asked. That was a question that Thor had thought about off and on ever since he was first banished to Midgard and met Jane. The unerringly inquisitive Darcy had asked him the initial question and Thor hadn't been able to answer. Thor's own role of God of Thunder had simply been part of him for as long as he could remember and he'd never questioned it. Thor's powers had simply made his title seem too obvious to wonder over.

"As with most such questions, the answer is the Norns, Thor," Odin answered. "They see the future and what we will become. So they give us our titles based on that."

"Ah. Of course," Thor said as he climbed up onto the back of the horse that they had brought for him to ride.
Only once Thor was settled, and they had started down the bridge did Thor realize that he hadn't needed even a slight boost to get up into the saddle. He'd apparently grown those last few inches he'd required while he was gone. Thor hadn't filled out yet, but startlingly enough Thor realized he had surpassed his father's height. He was reasonably sure before he'd left for Aztlan he had been just a few inches shorter than his father. Time was definitely passing, but until then Thor hadn't realized just how much of it. When he'd first come back, he hadn't even reached Odin's shoulders.

The first night back in Asgard, Thor found himself unable to sleep peacefully. Flashes of something terrible happening to Loki kept waking him, and Thor eventually gave up trying. Since he slept so poorly, Thor was awake much earlier than usual and decided to go work through his frustrations in the training ring. Tyr and Odin both wanted him to start training with Mjolnir anyway, and, though she was too heavy for him to lift and swing for hours at a time, Thor had missed her familiar song in his mind. Mjolnir was not sentient in the traditional sense of someone that could carry on a conversation, but she was not just a chunk of metal either. There was a reason Mjolnir was given the power to decide her own wielder, after all.

Thor swung the hammer with more ease than he had in the shack and shattered a training dummy into a mass of flying splinters and straw. Mjolnir seemed to know that Thor was upset. The chiming in his head was lower and sweeter, a comforting sound opposed to the exciting songs brought on by combat. Thor threw Mjolnir across the training field and destroyed yet another dummy. The young-again God held his hand out while Mjolnir flew into the distance.

Thor strained his focus as Mjolnir got more and more distant. Finally, the hammer slowed in midair and then was pulled back. Thor was slightly surprised as he hadn't managed to recall Mjolnir in midair before then in this life. That surprise caused him to stumble back a few steps as he caught Mjolnir and nearly had his arm pulled out of its socket. Still, Thor managed to keep his grip on the handle.

"Excellent, Thor!"

Thor turned, slightly out of breath and red-faced, to see his brother standing there with a smile. Tyr easily hopped over the waist-high fence and came close to where Thor had been practicing. Thor saw now that he'd gathered a small audience while he'd been paying attention only to Mjolnir. The sun had also risen much higher in the sky than it had been when he'd started. "I didn't realize you were there," Thor said as Tyr came closer.

"Only for the last half hour or so," Tyr said. "You're getting used to her quickly. That's good. She's a formidable weapon."

"She is," Thor agreed as he shifted his grip on the leather-wrapped handle of the hammer. Thor looked down at the thick uru head of the weapon that hadn't yet been embossed with the triquetra from Odin's enchantment. Absently, Thor ran his thumb along the engravings over the corners of the hammerhead. He knew that those runes were the enchantment that held the Storm Tempest within Mjolnir. There was a warm buzzing feeling at Thor's fingertips that was both familiar and oddly comforting.

"I think your innate powers make Mjolnir better suited to you than it ever was to Uncle," Tyr said thoughtfully.

Thor frowned and looked up. "Uncle?" As far as Thor knew neither their Uncle Vili or Ve had ever wielded Mjolnir. The only one who had was Odin and even then only before he'd trapped the Tempest within the metal.

"Mm, yes," Tyr agreed. "Uncle Cul. He was the one that the hammer was made for originally, or
so the story goes. But, while he was powerful and formidable in his own right, his gifts did not lay in the realm of elemental power as yours does."

"I've never heard of an Uncle Cul..." Thor mused.

"No, Father never really speaks about him. He's not even recorded as being dead officially, but since hide nor hair has been seen of him since before I was even born, it is probably safe to assume he is," Tyr said. "Especially since Father found Mjolnir abandoned when he went looking for Cul, and from all accounts, Cul was not one to leave his weapon sitting around unattended."

Thor hummed thoughtfully as he lowered the hammer. "Have you ever been able to wield her, brother?" Thor asked.

"Me? Well, I tried when I was coming into my powers. I managed to lift her a few times, but I found her too unwieldy to use in actual battle," Tyr said. "Then again, I have always preferred a blade to a blunt weapon. Clubs and hammers and staves have never appealed to me much."

"I'd think you'd be quite good with them," Thor said.

"I'm quite good with all weapons," Tyr said with a wry smile. "That's hardly saying much at all. But I think that's enough training for the moment. You don't want to over-strain yourself. You started quite early this morning."

Thor made a face but went over to the side and put Mjolnir down. "I couldn't sleep."

"Something on your mind?" Tyr asked.

Thor wiped his face and neck of sweat with a towel. "Yes," he said. "I didn't like leaving Loki there in Aztlan even though I know he'll be safe and that Mother is there with him..."

"I don't think any of us are fond of the idea of Loki being away from home during this, but it is better for him," Tyr said. "He needed a place to go where he could recover fully."

"I know," Thor said as he kicked at the dirt of the training ground. "I still don't like it though."

Tyr clapped Thor on the shoulder. "It won't be for long." Thor sighed and nodded. "Now, get something to eat. You could use it after the effort you just put out."

"And I thought Mother was still with Loki."

"Hush, little brother," Tyr said without any venom. "Someone has to make sure you don't destroy yourself with your own hardheadedness."

Thor gave his elder brother a glare but allowed Tyr to guide him back inside the palace. After a quick meal and a short rinse off, Thor remembered what he had promised to do for Loki. The thick parchment was folded onto itself several times and sealed with golden wax. Thor tucked the letter into his pocket and made his way through the halls to the healer's wing.

In Lady Eir's absence, Assistant Head Groa was in charge of the healing wing. Groa looked slightly frazzled with her hair trying to escape the bun she had put it in, but she was still managing and cheerful despite the apparent stress. She also noticed the moment that Thor walked into the room. Groa's dark eyes scanned over Thor quickly -probably for injuries- before settling on his face. "My Prince, what brings you to us today?"

"Ah, I was actually hoping to speak with Sigyn if I could," Thor said as he glanced around for any
sign of the blonde in question.

Seeing how Thor wasn't injured, Groa immediately turned to the papers she had been leafing through and marking things down. "I sent Sigyn out to gather some medicinal herbs from the garden," Groa said without looking up. "I only sent her out about half an hour ago so she still should be there."

Thor nodded. "I see. Thank you, Healer Groa."

"Of course," Groa said. She looked up just long enough to give Thor a brief smile and nod but was called by another healer that was standing beside a recruit with a bloody gash on his face.

The herb garden of the palace was the smallest section of all the planned bedded areas by virtue of the fact that most herbs simply didn't take up all that much room. Thor had to wander through the various vegetables growing closest to the entrance to the garden. After passing by a few fruit-bearing trees that had been gifted to Asgard from some of the other Pantheons - most notably a pomegranate tree from Persephone -, Thor spotted Sigyn picking leaves off of some small bush and laying the snipped bits in the woven basket beside her.

"Sigyn," Thor called as he approached.

Sigyn half-turned with her hands still partially buried in foliage. "Prince Thor!" Sigyn smiled brightly and quickly got to her feet. She used the apron she was wearing to wipe the dirt and bits of leaves off her fingers. "I had heard you'd returned!"

"Just last night," Thor said. "And you needn't use my title."

"Well, let's just say I'm not as comfortable risking that just yet. I haven't known you for years like Sif or the others," Sigyn said.

"You never call Loki by his title," Thor pointed out.

Sigyn gave a pixie-wicked smile. "I call him other things, Prince Thor," she said in a teasing tone. "Things I'm sure you'd rather not be called either. Especially not where others can hear them. They might get the wrong idea about us two."

Thor stared for a moment before laughing loudly. "And here people think that Loki will be a bad influence on you. Truly, they have no idea of the truth of the matter."

"People always think me so sweet," Sigyn said. She even fluttered her lashes lightly. "But that is fine by me. That just means that I surprise them all the more. But tell me, why have you come all the way out here to the gardens?"

"I was looking for you," Thor said as he reached into the pocket of his tunic.

"Oh?"

Thor nodded and pulled out the parchment to hand over to Sigyn. "Loki tasked me to give this to you. He agonized over it quite a bit. I think I saw half a dozen or so scrapped attempts when he handed me this one," Thor said. Loki probably wouldn't appreciate Thor sharing that bit of knowledge, but Thor didn't care, and Sigyn was smart enough that she wouldn't bring it up when Loki returned. "I... tried to encourage him to be positive but... you know him..."

Sigyn nodded and took the letter carefully. She looked down at it for a moment before sliding her thumb under the wax to break the seal. Thor couldn't help but be anxious as he watched Sigyn...
read. Loki was so hard-headed, and Thor could never tell when any advice he gave was going to be taken or not.

Slowly, Sigyn began to smile. "He's sweet," Sigyn said as she folded the letter up. "He's trying to make me not worry about him, but I can tell he's not alright yet."

"How?" Thor asked.

"Because he spent half the letter rambling about nothing," Sigyn said. She put the folded edge of the letter up by her lip as she stared off at nothing, apparently thinking. "Loki has never just rambled about unimportant things before. I am glad he wrote, though. I have been worried."

"I will be revisiting him before long. Do you want me to take him a reply?" Thor offered.

Sigyn nodded, still staring off. "Yes, I would very much like that."

"I'll let you know when I'm next going back, so you have plenty of time to write what you wish," Thor promised. "He will be happy to hear from you. He tries not to act like he does, but I can tell that Loki misses you."

"I miss him as well," Sigyn said. "Nobody here is as funny as he is."

"He'll get better," Thor said firmly. "I know it."

Sigyn finally blinked and seemed to focus on the present more fully. "I have no doubt," she said with a half-smile.

"Sigyn!" a new voice shouted and a look of pure exasperation crossed the pretty apprentice's face. Thor felt his eyebrow go up and turned to see a boy a little older than himself coming closer. The older boy's blonde hair was intermixed with enough brown that it reminded Thor of dirty dishwater and the scraggly beard he had grown was clearly an attempt to look full-grown, but it was not nearly full enough to achieve that.

"Bjarke..." Sigyn said with so little enthusiasm in her voice, it was truly remarkable.

Behind Bjarke, his four friends were looming, and Thor shifted closer to Sigyn instinctively. Bjarke's friends were all just as large as Bjarke and were various shades of blonde or brunette. Thor couldn't for the life of him remember their names. They were never seen apart from Bjarke so the just sort of melded into one singular thing in his head known as Bjarke's friends.

Thor supposed it wasn't really good that he could just not know names of people that were ostensibly his peers and showed how self-absorbed he had been as a child, but he didn't really care in this instance. Bjarke and his friends had never been the friendliest sort. "So, have you put any more thought to my offer?" Bjarke asked Sigyn.

"Why would I do that when I already told you my answer?" Sigyn asked with her hands on her hips.

Bjarke's confident smirk fell slightly. "Oh come now, don't be like that," he said. "You owe me a chance at least!"

"I owe you nothing," Sigyn said.

"Bjarke, I'd advise you to leave her alone," Thor said as he stepped forward to be more directly between Bjarke and Sigyn. He didn't like how this was developing in the least.
"This isn't your business, Thor," Bjarke said.

Thor's eyebrow went up. "Oh, isn't it?" he asked. "Because it seems to me that you are accosting my brother's beloved right in front of me. So that would very much be my business. Also, it's Prince Thor." Thor didn't usually insist on his title, but in situations like this, it was handy to have as a reminder.

Bjarke scowled but recognized the reprimand for what it was and bowed at the waist just enough for it to be proper. "Of course. I meant no disrespect, Prince Thor."

"I think you'd best be on your way," Thor said, not bothering to point out Bjarke very much meant his disrespect. The other Asgardian was still sour-looking but knew better than to outright fight the dismissal and turned to leave with his little gang of followers.

Only once they were wholly gone did Sigyn turn to Thor. "Thank you for that. Bjarke is quite insistent and is quite frankly wearing my patience down to shreds."

"I can ban him from the grounds if you'd like," Thor offered.

"That might make him think I'm trying to spite him," Sigyn said as she bent down to gather her basket full of herbs. "So, I'd rather not do that unless he becomes more than just a nuisance. I have heard he has a temper that I'd prefer to avoid if possible."

Thor nodded. "He does have a temper. Wants to become a berserker."

Sigyn rolled her eyes. "Of course he does. I'll bet he doesn't realize how taxing that particular method of fighting is. And that not everyone is able to do it properly. It is usually those without tempers that are most effective as berserkers rather than those that fly off the handle in a moment's notice."

"Well, he will find out when he tries to take the test," Thor said as he walked with Sigyn back into the nearest entrance of the palace, which happened to be the kitchen. "If he bothers you again, tell me. I will make sure that he leaves you be."

"You needn't bother yourself over it," Sigyn said. "I can handle someone like Bjarke."

Thor smiled. Considering Sigyn was able to handle Loki, Thor had absolutely no doubts she could handle a less cunning opponent like Bjarke. "I know you can, Sigyn, but I don't think you should have to."

Sigyn smiled even wider. "You Odinson boys are so sweet," she said. "But enough talk about little annoyances like that. Tell me about this Aztlan. Loki says it's miserably hot?" Thor laughed. He could imagine Loki saying quite a few things about Aztlan beyond just 'miserably hot.'

So, Thor walked Sigyn back to the healer's ward and told her about Aztlan, probably repeating what Loki had already said in his letter, but Sigyn didn't seem to be bothered if that were the case. They made a long winding route back through the palace so that the conversation lasted. As they approached the ward, Thor glanced over at Sigyn. "I don't think I've asked... but how do you like it here in Asgard compared to your home in Vanaheim?"

"Well, there is a lot to get used to," Sigyn said. "But other than missing the water that we lived right beside, I like it here just fine. Asgard is so much bigger than where I'm from though. It's even bigger than the capital of Vanaheim, and I thought that was a sight to behold being on the hill like it was."
"So you are not from the capital?" Thor wasn't sure if he'd ever known that about Sigyn. If he had known it it had clearly never sunk in.

"No," Sigyn said. "I'm from the northern fjords. Ravndal, specifically. We had a really breathtaking view."

Thor hummed thoughtfully. "We haven't gone that far north. The furthest we've been is to our brother's home on Breidablik," he said.

"Yes, Loki wrote to me about that. He said the lake was really quite lovely," Sigyn said as she shifted the basket from the crook of one arm to the other. "Of course, nowhere in Vanaheim is really like Noatun. It doesn't generally get hot enough for people to want to run into the ocean just for fun and to cool off. Besides, there are so many lakes and rivers you're bound to be closer to one of those than the coast."

"You Vanir are really quite spoilt for choices when it comes to bodies of water," Thor said. "We here in Idavoll have the bay... and if you want to travel a little way... marshes."

"There are rivers and lakes here in Asgard," Sigyn said with a small laugh.

"Yes, but not like in Vanaheim," Thor said. "It feels like you can't throw a stone without hitting a river."

Sigyn laughed and shook her head. "Everyone always prefers everything but what they have," she said. "But I should return to work. These herbs need to be dried and prepared before they can be used."

Thor nodded. "Of course. I'll come to see you again soon. And remember to tell me if Bjarke bothers you again."

"Yes, yes, you sound like Loki. Go on then," Sigyn said with a shooing motion. Thor couldn't help but laugh loudly at that as he went off to go and find his friends.

Over a month had passed since Thor had seen or spoken to his group of friends and while he didn't regret making sure Loki was safe and taken care of he did still miss the company of Fandral, Dagr, Hogun, Astrild, and Sif. He also missed Sven. Thor should see if they could bring Sven to Asgard soon so that all of his friends could be together for a while. It would still be incomplete without Loki there but hopefully also a nice distraction.

Finding his friends was not in the least bit challenging. They had gathered in the very same training grounds that Thor had been using that morning. Sif was sparring against Hogun while Astrild occasionally shouted advice at them and Thor watched for a moment and gauged how far Sif's training had been progressing. She wasn't yet skilled enough to best Hogun, but Thor didn't think it would be much longer before she had him matched.

After a minute passed, Thor called out to his friends and crossed the remaining distance. His friends were quite pleased to see him, and the training session broke apart to catch up on all that had happened to everyone while Thor had been gone. After chatting awhile, they ended up in Odrerir having a good time. They also witnessed Volstagg making a complete lovesick fool of himself over Hildegund—who seemed to be enjoying the spectacle with her two sisters.

Thor slept like the dead that night with the help of the mead he'd downed at the bar. The next night was less successful for Thor, and so was the night after that. Distraction was harder to come by when Thor was trying to rest. Thor just couldn't quite shake the persistent knowledge that Loki was
off in Aztlan struggling with everything and the thought that Thor should be there with him.

To keep himself busy, Thor devoted himself to helping his friends catch Sif up to their current training class, reacquainting himself with Mjolnir, and building his own skills so that nothing like what happened to his brother could ever happen again. If Thor was going to call himself a protector of anything, he had to live up to such a role. Training took up most of his time, but after a week or so, Thor remembered that he had also sworn to be a better student and tried to catch up on the schoolwork he'd utterly forgotten about. He missed Loki terribly as he attempted to muddle his way through different subjects.

Sigyn found him trying to make sense of a star chart one night in the library and stepped in to help. So, Thor managed to at least keep pace with the work Lady Vor was giving him with Sigyn tutoring him in place of Loki. Hogun and Astrild also helped when Sigyn was too busy with her duties in the healing ward. None of them could quite explain things as succinctly as Loki, but he was infinitely grateful for their help anyway. Thor thought he'd have torn his hair out if left to his own devices.

After about a week and a half, Thor managed to convince Odin to invite Sven to Asgard. The half Alfr boy was in awe of Asgard and the fact that he was there as a guest to the Prince. Thor and his friends were only too happy to introduce Sven to all the things their home had to offer. But, what was a little more surprising than that, was that by pure happenstance, when Sven arrived in the Observatory Jarl -Heimdall's youngest son and nephew to Sif and Dagr- had been there and the two boys had hit it off. So, while showing Sven around, Jarl tagged along as well and brought their group size to eight -nine when Sigyn had time between her duties to join them.

One of the days that Sigyn was able to join them, the group decided to venture to Noatun. The temperature was a little chilly still, but none of them minded that, and it helped ensure the beach would be less crowded. As usual, it took a few hours ride to get to Noatun as it was a stretch of south-western coastline only a little distance from the mountain range that cradled the plains of Idavoll and the forest of Jarnsvindr. The journey itself was not particularly dangerous as the road skirted through the thinner and less risky section of Jarnsvindr down near where it broke apart into a small marshy estuary.

Sigyn seemed to adore the beach. She spent most of her time in the water with the rest of the group rotating in and out. Hogun swam quite a distance out beyond the breaking of the waves to float on his back. Fandral was combing the beach looking for something and enlisting the help of Dagr's keen eyes with the task. Astrild and Jarl had started an impromptu archery contest once they discovered they were both skilled with a bow. Sif was hunting for crabs and other shellfish by digging through the sand and diving into the water. Thor helped Sif in that endeavor and shortly after midday, between the two of them, they had managed to capture a large enough bounty to provide part of a lunch. Astrild and Jarl shot down a few sea birds and even a scrawny deer to round out the picnic.

Thor licked the grease from his fingers as he peered over Sven's shoulder to see what the half-Alfr had been doing for most of the morning from the top of the sand dune he'd claimed immediately upon their arrival. "That's very good," Thor said as he saw the drawing of the rest of the group doing their various activities on the beach.

Jarl, hearing what Thor said, came over as well and glanced down at the pad of paper Sven had in his lap. "It is good," he said before brushing a few loose braids of dark hair behind his ear. Most of the multitude of small twists that Jarl's hair was in had been pulled back out of the way but after a full morning of swimming and archery had loosened the tie enough for quite a few braids to escape. "You really captured everyone well," Jarl said.
Sven flushed a little. "Thanks but it's really just doodling..."

"Just take the compliment," Jarl said. "It was an honest one. It is a good drawing."

"Nobody really says much about my drawing is all," Sven said as he fiddled with the stick of charcoal in his hand.

"Well get used to it," Jarl said before ruffling some of Sven’s blonde hair. Sven jerked his head away with a little bit of a scowl, but Jarl just laughed good-naturedly.

A moment later, Fandral crowed in victory from a way down the shoreline. "What's with him?" Hogun asked from where he had been lounging under a scrubby tree clinging to a patch of nearby turf. Up in the tree, the familiar black silhouette of Huginn was perched watching everything going on carefully.

"He's been looking all day for something," Thor said. "But I have no idea what."

Fandral came rushing back to the group of them holding something in his hand. Dagr followed behind him at a much more sedate pace. Fandral came to a stop, kicking up some coarse sand as he did. With a grin, Fandral held up what he'd found. The bright Asgardian sunlight filtered through the bright blue substance and shined just a little. "Sea glass?" Sif asked.

"That's right," Fandral said proudly. "You know how hard this stuff is to find? I've been looking for it every time we've come here for the last decade!"

"Why?" Jarl asked.

"Because swimming messes up his hair or something silly," Dagr said as he trudged up to the rest of them. "And he keeps dragging me into it."

"You don't have to help," Fandral said back with a bit of snark in his voice. "You could go do whatever else you wanted if you really minded so much."

Dagr just rolled his golden eyes and flopped down onto the sand near where Sven was sitting. "So, why sea glass?" Sif asked again. "Why not seashells or something like that?"

"Because sea glass is more rare and amazing than plain old boring shells," Fandral said. "And this one is even blue... which is ten times better than just clear or white glass."

"What are you going to do with it now that you have it?" Jarl asked.

Fandral paused at that and frowned. Thor tried to suppress his amusement that Fandral obviously hadn't thought that far ahead but wasn't entirely successful. After a moment's thought, Fandral turned to Astrild. "Astrild. Here."

The bit of sea glass went flying and Astrild only just managed to catch it before it hit his head. Astrild blinked at the glass in his hand for a moment. "Enjoy. I'm going to go find another," Fandral said before heading back to the surf.

Astrild turned the bit of frosted blue glass over in his hand before shrugging and pocketing it. "I guess he's going to just give them away," he said.

"Then why do you get the first one?" Sigyn wondered.

"Everyone knows Fandral loves Astrild the most," Dagr said with a sly grin. Astrild threw a punch,
but Dagr quickly ducked away. "Oh, please, you're not good enough to take me."

"Wanna bet?" Astrild challenged. And just like that the two of them were chasing and shouting at each other.

Thor chuckled some and decided it was the perfect time to cool off in the water. Sigyn rolled her eyes at the antics of the boys and went into the surf herself.

They ended up staying at the beach until just a little after the sun had set. The breeze off the ocean started getting particularly cold, and they still had several hours of travel to get back to Idavoll. Sigyn and Sven both were capable of summoning little orbs of light and did so as their group rode back, tired but pleased with the way the day had gone.

Before the group split apart at the stables, Thor turned to Sven. "Sven, that picture you drew. Might I have it?"

Sven looked surprised. "Uh, of course. If you want it..."

"I do," Thor said.

"Alright," Sven said before carefully pulling out the sheet of parchment he'd drawn on and handed it over. Thor thanked him and rolled the paper up to keep it from smudging and tucked it away.

Although Thor knew nothing would really make Loki feel as if he were there, Thor hoped that having the picture might at least make his brother smile a little. Loki most likely needed a little cheering up. Next time Thor went back to Aztlan to see Loki he wanted to fill Loki in on everything that he'd missed. Hopefully, Loki would take the gesture as it was meant -a comforting one- and not get upset with Thor. Even though Thor was confident he'd been doing much better in that regard -judging his brother's reactions- he would never dare claim himself perfect at it.

Thor put the drawing into a satchel full of other things that he thought Loki might appreciate or want to have that he'd been collecting while he was in Asgard. Sven offered to draw a couple more pictures once he realized why Thor had asked for the first and so Thor managed to get a quite a few lovely drawings and even a portrait of Sigyn for his brother. Sigyn wrote several letters that Thor put in the bag as well.

Sigyn and Sven were getting along quite well due to both coming from Vanaheim and not being fighters. Although, Sif seemed to have taken it upon herself to give both of them at least a few pointers. Thor wasn't sure how much either of them appreciated the effort, but they went along with the few times it happened without too much complaint.

About a week and a half after the beach trip, Thor was making his way from the stables -where he still had extra chores- around to the gardens. He figured so that he could take a nice break by one of the ponds or fountains. As he rounded a corner, he heard raised and awfully familiar voices.

"You're being ridiculous!"

"I am not ridiculous. You're being a pig!" Sigyn snapped.

Thor frowned and saw Bjarke looming in front of Sigyn with an ugly expression on his face. "Why would you want a scrawny sickly little guy like Loki when you could have a warrior like me?"

Bjarke asked, thumping his chest with his fist.

Sigyn scoffed. "If I wanted someone easily replaceable with a toy and imagination maybe. But I'm a little more complicated than that," she said scathingly.

Bjarke frowned and seemed puzzled. "I think you should leave her alone, Bjarke," Thor said. "I've
told you once already. And now I hear you insulting a son of Odin and Prince of Asgard.

Bjarke whipped around quickly. "Prince Thor!"

"I suggest you leave the grounds and not return," Thor said. The sky was growing darker, and off in the distance, thunder rumbled. "I'll be telling the guards not to let you in from now on. Don't test me further."

"Oh, come on! Even you have to admit your brother isn't much!" Bjarke said.

"Out!" Thor snapped along with the sound of thunder cracking off in the distance. Bjarke jumped and scurried away. Thor would have to tell the guards to keep the other youth away from the palace before Thor decided to teach the idiot a lesson he wouldn't soon forget. Once Bjarke was gone Thor looked over to Sigyn. "Are you alright?"

Sigyn nodded. "Yes, of course. He's a nuisance but knows enough to not try and touch me at all. He just shoots his mouth off like the moron he is," Sigyn said. "Since Loki's not in Asgard he's been getting more persistent, though. I guess he thinks I can't handle myself or will get lonely or something silly."

"Well, you won't have to worry about him any longer. I'm banning him from the grounds," Thor said. "I can't believe he'd keep bothering you after what I said last time."

"I believe it," Sigyn said. "Bjarke isn't the brightest. He thinks he's the Norns' Gift to women or something."

Thor grunted. If he remembered right Bjarke from his first life hadn't ever amounted to much and Thor was reasonably sure that the man had never married. No wonder really, now that Thor had seen how the boy flirted. "Are you lonely, though? Without Loki?" Thor asked.

Sigyn shrugged. "Perhaps a little. But we've been apart for most of our relationship... first because he was in Vanheim and now that he's in Aztlan... I do wish he were here at home but... well, he won't be gone forever, and I can keep myself entertained," Sigyn said. "This isn't prehistory or anything. I've got my studies and things I like to do in my spare time."

"Well, tonight we're taking Sven out to celebrate his last night in Asgard. Did you want to come?" Thor asked.

"Mmm, Odrerir?"

"Of course," Thor said. "Where else is worth our coin?"

"Where indeed," Sigyn asked with a grin. "Alright, I suppose I could join you. Sif will probably need help hauling your drunken arses back home anyway."

Thor laughed. "We hardly have such a reputation."

"Perhaps not yet," Sigyn said. "But give it time, Prince Thor. I think all of Asgard has heard the sort of things your brothers got up to after a few tankards got into them."

"Ah, now that's not fair," Thor said. Thor was definitely not his brothers, after all.

Sigyn flashed another smile and winked. "We'll see."

Later that night, Thor was very proud to say that he did not need to be carried home. Although he
wasn't sure how he ended up there. He couldn't remember much of what happened after he started drinking although Thor was certain he'd made it home under his own power. He also was fairly sure he saw Astrild getting shot down by some pretty girl in a flowery dress much to Fandral's amusement and Sif flinging her brother across a table.

Thor woke up the next day closer to lunch than breakfast with a pounding headache. He had somewhat forgotten was a truly overwhelming hangover could be since Midgardian liquor barely gave him one at all even after drinking for hours and he didn't often indulge in Asgardian brews to the point he had the night before. Then again Thor didn't have the muscle mass he used to so he probably had miscalculated how much he could drink before it was too much.

Loki flipped through the pages of his book without really reading any of the text there. Lady Vor had sent several pages of curriculum that Frigga was working with Loki on. The work was challenging and about subjects that Loki enjoyed, but he couldn't focus on any of it. Despite having both Ofnir and Huld there with him, Loki was feeling oddly lonely. Probably because he couldn't remember ever in his life being parted from Thor. While his brother often annoyed him to no end, Loki couldn't deny that Thor was his best friend and terribly reassuring to have by his side.

The pictures of the nine realms on the pages shifted and moved as Loki stared at them, but he wasn't actually processing what he was looking at. Loki watched as runic script rotated around different celestial bodies that seemed to revolve on the page. A cold stream of water suddenly went down the back of his shirt and Loki couldn't help but yelp in surprise. Loki jumped up from his seat and looked around. He didn't spot anyone, but he heard poorly muffled laughter. Loki narrowed his eyes. "Who's there?" He didn't really mind the cold water, other than the surprise it actually felt rather good, but Loki wasn't often the one on the receiving end of such things.

A curtain off to the side fluttered, and Loki sent out waves of emerald green, and golden seidr rippled out from his hand. There was a yelp as the fabric sprung to life and wrapped around whoever was hiding behind it. Loki went over and, after a moment's struggle, managed to unwind the cloth from the head of his 'visitor.'

Loki couldn't quite help from jumping as the face of some sort of dog-like beast came at him from between the curtains. The long slender jaws snapped, and the creature's pearly teeth gleamed in the light. Loki summoned a dagger to his hand, but before he could gouge out the creature's bright yellow eye, it started laughing.

As Loki stared, the elongated face almost seemed to melt and crumple in on itself. What was left after the head shifted and molded into a new shape was a man with dark copper skin, feathers braided into his shoulder-length hair, and bright lupine eyes rimmed with thick black coal and a line of yellow paint. "I learned that from Seth," the man said with a sharp grin. "Pretty neat, huh? The Enneads really love that shifting their heads into animals thing."

"Who are you?" Loki asked, not releasing his grip on the dagger in his hand.

"Huehuecoyotl," the man said before disappearing from the curtain bundled around him. He reappeared a moment later off to one side. "You looked bored. I decided to introduce myself. I'm very popular, you know. I throw the best parties. Really. Everyone talks about them for ages. You should feel privileged I came by to say hello. People will be very envious of you."

Loki blinked. All of that had been said very quickly. To the point, Loki wasn't entirely sure that his surprise visitor had breathed at any point during that. "... I think you're not entirely truthful about that." Loki couldn't be entirely certain, but he usually was pretty damn accurate when picking out lies.
The other God looked offended for a moment before shrugging. "Yeah, alright, maybe a little exaggerated, I'll grant. But you're still very lucky that I have decided you worth my interest enough to be introduced to me. I know everyone who's anyone around here. And like I said, the best parties. Everyone says so. Even the mortals... although they do sometimes get a little out of hand. But I mean... is it any fun if there isn't a risk of things getting out of hand? And, honestly, it only happens on the rare occasion."

"Uh huh," Loki said, still not entirely believing that.

"You can put the dagger down," Huehuecoyotl said with a nod in the direction of the weapon. "I'm not going to hurt you or anything. I'm really the peaceful sort. Besides... it's only a dagger. It wouldn't actually do that much to me."

Loki looked to the dagger in his hand and then back at the God in front of him that looked like he was probably a good seven or eight centuries older than Loki was. "Right..." With a little more hesitation, Loki sent the dagger back into the pocket dimension that it came from. "How'd you even know I was here?"

Huehuecoyotl rolled his yellow eyes. "Oh please. You're the most interesting thing that's happened here in centuries. Also, Xochiquetzalli mentioned you. Apparently, she's been talking with some of your party about your... um... situation."

Loki scowled. "They've been talking about me?"

The other God seemed to hesitate, and his eyes flicked around quickly. "Well... I mean, for health reasons. Xochi isn't a gossip... but she's got a knack for helping first-time mothers and things like that. Trust me, she's lovely. You have nothing to worry about."

"I'd prefer nobody to know about that," Loki said as he went to close the book on his desk that he hadn't even been reading.

"Ah..." Loki spotted the other God scratching at his temple awkwardly. "Sorry? But... I mean... it is sort of obvious."

Loki scowled and put a hand to his expanding stomach. Even wearing loose tunics, his belly was a prominent curve. "Thanks so much," he said sourly. "I hadn't noticed how fat I was."

"Okay, hold on, I didn't say anything about being fat," Huehuecoyotl said. "I'm not stupid. And anyway, I was thinking you'd want to get out of this room and have some fun. You know, while you can. I hear being pregnant tends to become physically demanding there near the end. Of course, if you'd rather sit around and pout for the whole however long you have left, by all means, I would just get terribly bored with it. Your mother said something about also being one to get bored easily, so I thought, why not. Of course, I can't make you. It's all up to you. So, want to go make Tlaloc pull his hair out from frustration? It takes a lot of effort. Tlaloc has some crazy amount of patience... but it's so worth it in the end."

"... and how do you plan on making that happen?" Loki asked, unable to help but be intrigued by the challenge presented to him.

"Well, last time I had a lot of luck with filling his room full of sand... that took a lot of effort though," Huehuecoyotl said. "So I was thinking maybe something with rotted fruit... something larger than sand anyway."

"So, what happens when he gets frustrated anyway?" Loki asked.
Huehuecoyotl grinned wolfishly. "Oh... it's a magnificent storm of fantastic proportions."

"Is that what caused that one a month ago?" Loki asked. Even though he'd blamed Thor for it endlessly, Loki had known it hadn't actually been his fault.

The other God's grin widened. "Maybe."

"Well, I'm not afraid of storms," Loki said. It would be rather difficult to be afraid of them when Thor could call them with so little effort.

"Fantastic," Huehuecoyotl said as he threw his arm around Loki's shoulders. "I can't wait to see how old blue-boy reacts to this one. Maybe we'll even get hail if we do good enough."

"Is that something we want?" Loki asked.

The once coyote headed God shrugged. "It would certainly be a sight to behold. I don't often get him to hail down upon us."

"Can I call you something other than Huehuecoyotl? It's kind of long..." Loki said.

The other God seemed to think. "How about we just go with Coyotl?" Huehuecoyotl suggested. "Not so fond of the first half of my name anyway. I mean, I'm not that old. Quetzalcoatl is much older than I am and yet I'm saddled with Huehue like I'm some ancient, grey feathered old thing... So, yeah, we can go with Coyotl. That'll work for now."

"Right..." Loki said. He hadn't anticipated stumbling on to an apparent sore spot, but he was pretty sure he'd found one.

"I hate the fates. They're such bitches," Coyotl complained.

"Yeah," Loki said. "I heartily agree..."

There was a moment of silence. "Let's go cheer ourselves up by being obnoxious to other Gods, yeah? It'll be fun."

"I feel my mother will call you a bad influence," Loki said.

Coyotl grinned again. "What are you talking about? I am the best influence."

"Lies."

"I guess you'll find out."

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**Sigyn Goddess of Fidelity**- Sigyn is showing her steadfast loyalty here. People think they can move in on Loki's girlfriend but they'd be wrong.

**Sea Glass**- Considering what sea glass actually is (manufactured glass that has been worn to a frosty surface after a long time in the ocean) there is not at all much of it on Asgard. They don't have too many ship wrecks on Asgard anymore.
Seth - He'll be appearing more a way down the line but this is his first mention. Brother of Osiris, he's the Egyptian God of lots of things including Storms, trickery, and chaos. In Marvel Set and Seth are two distinctly different characters and Seth is the Egyptian one hence I'm sticking with that here. Marvel Seth has masqueraded as the Marvel Set in the past and I imagine this was to explain how mythology would more likely use Set rather than Seth. Not that Egyptian names are easy mind you! Pick one people! Just one!!! And we haven't even gotten to them in this story... *sigh*

Enneads - That's what Marvel calls the Egyptian pantheon.

Huehuecoyotl - The Aztec God of parties, male sexuality, mischief, and song. He's also a coyote God which you can kind of see there at the end of his name. The first part of his name 'Huehue' means apparently old old... which is why he complains about it here (even though that's not really an insult from what I can gather. It's sort of seems to be like wise old sage mode type of thing). Huehuecoyotl also is known for his shapeshifting powers like a lot of mischief gods seem to be and also has been depicted female in the past. I thought he and Loki would get along just famously all considered.

The Mischief Gods - I read this fic a while ago where all the mischief gods sort of came together for Loki (I'll have to try and find it again) and I loved the concept of sort of a brotherhood of the trickery gods. Hence why I'm introducing many of them to Loki early on. This concept isn't foreign to Marvel either. Many types of Gods have formed councils in the comics in the past including the Death Gods and the leaders of the various Pantheons. I figured... oh the mischief bros would so be a thing if they could get away with it. So be prepared for that in the far distant future. Got it!
https://archiveofourown.org/works/547583
Growing

Chapter Summary

Time passes and Loki's condition progresses.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Huehuecoyotl was amusing, to say the least. Loki liked him. Especially after a few weeks, wherein the older God had shown Loki some of the more interesting places in the city. Like some of the giant statues that were scattered about or the library that they had. Huehuecoyotl didn't seem that enthused by the library, honestly, but he amused himself by changing positions of dozens of scrolls while Loki was reading.

The other Gods, Frigga included, had quickly found that leaving the two mischief Gods in close proximity to each other was a recipe for outright chaos. Loki found the time when they cursed the Tlachtli ball to always ricochet far into the distance in unpredictable ways each time it hit a solid surface particularly fun. Loki had even spelled the toy to not lose momentum at each impact. The chaos lasted for three full days as people tried to catch or otherwise stop the ball from bouncing all over the city. It had finally been stopped when one of the war Gods (Loki wasn't sure which one he had been) had pierced the ball with a spear and pinned it to a wall. There was a perfectly round hole in the stonework now from where the spear pierced at least a foot.

After that, Huehuecoyotl had been told he had an important task that he had to do right that second in some other place and Loki didn't see his new friend again for several days. Not a particularly subtle thing for them to do but Loki could understand after the second day of being bested by a ball the other Gods in Aztlan had been a little sore. He would have liked to have been told what this important mystery thing was, though, just to know what story they'd come up with.

Luckily, Coyotl returned to Atzlan and even brought Loki a strange-looking feather made from shiny silver metal that was still somehow as flexible as a natural feather. "What's this?" Loki asked as he examined it.

"Ah, it's a feather from a rather obnoxious braggart. Vucub Caquix." Loki blinked as his All-Speak was kind enough to translate that to 'Seven Macaw.' All-Speak tended to do that with the names here which sometimes led to moments of Loki getting a bit confused as to if what All-Speak was telling him was a name or title or just words meant to describe. This time, however, Loki was reasonably sure it was a name. "-I'm betting he's going to be killed one of these days from how he makes everyone mad at him. So, I plucked a feather out of his ass," Huehuecoyotl said with a self-satisfied smile.

Loki hummed at that and carefully ran his finger along the sharp edge of the feather. Loki couldn't put too much pressure down, or he was sure he would slice the flesh of his thumb open. "It's sharp for such a thin piece," Loki mused. Almost like an overly decorative dagger rather than something that came from a -presumably- living creature.

"Mm, yes, he's got dozens of jewels all over him too... most around his face, though, and that wasn't something I really wanted to get too close to. He has some nasty teeth in that never shut mouth of
his," Coyotl said as he leaned back across Loki's bed and tossed his hair back from his face. The beads of his headdress clacked together, and the dark feathers ruffled. "He thinks himself sooo beautiful when really he's just a gaudy mess."

Loki couldn't quite help but chuckle at that and reached over to put the metal feather onto his side table. "Where is my darling?" Coyotl asked as he looked around. Huld had taken a liking to Coyotl almost instantly and liked to curl up in his lap.

"Most likely off bothering Ofnir," Loki said as he shifted his position on his bed to try and get more comfortable. Though his stomach had not yet grown to where he had trouble moving around, Loki did sometimes find that the baby made his joints -specifically those in his lower body- ache from the unusual weight that he was now carrying. Though nobody had said it to Loki yet, he was sure that the different Gods and Goddesses that were keeping an eye on his health currently were contemplating keeping him restricted to his bed at some point. Hopefully, that was far off yet.

"Good. That lizard of yours is far too grumpy at times," Coyotl said.

"I think he misses home," Loki said. "Although I know he's been enjoying the freedom he gets here. I get to see him more when we are in Asgard." The heat truly drained Loki to extremes here, especially in his current condition. Even though Frigga had given him a bracelet that acted a lot like Ofnir's collar to keep him more comfortable, that wasn't always enough, and he'd had a few close calls with dehydration and heatstroke that had been far from fun. Loki had been spending more and more time inside lately.

"Do you?" Coyotl asked, eyes glimmering with a strange shrewd intensity.

"Do I what?"

"Miss home," Coyotl asked. "You've told me about those idiots that kept harassing you before all this happened."

Loki was quiet for a long minute. "I suppose I do..." he said. "Really, Bjarke and his lackeys aren't anything that I can't handle. They aren't as fast or as clever as me. Although they definitely are annoying."

"I understand," Coyotl said. "There are idiots that spend all their time trying to aggravate others in all realms it seems."

"Indeed, there are."

Coyotl hung around for a bit longer until Ixtlilton came by for another session of trying to help Loki work through his trauma. Huld slipped through the door at the last second and rushed over to Loki. The young Trickster couldn't help but smile and scratch the adorable eye-eating monster behind her small silky ears causing Huld to nearly purr and curl up pressed against Loki's curved stomach.

"How was your sleep the last few days, Loki?" Ixtlilton asked as he took his usual seat in an ornately carved wooden chair that looked as if a large cat was snarling at the end of each armrest. Jaguar probably. Loki had noticed images of the cats quite frequently all over the city.

Loki continued to pet Huld -it was something to do besides fidgeting and oddly soothing. "Well enough," Loki murmured.

Ixtlilton's mask caught the light as he tilted his head in thought. Yet again Loki cursed the blankness of that mask because he couldn't tell if Ixtlilton believed him or not. "Have you been
recording your dreams like I suggested?"

Loki made a face. "I don't see how it's at all helpful," he complained. "I always dream the same things." Well, not the exact same things but they were all along a similar vein at the very least. Although his dreams had gotten substantially less disturbing since leaving Asgard, they were still not anything that Loki would classify as happy.

"Might I see your writing on it?" Ixtlilton asked.

There was a heavy sigh, and Loki reached to the side to pick up a small plain brown book. A small gesture and green seidr flashed before rising off the top of the book like a mist. Loki opened it and flipped through several pages before handing it to Ixtlilton. Though the mask-wearing God wouldn't pester Loki, there was always this odd guilt that Loki couldn't quite shake whenever he didn't answer Ixtlilton's questions. Loki wasn't sure what caused it -perhaps because of how calm and patient the other God always was- but Loki definitely didn't like feeling guilty. So, despite himself, Loki occasionally was sharing bits of his thoughts and details about what had happened to him. Not many. But some.

Ixtlilton read over the short description of the latest dreams Loki had been having and the few disparate thoughts Loki had deigned to jot down about them. After a moment, Ixtlilton closed the book and handed it back. Loki tried his best to not snatch it away since he had willingly given it over and even unspelled it, to begin with. "Do you want to expand on any of that?" Ixtlilton asked.

Loki made a face instantly. Ixtlilton's question had been softly asked, but the very idea of Loki saying his inner thoughts out loud was very unpleasant. "No." He shouldn't have put down those thoughts he'd had -or at least not shown them. Loki knew that they would trigger Ixtlilton to ask unpleasant questions.

The silence between them was long and not entirely comfortable. Loki focused on petting Huld who had tried to work her way closer to Loki. Finally, Ixtlilton shifted in his seat, and Loki couldn't help but look over. "No matter what he told you, it was nothing that you did that 'seduced' him," Ixtlilton said. "His perversions were his own and reflect nothing on you."

Loki quickly looked away again. "... he said I flirted with him."

"He was delusional," Ixtlilton said. "He saw things that were not there, but that supported what he was going to do anyway. You did nothing to encourage him to kidnap and hurt you."

Loki tucked his face down against the top of Huld's head. Loki knew that. He did. But that didn't prevent the voice he hated so much from taunting him in his dreams about how he'd wanted that monster's attention. Loki couldn't entirely suppress the shudder that went down his spine. "I said I didn't want to talk about it," he said just loud enough to be heard without lifting his face.

"... You did. My apologies," Ixtlilton said. There was another moment of silence. "Your mother has been looking for someone to take the child once it's born."

Loki tried not to, but he couldn't stop himself from curling a little more into Huld who's fifth hand coiled around his arm. He didn't want to talk or even think about that either. Talking about the baby made him want to break down crying still, and Loki wasn't entirely sure why. Nor did he want to do it in front of Ixtlilton. After what felt like too long, Loki thought he had to say something just to get Ixtlilton to move on to a different topic. "... she'll find a good family."

"Do you want to know the family at all when she finds one? Perhaps what their names are?" Ixtlilton asked.
"No," Loki said shortly. He didn't want to know anything about the people his mother eventually picked. Loki didn't care what they did or where they lived or their names. He trusted his mother to select an appropriate home that could provide what the baby would need. Especially since the baby was already showing signs of being... off. Loki tried not to think about all that because it was far too distressing.

Ixtlilton switched topics to benign ones, but Loki barely was listening. Something about some of the villagers spoiling Ofnir since he'd been less able to go out to see him lately. The heat just got to him so much faster now. "Would you like me to get your mother? Or perhaps Heillr Gerd?" Ixtlilton asked after Loki refused to be drawn back into a conversation for at least half an hour. He had learned quickly that when Loki shut down that there was no point in pressing for more.

"Gerd," Loki said after several minutes of no answer at all. He didn't particularly want his mother to see straight through him right then, and Loki had a feeling if he didn't say yes to one or the other Ixtlilton wouldn't leave himself. He often lingered after Loki stopped talking for some reason Loki couldn't fathom -maybe trying to make sure he hadn't overstepped was the only thing that made even a little sense to the young Prince. So, Gerd was the most logical choice for Loki to pick to end the meeting and not be asked further difficult questions he couldn't think about.

Ixtlilton nodded. "Very well, I'll get them."

Loki waited until Ixtlilton had left before letting himself slump onto the side and curled up. It was getting harder to curl tight into a ball, and still be comfortable. Huld let out a little trill noise and climbed up over Loki's body to sniff at his face. "You can't eat my eyes, Huld," Loki murmured although he highly doubted she was looking to do that. So far she had seemed perfectly content to switch out eggs and other high protein foods for the eyes her kind preferred -although Loki did still give her fish eyes which she devoured with an almost frightening intensity.

Huld continued to sniff Loki's face until she gave his chin a few licks and then rubbed her head against the same spot. Loki reached up to scratch her side as she purred. Loki was truly glad he could have her with him at least. Ofnir would also be comforting to have nearby, but he was just too big. At the very least the wyvern had taken up the habit of sleeping directly under Loki's window, and that did make Loki feel much better. It was not easy to sneak past Ofnir. Drugged meat was the only way it had happened before, Frigga had told him.

There was a knock at the door, and Loki called for Gerd to come in since the guessed it was them. "Good afternoon," Gerd said as they closed the door to keep the magically cooled air from flooding the hotter halls beyond.

"If you say it is... it's miserably hot out," Loki said. His mother had warned him that the temperatures were consistently climbing as the year moved closer to summer. Frigga would always let him know when the temperature or humidity made going outside something he really shouldn't do. Loki hadn't dared venture out of his room in two days. He was going a little crazed cooped up.

Gerd hummed and sat down on the edge of Loki's bed. They reached out and rubbed the base of Loki's neck with strong but gentle fingers. Loki tried to resist, but the tension there melted after a moment as the nerves there were massaged. Frigga had tried to learn how to do the same sort of thing, but she'd never quite gotten the hang of the firm but oddly relaxing grip. Loki wondered if it was because she wasn't a giant in any way. "That's not fair," Loki muttered as his muscles continued to slowly ease.

Gerd chuckled some but didn't stop. "I know. Do you want me to stop, though?"

Loki huffed. "No."
"Alright then," Gerd said. There were about ten minutes where neither of them said anything. The last bit of the tension Loki was carrying in his body melted away but Gerd kept slowly rubbing and massaging the back of his neck, which made Loki's eyes start to droop slightly. "He doesn't mean to upset you, you know. He's just trying to help you work through everything that happened."

"I know," Loki said. And Loki did. He knew that Ixtilton was there to help him. But the very nature of that help meant that he had to prod at the exact places Loki didn't want anyone poking at.

"Your brother should be coming back in a few weeks," Gerd said. "Are you excited to see him again?"

Loki frowned and thought about that. "I am," he said cautiously. He missed Thor terribly, he really did. But Loki also didn't want to be seen with his stomach growing as fast and large as it was. Not too long ago, one of the Goddesses Loki didn't know very well -and who he hadn't seen since- had obliviously asked when his twins were due. Loki had very nearly had a panic attack because what if that was why the healers had seen too many limbs developing? He didn't think he could handle two. Norns, he knew he couldn't since he couldn't handle the idea of one.

Eir had been quick to assure him that they'd triple-checked the results of all his scans and there was only one heartbeat, so it wasn't twins -just a very large baby. She'd even indulged him by doing another scan to be extra sure. The results were the same. Only a big child with too many limbs and not twins. That was frightening for other reasons, but at least Loki had already been used to that prospect. "I just... I don't know how Thor will react," Loki said after another minute.

"He might be surprised, but I think he will be supportive," Gerd said. "He has been so far."

"I know, but... it's different seeing it," Loki argued.

Gerd gave a slight shrug. "That is true. But have faith in your brother, Loki."

"I do have faith in him," Loki said. He had an immense amount of faith in Thor. His brother had saved him from that monster and even killed him. Thor had argued over and over to be allowed to come with Loki to Aztlan and hadn't been happy to be sent back to Asgard. "I just... it's embarrassing."

"It's normal," Gerd argued. Loki buried his face in his pillow and Gerd kneaded the back of his neck lightly. "Alright. We can talk about this later if you want. Are you hungry? It's getting nearer to midday."

Loki shifted his head to glance up at Gerd. "I'm always hungry... it's tiresome."

Gerd chuckled a little. "Well then, let's get you fed, shall we?"

Loki sighed but knew he'd feel a little better without having his stomach growling at him, so he pushed himself up fully. "Alright..." he murmured. Huld jumped off and circled Loki a few times like an excited puppy dog. "I guess you want a treat too, don't you, Huld dear?" Loki couldn't entirely stop the smile from crossing his face at Huld's excitement. "Alright, then. Let's get you something too."

It took almost seven weeks for Thor to get a chance to go back to Aztlan to visit Loki. Though Thor pestered his Father every opportunity he thought he'd get away with it to go back to see his brother, Odin wasn't persuaded to rush Thor back. Keeping his mind off of Loki's plight proved difficult, but Thor tried his best lest he drive himself crazy with worry.
The Bifrost at least meant that when Thor was allowed to go back, he didn't have to wait so long before he was there and seeing Loki again. Thor was almost knocked off his feet from the oppressive humid heat in the air when Thor and his Father arrived. Thor was still a little surprised that Odin was visiting, but he'd overheard Odin telling Tyr he would be back that night.

Loki wasn't there when they arrived on the ball court, but both Gerd and Frigga were. "My dear," Odin said as he stepped forward to give Frigga a kiss on the cheek. "It does my heart glad to see you again."

Frigga smiled. "You old bear," Frigga said with amusement. "As if you haven't been looking in on us with Hildskjalf."

"It isn't the same," Odin said before turning to Gerd and giving a respectful nod. "Heillr Gerd. It has been some time since we last met."

"It has, All-Father," Gerd said. "I'm sorry about the circumstances."

"We all are," Odin said.

"Where is Loki?" Thor asked. He would have thought that his brother would have come out to greet them at least.

"He's resting in his room," Frigga said. "He went out this morning to visit Ofnir and tired himself out."

Odin nodded some and gestured for his wife to lead them. "Then let us go see how he's feeling."

"He'll be glad you came," Frigga said as she hooked her arm around Odin's. "He was worried that you wouldn't. Or would be called away at the last minute."

Odin frowned a little bit. "I won't be able to make many trips..." he said uneasily. "But the rest of our sons can handle anything that might occur in Asgard while I'm gone. Especially for a single day." Thor was glad that Odin had managed to visit even if it was only for a few hours. Thor was sure that a stronger relationship with their Father would help Loki immensely feel like he was part of the family -like Thor kept telling him he was. Thor would be beyond ecstatic if he'd never had that argument with his brother ever again.

As they approached the pyramid, Quetzalcoatl and Ixtlilton were both there. Odin paused to greet and talk with them, but Thor slipped off while that was going on. He didn't currently have the patience to deal with niceties involved with two rulers greeting each other. Though Thor doubted Odin would let the greetings go on for too long since he had limited time to visit with Loki, Thor wasn't even that patient right then.

Thor remembered the way to his brother's room without a problem and got there probably before Odin and Quetzalcoatl finished their first greetings to each other. Thor knocked on the door. "Loki! I've returned! Are you well?"

There was a pause where Thor had to wait impatiently to see if Loki would let him in. Thor shifted his weight back and forth on his feet and tried to not get on his brother's nerves by knocking again. He managed to restrain himself and was rewarded not two minutes later when the door opened to show a somewhat annoyed and wet Loki. His brother must just have been washing, Thor realized. "I can't believe I was starting to miss you," Loki said as he ran a thick towel over his dripping hair.

Thor couldn't quite help from staring at his brother. His stomach, which had been starting to show when Thor left, was now very obviously distended under the thin dressing gown. Thor hadn't seen
his brother so obviously pregnant before -well he assumed he'd seen Loki while he was stuck as a horse and pregnant, but Thor couldn't remember that- and the image was odd. Not helping was that Loki's stomach seemed larger than Thor would have assumed it would be by how far along Loki was. Loki looked as if he'd swallowed a pumpkin whole and there was no disguising the curve of his belly at this point. Thor was reminded yet again that Loki was too young and small for having a child that was mostly Jotnar.

"Please, stop staring..." Loki said in a smaller voice than Thor had heard in a very long time.

Thor shook his head and forced himself to blink. "I'm sorry, brother. I just... I wasn't expecting you to have grown quite this much..."

Loki huffed and turned away. "I know. It's very distressing... Come in before you let all the cold get out."

"Father will be here in a few minutes," Thor said as he entered the room and closed the door behind him.

Loki paused only a few steps away from the door. "... Father's here?"

"Yes, he's greeting Quetzalcoatl now," Thor said.

"I didn't... I didn't think he'd come," Loki said as he made his way over to a chest of drawers and started pulling out different clothes, most in a vibrant green color that reminded Thor of some of the feathers he'd seen the Aztlan Gods decorating themselves with. "He's always so busy..." Huld got up from where she had been curled up in Loki's bed and stretched while giving a huge yawn.

"He is," Thor agreed. "And he can't stay for long, but he wanted to check on you just as I did."

Loki was silent for a moment as he held his clothes in front of himself. Then he nodded. "I should definitely be dressed then," he said. "Wait there, I'll be out in a minute," Loki said before going to the bathing chamber to change.

Thor sat down on the edge of the bed and scratched Huld as she prowled nearby. "How have you been, brother?" Thor asked loud enough to be heard in the other room.

"That depends on the day and who you are asking," Loki replied. "I think I'm perfectly fine... it's the others that seem to think I need help 'coping' still." Thor resisted the immediate urge to point out that Loki still had bags under his eyes from a lack of sleep as proof that they might have a point. Loki would snap back at that and Thor wanted his visit to be a nice one.

"Well, physically, then. How are things?" Thor asked.

"I'm getting fat," Loki said in annoyance. "And I keep changing all the time!"

Thor nodded a little to himself. Those fluctuations had been going on even before he'd returned to Asgard. "But the sickness? Is that better?" Thor asked.

"I suppose," Loki said as he finally came out of the other room. It was strange to not see Loki in his usual dark tunic, vest, and trousers that he wore in Asgard. Instead, he was wearing something much lighter that didn't even have sleeves and, though Thor could see that Loki had pants on under it, the garment looked very much like a dress, or at least a skirt. Over it, Loki had some other wrap like garb that hung down and helped obscure his belly at least partially.

"Come sit down, brother," Thor said with a gesture to the bed beside him. "We have a lot to catch
Loki sat down beside Thor and even allowed the Thunder God to embrace him for several long moments. "I've missed you," Thor said. "It's not the same without you by my side."

"I've missed you as well, brother," Loki said. "Huehuecoyotl is fun, but he's not you."

Thor tilted his head a little. "Huehuecoyotl?"

"Yes, he's quite ingenious with his pranks," Loki said. "And he's even taught me a few new tricks that I'm sure will be useful in the future. The other Gods keep sending him off to run errands and do pointless quests though so he's usually only around for a few days at a time now before he's off again. It's like they're afraid to leave us together for too long or something."

Thor laughed and squeezed his brother's shoulder. "I can imagine anyone that you think ingenious would be quite the handful all on his own, much less with you by his side."

"It was only a bit of fun, really. Nobody got hurt and nothing really damaged. They got a little bent out of shape about not being able to stop things is all," Loki said dismissively.

"That sounds like something I'll need to hear about," Thor said.

Before Loki could go into further detail, there was another knock at the door. "Darling, I take it Thor is there with you?" Frigga asked.

"Yes, Mother."

"I thought as much." The door opened, and Loki got to his feet quickly. Frigga smiled. "Your Father's here as well."

Frigga and Odin came into the room, and Thor got up to stand beside his brother. There was a moment of awkward silence as Odin's one eye scanned over Loki. Thor could see his brother's hands fidgeting behind his back. Odin held out a hand. "Come here, Loki."

Loki hesitated for another half-second before stepping closer. Odin wrapped his arm around Loki to bring him into a hug. At first, Loki was stiff as a plank but then slowly relaxed. "I am glad to see you well, son."

"And we miss you being there," Odin said. Loki slowly relaxed more and let his head drop down to rest on Odin's broad shoulder. Odin allowed the hug to linger for several minutes until Loki himself pulled away. Thor was honestly surprised Loki had let it last as long as he had since he disliked such contact usually. Odin clasped Loki's forearm in his hand to keep Loki from stepping away completely. "I do not have as much time as I would want, but we can still sit, and you can tell me what you've been up to. I hear you have a new pet?"

Loki had grown tense again as Odin caught him but relaxed at the much more pleasant topic. "Yes, I named her Huld," Loki said. Hearing her name, the ahuizotl jumped off the bed and scampered over to where Loki and Odin were standing.

Odin looked down at the small creature with an unsettling number of grasping hands and large inquisitive eyes. Loki bent down to pick the animal up, and Huld quickly made herself comfortable in Loki's arms with her tail coiling around him and her hand-like paws holding onto Loki firmly. Odin eyed the little creature for a moment before sighing. "She looks like trouble," he said.
"She's so sweet though," Loki protested.

"One can be sweet and still be nothing but trouble," Odin said. "You yourself are a prime example. What is this I hear about some ayotochtli creature flying?" Loki snorted to try and stifle his amusement but failed. Thor frowned but figured this had to have been something that Quetzalcoatl or Frigga told Odin before he came inside.

"I felt sorry for them crawling around all the time..." Loki said with a grin that belied his excuse. "They have such sad, short, little legs after all. Although their claws are quite fearsome."

Frigga sighed. "We've already had this conversation, Odin," she said, sounding somewhat exasperated. "He still finds it terribly funny."

"It was funny, mother!" Loki argued.

"What is a... ayo... ayotochtli?" Thor asked. His All-Speak was translating the word to 'turtle-rabbit' which was brought bizarre images to his mind. Something sort of like a long-necked rabbit wearing a turtle's shell on it's back.

"Ah, it is sort of like a fat little hedgehog with longer ears, and a leathery armor bit all across it's back instead of spines and a tail. It eats a lot of insects and is actually kind of adorable. Some of them curl up into little balls," Loki explained, holding his hands apart into what Thor assumed was the approximate size of the strange creature.

"An... armored hedgehog," Thor repeated. "Huh."

Loki nodded. "We got them from Midgard. Well, Coyotl got them from Midgard since I can't go right now. But he brought back two dozen. Quetzalcoatl made us send them back, though, which is a shame. I think you would have liked them, Thor."

"And you made them fly," Odin said dryly.

Loki forced his smile down. He didn't quite manage to look entirely serious though he tried his best. "Well... just a little. Really, they appreciated the experience. How many creatures without wings ever get to fly?" Frigga shook her head slightly, and Odin sighed.

"Well, I am glad that you are keeping yourself entertained, son," Odin said. "But perhaps fewer tricks?"

"It's not like I'm hurting anyone," Loki said with a huff.

"Now, let's not ruin the visit since you'll be getting so few," Frigga said. "I'd much rather have the chance to have a meal as a family again, personally."

"Very well, Frigga," Odin said.

When they arrived at the room that had been set up for them to eat in, Thor instantly noticed the lack of meat on the long table. There was a wide variety of vegetables and strange fruits along with bread and a few kinds of cheeses. Thor guessed that even though the sickness his brother suffered seemed to have abated, meat was still a trigger for him. At least there was plenty of everything that was there.

After a nice lunch where, for once, Loki ate more than his brother, Thor has some more time to spend with Loki alone. Odin was off talking with the different healers in person that were looking after Loki. "I brought some things for you," Thor said as he put the bag of items he'd gathered for
his brother onto the bed where they were sitting on.

"What sort of things?" Loki asked.

Thor dug around inside the bag for Sigyn's letter. "Well, first of all, this," he said as he handed the folded up piece of parchment over to his brother. "Sigyn wrote back. She wrote a couple letters to you, actually, but this was the first," Thor said. "I have them all in here."

Loki took the letter with a bit of hesitation but didn't immediately open it. Thor busied himself with finding where the other messages had sunk into the bag. Out of the corner of his eye, Thor saw Loki still just looking down at the unopened letter. "It won't bite you, brother," Thor said softly.

"I'm not sure if I want to know what she has to say..." Loki said.

"You're being pessimistic again, Loki," Thor said. "She likes you and won't hold anything against you. Especially not something that wasn't your fault, to begin with."

Loki turned the letter in his hands and ran his thumb over the wax seal but didn't yet break it. "I don't know why she would like me... I mean, look at me," he said with a gesture at his own body.

"Loki-"

"No, I'm serious," Loki said. "I've never been attractive and now-"

Loki abruptly stopped, and a strange look crossed his face. "Brother?" Thor asked. "Are you alright?"

Loki nodded and put a hand to his stomach. "I feel it sometimes..." he said softly while his hand rubbed along one spot of his belly. "It's... it's kind of strange still. Makes it feel more real." Loki sighed and shook his head. "Not that it's not real. I mean, I'm not having trouble with my pants for no reason. But I mean... it's not just a... a thing. I don't know how to feel about it honestly."

"I wish I could help," Thor said.

Loki shook his head. "I'm fine... the more often it happens, the more used to it I get. Still catches me off guard, though."

Thor hesitated for a few moments. "Do... you want to talk about it?"

"No," Loki said. "Bad enough that Lord Ixtlilton keeps trying to get me to talk to him." Thor nodded and didn't press his luck. He would just continue to hope that if he were patient, eventually Loki would open up again.

After another minute of silence, Loki took a deep breath and turned back to the letter. He broke the wax seal and flipped the parchment open. Thor watched as Loki read what Sigyn had written. Loki was an extraordinarily fast reader typically, but currently, he seemed to be taking much longer than Thor had assumed it would.

Thor watched as Loki's eyes grew wet and he bit at his lip. Thor wanted to give comfort but held back. He had no idea what Loki was reading or what precisely was causing his brother distress currently. Loki lowered the letter and wiped at his face. "She is sweet..." Loki said as he sniffed and tried quite obviously to push down his emotions.

"She is. And she is waiting for you," Thor said.
"She's waiting for someone who doesn't exist," Loki said. "I'm not... I'm not that anymore. I don't think I can be..."

"Who says you have to be?" Thor asked. "You're Loki, and that is all you need be."

A painful expression crossed Loki's face briefly. "I want to be that. I don't want to be some... used up... thing," he said. Thor was pretty sure that Loki had changed what words he'd been about to say but didn't dare ask about it.

"You are not a 'used up thing,' brother," Thor said as he reached over to clasp the back of Loki's neck. "I don't like hearing you talk about yourself in such a way."

Loki ducked his head, and Thor squeezed the back of his neck in an effort to comfort him more. "Look at me, Thor... how can you say anything good about this? About me?"

"Because you're my brother and none of this was your fault," Thor said. "And. There are far worse things in this world than having a baby." Loki cringed, but Thor brought him closer to wrap his other arm around Loki's shoulders. It was an awkward half-hug that was hopefully giving Loki a little more comfort than just a hand to his neck. "It all will work out. You'll see."

"I'm not sure how it can," Loki said as his head fell down to rest on Thor's shoulder. "I mean... even not keeping it... I still-I'm going to... I don't know how I even can..."

"Shh, brother," Thor said as he massaged the nerves at the base of Loki's neck. "You are worrying too much. It's not good for you or the baby. We will take care of you. You will survive this, Loki. You are too strong to do anything but."

Loki shook his head without lifting it off of Thor's shoulder. "I'm not."

"You are. I know you are," Thor insisted. He had seen Loki survive this and though he had never been quite the same after -never as easy-going or as forgiving- he had thrived more than Thor thought he himself would have been able to. Loki might have gone off track but he'd still been strong and fierce and someone Thor was proud to call his brother. Thor just wished that he could explain that to this Loki and not seem as if he'd lost his mind.

Almost fifteen minutes passed before Loki did manage to calm down, and when he did, he didn't seem to listen -or at least not fully process- what Thor told him. But, Thor was nothing if not stubborn so he would try to get through to Loki later. Plus, around that same time, Odin came by to speak with Loki. Thor wanted to stay, but Odin told him to run along and visit with Frigga. Reluctant, but not willing to argue with his father, Thor did as he was told.

Odin waited until the door closed again before turning to Loki fully. "I wish we could have a longer visit, but I'm afraid I only have a few more hours before I need to return to Asgard," Odin said.
"I understand," Loki said as he fiddled with the bottom of the green mantle he was wearing that hung down over his body. He had the urge to pull the fabric down, but Loki knew that wouldn't do much, and, in fact, would probably just draw more attention to his stomach.

Odin was quiet for a moment before he sighed and sat down beside Loki. "Your mother tells me you still are not speaking much with Lord Ixtlilton," Odin said. "He is trying to help you, son."

"... I know." That didn't make it easier for Loki to open up about what had happened though.

The silence between them was oppressively long, but Odin wasn't sure how to talk with Loki at the moment. Frigga had said that this talk was needed and Odin trusted her judgment, but he also had no idea what he was supposed to say. Odin wished he had Frigga's easy way with the boys and her natural ability to say what was most needed. After another few moments of floundering, Odin tried to think about what he would have wanted to hear from Bor had Odin been hurt like Loki. "... I am not upset with you, you know."

Loki paused in his fidgeting and looked up. Odin tried to not grimace at the wide-eyed look Loki was giving him and didn't think he was entirely successful. Perhaps some context would have helped with that statement. "You hold no blame for any of what happened."

Loki looked back down at his hands. "I... I could have fought him harder..."

"You fought him, Loki. You broke bones doing so. He was too strong, and that was not your fault," Odin said.

"Thor beat him," Loki pointed out softly.

Odin frowned. "True..." To be honest, Odin was still surprised by the fact that Thor had done that. He wouldn't have thought it possible if he hadn't seen Mjolnir with the beast's flattened skull under it. "But Thor was not attacked in his sleep and was armed. You were not given any such advantages."

"But-"

"Loki, we cannot win all battles. You fought, and you have survived and are doing much better than most would expect," Odin said. "I am proud of how you've handled yourself with such unfair burdens placed on you."

Loki was quiet for several moments. "I... I should have found a way to escape..." he said. "But I couldn't. I'm sorry."

"I am the one that's sorry, Loki," Odin said. "I should have protected you better. I let that beast into Asgard, and he hurt you. Is still hurting you. And that is my fault."

"Father..."

Odin tightened his hold on Loki's shoulder. "Do not think you need to apologize or feel guilty about what happened, son. Nothing that happened was your fault," Odin said firmly. He wasn't sure if Loki had fully absorbed what Odin was saying, but Loki didn't argue about it. Loki let himself slowly sink into Odin's hold.

Odin wasn't as comfortable with giving reassurance and parental love in as physical a way as he would like. His own Father had never given any, and so he found it challenging to do it himself. Odin tried his best, though, and held Loki until Loki himself pulled away slightly. Loki's eyes had turned pure blood red, and there were a few streaks of blue across his skin. Loki didn't seem to
notice and wiped at some wet marks that were down his cheeks. "... thank you, Father."

"No need for thanks, Loki." Slowly, Loki's coloration returned to his normal pale skin and green eyes. Odin gave Loki a smile and ruffled his hair even though it caused Loki to scowl. "Now, as much as I would like to sit here and talk with you more... I agreed to meet with Lord Quetzalcoatl again after we ate. So... unless there is something else?"

Loki bit his lower lip and paused in flattening his hair. "... no, Father."

Odin narrowed his eye because he was reasonably sure Loki wasn't being entirely truthful. When Loki still said nothing, Odin nodded and got to his feet. "Well, I'll check back in before I leave to see if you think of something while I'm gone." Loki nodded in understanding as Odin stood there for a moment before leaving.

When next Thor saw his brother, Loki was looking a bit more melancholy and also a lot more feminine. Thor had to do a double-take but realized at some point while Thor was gone Loki had shifted female again. The long fabric across his front disguised it somewhat but not quite fully. Odin had gone to speak with the other Gods apparently several minutes before Thor had tentatively returned to knock on Loki's door. "Loki," Thor said as he entered the room and closed the door again. "I spoke with Mother. She says I can stay for a few days before returning to Asgard."

"That's good," Loki said. He didn't sound all that excited, but Thor tried to not take it too personally. Loki was going through a lot and whatever he had spoken about with Odin had to have been... weighty.

Thor decided right then that Loki needed to get out of his room and be cheered up. But, there was the question of what to do that wouldn't overheat his brother too quickly. "Have you been swimming lately, Loki?" Thor asked.

"A few days ago. Huld and Ofnir both like the water... although Ofnir less so now that he's been flying more," Loki said. "It also still seems to settle the baby," he added in a softer tone.

"Good. Then let's go swimming," Thor said.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "This is rather sudden, don't you think?"

"I won't be here very long, and I don't want to spend the whole time in your room. So let's go swimming. That will keep you cool and let us be outside at the same time," Thor said.

"I... I'm not really..." Loki hesitated. "My body-"

"Brother," Thor interrupted. "I don't care."

"It's awkward, Thor..."

Thor folded his arms across his chest and thought about that. "Alright," he said after a minute. "I can see that. But it shouldn't be. I've seen you naked, which you don't even need to be this time, and I know what girls look like."

"But isn't it strange?" Loki asked.

"Strange? Yes, I suppose it is," Thor admitted. "But I don't want you hiding away either."

Loki seemed to consider that before nodding. "Alright... but I don't want to hear any comments."
"Never, Brother," Thor said. Perhaps once Loki was more at home with himself, Thor would discuss it more, but Loki wasn't at that point yet. Thor wasn't sure if that would ever come, but he remembered times when Loki would shift into a woman for short periods to achieve specific goals. He'd seemed at least comfortable enough to not only do it but come up with the plans in the first place. That gave Thor hope that someday Loki would be alright.

Loki grabbed a thick towel from the bathroom and threw it at Thor's head before taking another and gesturing for Thor to lead the way. "Well, let's go lest you die of boredom."

Thor rolled his eyes but obediently led the way out of the pyramid and then down again. "So, have you been keeping yourself well entertained without me. I hope so," Thor said as they walked.

"Mm, I suppose. I've made a friend of one of the younger gods here. Huehuecoyotl... but they keep sending him away, so we don't get to spend more than a few days together at a time," Loki said. "Something about there being less damage that way."

"Damage? What have you been up to, brother?"

Loki waved his hand a little off to the side. "Oh, just a little fun here and there. Honestly. It is not our fault they react so very poorly to a bouncing ball... or flying animals... and living fruit. Nobody got hurt! Well, the fruit got eaten, but that was to happen regardless, so I don't think that counts."

Thor fought the urge to groan because, while clearly pranks, those were small trifles for Loki. Thor had no idea how funny those incidents had been since he hadn't seen them, but he was willing to take Loki's word for it that nothing too serious had happened. So long as no inter-realm incidents broke out, Thor certainly wasn't going to Loki's fun. Not that he really thought he could even if he tried. "I'm glad you're finding ways to keep yourself entertained."

Loki's smile faded a little. "Well, some days are better than others..." he admitted. "Sometimes, I just... I want to destroy something. Just, make it shatter or rip it apart because it feels better than sitting there feeling like I'm the most broken thing in the room. Sometimes I even do it."

"Does it help?" Thor asked. He'd honestly never heard Loki talk about something like his feelings or how he dealt with them before. Loki had always been so closed off about things like that.

"Yes, some," Loki said. "I'm not sure why it makes me feel better, but it helps. Sort of like releasing pressure. Mother doesn't like it, though, and I see her point. But..."

"If it helps it helps?" Thor offered.

Loki nodded. "And it's not like anyone's letting me drink right now," Loki said with exasperation. "I haven't had just fruit juice during dinner in ages, and here I am stuck with water, milk, and juice. It's obnoxious," he said with distaste.

Thor couldn't stop the laughter from bubbling up. "It's not permanent, brother."

"Hardly the point," Loki replied as they continued on their way towards their usual swimming spot. Ofnir had spotted them and was crawling along the tops of the buildings to keep pace, occasionally jumping the distance with a loud thud. Huld was nowhere to be seen, but Thor was sure she'd show up sooner or later. "... how long did mother and father say you were going to be here for?" Loki asked.

"A few days," Thor answered. "And hopefully I can visit again later. Asgard just isn't the same without you, Loki."
"And making mischief isn't the same without you," Loki said.

"Only because you don't have me to blame after the fact," Thor said.

Loki grinned widely. "Well, that's still a reason to have you around, dear brother."

Thor shook his head in minor exasperation but wasn't too upset. Loki blaming Thor for mishaps had already grown somewhat unbelievable by most in Asgard. Though Loki would probably attribute it to Thor's popularity as Crowned Prince, privately, Thor thought that the people just didn't think Thor clever enough to pull off some of the elaborate schemes that Loki could.

The water was as cool and refreshing as it had been last time and Thor wasted no time in stripping out of his clothes and jumping in. Loki was a bit slower and carefully slid into the lake as Ofnir found a comfortable spot on the edge that allowed about half of his body to sink below the surface but also keep his wings dry.

"Have you finished reading Sigyn's letters, brother?" Thor asked after about ten minutes of swimming around and letting his body cool back down to something comfortable.

"No, not yet."

Thor raised an eyebrow. Loki sighed. "Don't worry, Thor. I will," Loki said. "I just... I've had a lot to go through today."

"Alright," Thor said as he turned his attention back to swimming. Huld had shown up and would dive down and spend an almost frightening amount of time out of sight before reappearing. Thor was painfully aware that Huld could probably easily drown him, but thankfully she seemed content to play a strange diving/fetch game with Loki.

Thor noticed after about half an hour that Loki had moved to sit on some boulders. Loki's wet clothes didn't do nearly as good a job of hiding his body though Thor tried his best to ignore that. Thor did notice that Loki hadn't yet shifted back to male, which was a little odd. Usually, Loki's shifts only lasted a short while. Perhaps he was having trouble maintaining male form? That would make some sort of sense, Thor thought, all things considered.

"I've been meaning to ask," Thor said as he swam over to where Loki was lounging. "And you don't have to answer if you don't want to, but does it hurt?"

Loki looked puzzled. "Does what hurt?"

"Well, when you..." Thor gestured at Loki's body. "Change like that."

There was a long pause, and Thor wasn't sure if Loki would answer. After another moment, Loki slowly shook his head. "Hurt? No... honestly, I don't even notice most of the time," Loki said. "I still feel like me, I just... I don't like not having control of it, and it's disconcerting when I look down and suddenly see a body I wasn't expecting. I worry that I'll change without being able to control it and upset someone. It's already so easy for me to make people dislike me... I don't need help in that."

Thor slowly nodded in understanding. He wasn't going to patronize Loki by saying people liked him more than he thought. Thor knew that Loki wouldn't appreciate it much. So Thor settled for something different. "Well, I don't think anyone who matters will let a little thing like breasts change how they see you."

Loki looked down at himself and then back up at Thor. "They're not quite as 'little' as I would like..."
"...anymore..." he drawled. "This... pregnant thing seems to agree with them, frustratingly enough."

"I was kind of trying to not notice that, Loki," Thor said. No matter what Thor said and would like to be his reality, it was still awkward to notice his brother's breasts when he was female.

"Believe me, I try not to notice it too," Loki said. There was a moment of silence, and then Loki put his chin on his hand and started talking again, "But, I suppose, at the very least, they are well proportioned for me. A little larger than I would like, but babies supposedly do that. Huehuecoyotl says that they are quite attractive-"

Thor decided that this topic was now officially too awkward and dove down beneath the water. He stayed submerged in blissful silence as long as he could. When he resurfaced, Loki was laughing near hysterically, so Thor sent a spray of water in his direction with his open palm. "Shut up, Loki!"

Chapter End Notes

**Tlachtli**- An ancient Aztec sport involving a ball. It reminds me of a cross between basketball and various other ball sports like soccer/football as I'm pretty sure use of hands wasn't allowed. Yet they had to get the ball up into hoops on the wall. Apparently it got pretty violent at times. (As an aside, I really need to go watch Road to Eldorado after writing chapters in Aztlan... I love that ridiculous movie. Much like I love Emperor's New Groove)

**Vucub Caquix**- Vucub Caquix or Seven Macaw as he's probably better known is actually Mayan in origin and not Aztec. (Or at least I found him in Mayan myth but nowhere else so I assume he's primarily Mayan). The Mayan/Aztec relation kind of reminds me of the Roman/Greek relation in terms of myth. They were cultures located close enough to each other that even though they were distinct they had a lot of crossover. The book I was reading/listening to about Mayan myth sort of drove this home by pointing out that Quetzalcoatl is also in Mayan myth (or a very similar god is) under the name Kukulcán. So, I figured that the crossover could continue and had someone pluck one of his obnoxious feathers, haha. Also, in Seven Macaw's myth the 'hero twins' of the Mayan basically break his jaw and then convince some old people to trick him into letting them remove all his gemstone teeth, eyes, and precious metal feathers. He then dies of humiliation and his wife dies with him. His sons later are killed for also being prideful in other myths.

**Loki's Pregnancy**- The nameless Goddess had a point in what she thoughtlessly said. Loki appears to be either much further along than he is or carrying twins due to the situation. But ya know, Sleipnir does have twice as many limbs so he is sort of like one and a half babies in there.

**Ayotochtli**- That does translate to turtle-rabbit... but it's an armadillo. But honestly... I can kind of see why they would call it a turtle rabbit. I also do think that they look a bit like hedgehogs, mostly in the face and the fact that they both carry around protection... and curl up into balls.

Edit: I have now OFFICIALLY had to break my master copy of this fic into multiple documents because it is too long that google docs couldn't handle it and wouldn't let
me add this chapter. It is now broken up by arcs... sigh. Why do I do this to myself?
The brothers stayed in the lake for a good two hours at least before Loki called a halt to their fun. He was tired and hungry, he had complained, and Thor wasn't about to be the reason his brother suffered. So, they had returned, and Loki took a short nap while Thor got comfortable. Several hours later, Loki had woken again and had been picking his way through the food that Thor had ordered for him while he was asleep. As Loki snacked his way through the selection, the two brothers turned their attention to something that wouldn't be physically demanding on Loki's pregnant body.

"I am never, ever going to understand this," Thor said as he stared at the unbalanced equation in front of him. He had done so much work and simplified it to easier to use numbers, and yet the damn thing was still not making sense. Somewhere, somehow, he'd made a mistake.

Loki hummed and looked over from his own work. Lady Vor sent a new packet for Loki with Odin, and the brothers had been going over it for the past hour. Loki slid Thor's papers closer to better see the scribbles that the Thunderer had made. "Mm, you just forgot to convert the gravitational force into a like unit," Loki said, pointing to the beginning part of the equation. "Everyone has made that mistake at least a few times. Do you know how to convert it?"

Thor nodded and pulled his scrap paper closer to work through that equation first. "I'm so bad at all this..." Thor grumbled. They had been working through various celestial body movements as the first step of plotting navigation through the stars. Thor liked the subject of star navigation and just study of the stars in general, but the math behind it all was hard to keep straight at times.

"You aren't that bad," Loki denied. "You managed to calculate the rotation and the moon orbit up here without a problem," he pointed out.

"I suppose," Thor said although he was frowning.

Loki sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You know... this work isn't geared towards you."

Thor looked over. "What do you mean?"

"It's geared to me not you... the fact that you're keeping up as well as you are is impressive," Loki said. "And, you're getting better all the time."
"Lady Vor still dumbs everything down for me," Thor said with a face. He usually tried to not worry about things like that, but this particular section of schoolwork had been giving him a lot of trouble lately. This latest mistake was only one in seemingly hundreds and Thor was about ready to pull his hair out.

"Not as much as you're thinking," Loki said.

Thor looked over at his brother in confusion. Loki sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Do you remember what you promised mother when you left the classroom and started being tutored with me?" Loki asked.

Thor had to think back but then nodded. When Loki was so bored in class with their peers that he was continually causing mischief and disrupting lessons, their parents had decided to put him on an advanced track to keep up with his intellect. Thor had thrown quite the fit at being separated from his brother -not helped at all at the two princes' ages at the time- and insisted on being moved to private lessons as well even though Thor himself was the one that had first wanted to go to school with his friends. Their mother had warned Thor several times that going to tutoring with Loki would mean that lessons would be much harder than before. "... I promised I would keep up," Thor muttered.

"And you have," Loki said. "Maybe not perfectly but you're not that far behind me." Thor raised an eyebrow, not entirely believing that. Loki sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Alright, look, I wasn't going to tell you this, but you're about a year ahead of Fandral and Astrild, for instance."

Thor frowned. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Loki said. He reached across the table -somewhat awkwardly due to his stomach- to pick up a few papers. "This here? Being able to calculate event horizons on white holes so that you can find the proper entry trajectory? That's not something that the others are doing. They've not even started on black holes yet, much less white holes."

"How do you know?" Thor asked.

"Because before I left, I asked Astrild to help you while I was gone, and he had no idea what we were working on at all. He hadn't even heard of some of the theories we're working on. Luckily, Hogun and Sigyn are advanced placed too; otherwise, there would have been nobody at all to help you," Loki said as he pulled a piece of bread apart. "Although Astrild still insisted he'd try however he could."

Thor was a bit taken aback. "You asked them to help me?"

"Don't sound so shocked, Thor. I am capable of doing nice things," Loki said sourly.

"I know you are! It's not that... I'm just surprised you would have thought to do that," Thor said. Maybe he shouldn't have been since Loki always seemed to be considering the bigger picture and factors Thor failed to. "I didn't think much about anything like that when I heard you were coming here."

Loki smirked a little before eating the piece of bread he ripped off the main loaf. "That's because you never think about anything not of immediate concern," Loki said. "You're very singularly focused, brother."

"Singularly focused?" Thor repeated. That was a nicer way of phrasing it than Loki would typically use. Thor thought about what Loki said for a moment before nodding. "I suppose I can see what
Loki shrugged. "Not necessarily. It does lead you to leaping before you look, though, like an idiot."
Thor frowned; the more considerate phrasing hadn't lasted very long at all before a return to form.
Loki laughed at Thor's expression. "It's true, Thor, and you know it. That's why I call you an idiot all the time. Because while you can think you don't."

"I do too think," Thor said.

"Oh?"

"Yes."

Loki folded his arms. "What's the last thing you truly thought about before doing it?" he asked as a challenge.

"Going out to swim," Thor said. "You were very doubtful, but you enjoyed it, and it wasn't too hard for you, now was it?"

Loki made a face. "I'm not sure that counts..."

"Why would it not count?" Thor asked.

"I just don't think it does."

"You're just mad because I'm right," Thor said with a grin.

Loki rolled his eyes. "Smugness does not suit you, brother. And anyway, you're still wrong."

"You've yet to explain how," Thor said.

Loki laughed a little and shook his head before leaning back in his chair a bit more. "Mm, I have missed you, Thor. Even if you are always wrong," he said, still smiling.

"I am not always wrong, brat," Thor said although he couldn't help but smile. He was glad that Loki was feeling well enough to poke fun at him and act like his old self. "In fact, I'm older, so that means what I think is automatically more correct than what you think."

"Oh ho? You think so do you?" Loki asked. "Well, tell me, oh ancient one... if you are always so correct, why am I the one getting us out of trouble all the time while you just stand there?"

"You are also the one that gets us into that trouble," Thor pointed out.

Loki grinned widely. "Well, I can't help it. Following the rules is so boring," he said.

There was a knock on the door, and Loki called for whoever it was to come in. Odin stepped into the room, and Loki's smile fell just a little bit. Thor didn't like that but wasn't sure how to fix it or how his brother shifted his body slightly away from the door as if that would hide his stomach from view. "How are things going in here?" Odin asked as he stepped forward. "Well, I hope."

"Well enough," Thor answered. "Loki's been helping me with some of my school work."

Odin nodded. "Good. Good," he said absently. "Thor, would you give your brother and me a few moments?" Thor hesitated for a few seconds but then nodded and got up. Even as he left, Thor couldn't help but glance back at Loki with concern. He didn't like how small and unsure his brother looked, but Thor also couldn't imagine their father allowing him to stay after he'd already asked to
be alone with Loki. Thor gave Loki what he hoped was a reassuring smile before leaving. His mother was outside waiting and gave Thor a one-armed hug whilst pulling him off to the side.

"How are you feeling, son?" Odin asked.

Loki shrugged. "Better... I suppose."

Odin nodded again, even though the answer did not invoke much confidence. "Come, Loki. Sit with me for a few moments and talk," Odin said with a gesture towards the bed.

"... alright," Loki murmured as he got up from his chair and went to sit on the edge of the bed beside Odin. He fidgeted with his clothes over his stomach and was looking anywhere but his father's face. "Talk about what?"

"Loki," Odin said gently before putting a hand on Loki's forearm to stop him from twisting and tugging at his clothing. "You don't need to hide your stomach from me. Relax."

"But it looks... wrong," Loki said, twisting his fingers in the fabric even more.

"It doesn't look wrong," Odin said. "It looks how any pregnancy looks."

Loki glanced up at Odin before his eyes skittered away to a far corner. Odin sighed and tried to figure out how to best handle this situation. Something that would convey some sort of peace to his son. Odin had very few things that he thought would actually do that. After a few minutes of thought, Odin came upon something that might work. "I want to tell you something, Loki. A story that I hope you will find helpful..."

Loki risked another glance up at his father. "... what sort of story?"

"One from when I was younger," Odin said. "It's about my brother. The one you were named after."

"Loptr?"

Odin nodded. "I know I haven't told you much about him... but that is because I find it very hard to do. My father was not a very affectionate man. Rarely showed us much fatherly attention at all... but he was especially hard on Loptr. I think because at that point he had discovered that Jotnar are singularly gendered and that... he never handled that revelation, really. He became very unpleasant to my mother and extremely harsh towards Loptr. I didn't realize the full of extent of how bigoted he really was until after most of it had already happened, I'm ashamed to say."

Loki twisted his fingers together nervously as he looked at Odin. He wasn't sure where all this was going, but the topic wasn't a comfortable one. "What... what story did you want to tell me?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Odin sighed. "Loptr was with child once, himself," he finally said. "My father forced him to end it... even though he himself had banned abortions decades previously. Loptr was devastated... begged my father to not do it." Odin shook his head slightly. "Bor didn't care. He couldn't abide the thought of his adopted son bearing a child. To Helheim with Loptr's wishes. It was why I insisted on letting you make the decision even though I know it was a hard one."

Loki was quiet for a moment and then looked over at Odin. "He... wanted the baby?"

"Yes. Very much," Odin said. "Bor demanded to know who the father was, but Loptr wouldn't say. I had known that my brother was having an affair for quite a while... I suspected since he kept it so
hidden that it was with a man, but that had confirmed it. Bor was so furious. Loptr, of course, never forgave Bor. My sweet little brother changed after that. Became more closed off... harsher with his insults and vindictive. I am sure that he did some of the horrible things that were written about later purely to get at our father and the rest of us."

"Why would he want to hurt you?" Loki asked. "If Bor did it-"

"Because of how angry he was," Odin said. "He wanted his child, and our father stole the choice away because it made him uncomfortable. Because he was a massive hypocrite and insecure." Loki was a little surprised to hear that from Odin but kept quiet. "And father was... easier on me, Vili, and Ve. So, Loptr lashed out at all of us. Mainly father but us three as well if we did something that made him particularly angry. He got himself into trouble several times. But that wasn't the point of why I was telling you all of this-"

"What was the point?"

Odin sighed and turned more towards Loki. "The point was to help you understand what I'm about to tell you," Odin said. "That I'm proud of the choice you made."

Loki reeled back a little. "W-what?"

"I'm proud of you," Odin repeated calmly. "I know part of why you decided to have the baby, but I know that neither option was easy. That both were scary options. So, I'm proud that you have been able to make a decision at all. Especially the one that you have."

Loki looked away. "I didn't... didn't do it for any noble reason..." he said softly. He had been too scared of what would happen if he ended it, Loki didn't consider that very impressive.

"It doesn't have to have been for a noble reason," Odin said. "No option you had was perfect, but it was still yours to make. And I happen to think you picked the more difficult path. And... potentially the better one." Odin knew from what Ixtlilton had told them that the Norns had heavily pushed Loki the direction that he'd gone, but that didn't change Odin's opinion all that much. Loki had still made a hard choice, and Odin refused to let his anger at the Norns' interference seep over to Loki.

"I... I'm not so sure anymore," Loki said. "The baby is... wrong."

Odin frowned and tilted his head slightly. "Wrong in what way, son?"

Loki twisted his hands together even more. "Lady Eir... she discovered the baby was malformed."

"Ah, yes, I had heard that," Odin said. "He'd been kept up to date on Loki's health, and Frigga had discussed with him at length the situation with the baby. "But that is not your fault. Such things simply happen."

"I tried to stop the magic," Loki said in a small voice. "T-that night. I felt the spell and I... I didn't know what it did, but it hurt so I-"

"Loki," Odin interrupted softly but firmly. "If you had truly managed to do something to disrupt the spell... it simply would not have worked. It would not have caused such a problem with the baby. And, even if it did do that, which again it didn't, then I don't think that anyone could blame you."

Loki looked over at Odin again, and the King could tell just from the look in his big green eyes that Loki didn't fully believe what he'd been told. "Loki," Odin said. "Nothing that has happened since Winter's End has been your fault." Loki looked away again, and Odin sighed before wrapping his
arm around Loki's shoulders. Odin felt Loki's whole body shudder.

"Father, I-I feel like..."

Odin waited, but even after a full minute, Loki didn't finish. "It's alright, Loki. You can tell me whatever you need to."

Loki wiped at his face a few times. "You'll be upset..."

"Not with you," Odin said. He wasn't going to promise not to get upset because he had a feeling whatever Loki was struggling to say would be upsetting but probably not for the reasons Loki would think.

"I feel like..." Loki wiped his eyes yet again and still refused to look up. "Like I shouldn't... like I can't be an Odinson anymore..." he said in a small voice.

"Loki... Loki, look at me."

The young God almost cringed but slowly turned his eyes up to the All-Father. Odin put his hand to the back of Loki's neck like he used to do for his own brother. "These thoughts serve you ill, Loki," Odin said as Loki shuddered and then slowly relaxed under Odin's hand. "Unlike my father... I did not take you in and give you my name with any misinformation. I knew who you were and where you came from... and all the possibilities that might entail. I did not want this for you. I would have much preferred that you'd not been hurt, but nor will I rescind my name. You are an Odinson, no matter what anyone else says."

"But..."

"Loki, do you trust me?" Odin asked.

Loki's green eyes widened. "O-of course, Father."

"Then do your best to not believe those poisonous thoughts over what I am telling you," Odin said.

"It's hard."

"I know," Odin said kindly. "Fighting our own doubts is always hard. But I want you to try... and if you ever need to hear it again, just ask." Loki nodded but said nothing. Odin waited, wanting to be sure that he had helped Loki as much as he could. Especially since he would be leaving Aztlan in a few hours.

After a few minutes, Loki turned to look at his Father again. "Am I..."

"Are you what?"

Loki sighed and looked down at his hands, fiddling with the edge of his tunic. "Am I... doing the right thing, Father?"

Odin considered how to answer that carefully for a moment. "The right thing? There is no one 'right thing,' Loki. Not in a situation like this. All you can do is try to do what is right for you. Do you feel like you are?"

"I... don't know," Loki said. "I think I am? But... sometimes I find myself doubting that, and I'm not sure why."

"I see," Odin looked off to the window as he thought. The view of the mountains and lake
surrounding the city was blocked behind wooden slats and gauzy curtains that fluttered in the magically induced breeze. "Well, you do still have time to consider everything. Take your time and really think about what you want to do," Odin said. "Make certain that what you decide on is something that you will be comfortable with, Loki."

Loki nodded absently as he continued to pick at the edge of his clothing. Odin studied his son for a moment before noticing something that had slipped his attention earlier somehow. "You've gotten quite tall since last I saw you," he realized.

Loki looked up, clearly surprised by the sudden topic change. But he smiled genuinely in a way that Odin was relieved to see. "Almost as tall as Thor again. I'll catch up to him. I know it."

Odin smiled at that and gave Loki's nape a gentle squeeze. "I have no doubts."

Thor spent the next few days with his brother as much as possible. He made sure that Loki read all of Sigyn's letters and agreed to take some back when Loki shyly asked him. The Crowned Prince realized he was being reduced to a messenger for his brother's love letters, but Thor didn't mind. And, he was too glad that Loki had decided to write back in the first place to tease him about it.

Thor had been a little more hesitant about the pictures he'd had Sven draw for Loki because he still wasn't sure how well Loki would take them. There was immense relief when Loki opened up the first one and smiled at the scene of them all on the beach of Noatun and even made mention of how silly Fandral looked with his hair flipped every which way by the wind. Then Loki had gone very quiet, and doe-eyed at the picture of Sigyn that Thor had asked Sven to draw. That time Thor hadn't quite been able to hold back his teasing. He paid for it later when the meal he was eating suddenly felt like biting into pure lava. The burning in his mouth wouldn't abate for several minutes until Thor stuffed handfuls of bread into it.

Huehuecoyotl eventually showed his face, and though he was an easy-going and friendly God, Thor wasn't as fond of him as Loki seemed to be. Possibly because the very first thing Huehuecoyotl did was put Thor's bed floating out on the lake. With Thor still sleeping upon it. That had been a very wet and unpleasant morning. The prank set Loki roaring with laughter and Thor eventually did get his revenge when he tripped his brother's new friend as they were going down the stairs and Coyotl went headfirst into a pot. Entirely by accident. Naturally.

After that, Coyotl seemed to have decided to target people that were not Thor, and the three of them all got along much better. Coyotl even took Thor out searching for some sort of dangerous animals that Thor couldn't recall the name of even after asking three times. The search was fruitless, and Thor was half-certain this water jaguar thing didn't even exist, and Coyotl was just teasing. But, it did keep Thor busy while Loki was at his various medical exams and meetings with Ixtlilton.

But, Thor had to return to Asgard before he wanted to do so. He made a promise to return as soon as Odin would let him and that he would bring more letters and pictures for Loki, but neither brother was pleased about the circumstance. Thor would have to try hard to make sure to try and get their Father to agree that next time Thor came for a visit he could stay until Loki could go home as well.

When he returned to Asgard, the first thing Thor did was deliver the letter his brother wrote to Sigyn. She thanked him profusely and swore she'd write a return as soon as she got a chance. Thor didn't doubt that she'd have several done by the time he got a chance to see Loki again. While Thor was back in Asgard, he busied himself with his friends and training again. Sif was making genuinely remarkable progress in catching up to the rest of them, and Thor didn't doubt she would
be in their class before the next year was upon them. Dagr seemed a bit moody about that development, but Thor had seen him get that way the first time around and knew that Sif's brother eventually got over having his sister also be a warrior.

Hogun was as quiet as ever and had decided to specialize in the mace, being the first of Thor's friends to pick a primary weapon. Fandral and Astrild were, of course, too busy chasing after girls to worry overmuch about picking their primary weapon specialties, and were often seen being run out of various taverns laughing their heads off and still flirting with the half-amused and half-exasperated barmaids.

Unfortunately, Amora and Lorelei's promise to not return until they were done with their schooling didn't seem to be true. More than once, on a weekend, Thor was ambushed by one or both of them. Usually, while he was out in the town or on the training field. Once Thor was at the market with his friends, and Lorelei had seemingly sprung out of nowhere to cling to his arm and bat her eyelashes. Luckily, Sif had been there and chased the redhead off without even resorting to physical violence. Thor had been quite impressed.

Although when he said that Sif had blushed and Thor made a renewed mental note to have a talk with her about how he wasn't interested. It was just such an awkward conversation to have, and Thor was awful at turning women down. He always felt so horrible doing it no matter how nice he tried to be. He especially didn't want to make things unpleasant with Sif since Thor truly did value her as a friend and didn't want to ruin that.

Two months after Thor returned to Asgard, Volstagg finally convinced Hildegund to allow him to court her for real. Thor knew that it would be a rather short courtship and they would be quickly married and expecting the first of their enormous brood. Thor watched with amusement as Volstagg paraded around with Hildegund like the proudest cock in the yard. Hildegund also seemed amused but also much enjoying the way Volstagg doted on her constantly. Considering she doted on him right back Thor thought it little wonder that their official courtship was so much shorter than the average one.

About that same time, Thor started to notice that there were rumors about Loki's absence from Asgard. Some of the rumored reasons that the younger prince was off in another land were downright ridiculous, but some were altogether too horrible. Thor tried his best to squash the rumors, but without wanting to tell the truth either, it was quite hard to do. Odin made several announcements to try to cut through the gossip as well, but they still persisted since nobody would say who was postulating such theories in the first place. Loki would have to return to Asgard to silence it once and for all.

The particular rumors that Thor hated the most were any that seemed to imply that Loki had done something to anger Odin and was sent away as a punishment. But there were also ones that claimed he'd run away and the royal family was just covering it up until they found him, he'd caught some sort of plague and had to be sent off for the protection of Asgard, or he was off being tutored by Alfr in his magic. Thor couldn't even fathom where the gossip was coming from most of the time.

Thor was keenly aware of how much time was passing without him by his brother's side. Loki was already in his third trimester, and Thor felt as if he hadn't been nearly as supportive as he should have been just by virtue of them not being in the same realm most of the time. He was pestering Odin regularly to return from Aztlan, and finally, he was allowed to do so although Odin could not join him like he had before.

When Thor saw Loki again, his belly looked painfully large and Thor had to fight the urge to say
something about it or stare. There was absolutely no disguising it anymore since it looked as if a Midgardian Beach Ball that Thor had once seen had somehow ended up inside Loki's stomach. Loki had to struggle to get out of his chair to greet Thor when he returned. Right then and there, Thor resolved to not force his brother to have to do too much physically. He was truly afraid that Loki would hurt himself somehow with his own stubbornness.

"You know, brother," Loki said as Thor went to fetch the book that Loki had left across the room so that his pregnant brother wouldn't have to get up from his bed. "As much as I rather enjoy you acting my servant... it's not necessary, Thor. I can take care of myself."

"I know," Thor said as he came back to the bed and held the book out. "It's just faster and easier, isn't it?"

Loki sighed with exasperation as he scratched Huld behind her ears where she was lying beside him on the bed. "Have you been talking to Mother or Gerd?"

"No," Thor said. He sat down beside Loki. "But you looked comfortable, and I didn't want you to have to move."

Loki snorted. "I look comfortable, do I?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "I'll have you know I am very much not comfortable. This baby is very heavy."

Thor supposed that he might be making his brother a little uncomfortable, but Loki didn't tell him to stop helping so he didn't. Loki wasn't technically on mandatory bed rest, but Thor thought that might have been solely due to Loki's silver tongue. So, the fewer chances Thor could give Loki to get up out of bed and move around, the better he would feel about the whole thing.

They stayed in Loki's room for most of the day before Loki decided that they needed to leave, complaining of being bored. Thor really didn't like the idea of it, but Loki was determined and didn't really care what Thor said to try and deter him. So, Thor found himself walking along with Loki as they went to the Aztlan library where Loki had apparently been spending more time as his pregnancy progressed.

The library was a large room filled with scrolls on shelves. The room had four massive square pillars within it, holding up the ceiling with little sitting areas clustered around the base. Every wall and column was covered with intricate carvings painted with bright pigments. Thor found himself staring at the four pillars as Loki spread out on a low table to read through a selection of the scrolls.

Each pillar told of the world being made on one side, and as the carvings continued onto the other faces, it showed the world being destroyed in various ways. Sometimes everything ended by fire, other times by water or great storms and beasts. Giant suns were carved into the top of each pillar, but each star had clear differences as did the worlds carved below them.

Thor moved to the walls and read through the stories that flowed around the room without a clear break. By the time Thor had finished his circuit of the room, Loki had clearly been consumed fully by his own studies. The table he was at was covered in even more scrolls than the first time Thor had looked over. Loki was murmuring something to himself and writing notes down in a small book he had brought with him.

"What're you studying, brother?" Thor asked as he peered over Loki's shoulder. The parchment under Loki's left hand was of some circular diagram that was slowly rotating in an intricate pattern. It took Thor a moment to realize it was a depiction of the universal movements through time since it was slightly different than the ones he was used to seeing in Asgard.
"Here in Aztlan they use a very complex calendar," Loki said absently. "Well, two calendars really. It's quite interesting how they decided to break everything up, and I'm trying to figure out if, specifically their ritual calendar correlates to the festivals we celebrate or if because Aztlan is in its own pocket dimension if the universal ley lines hold no effect."

Thor nodded. "I see."

Loki looked up with an eyebrow raised. "Do you?"

"Well... those words all made sense," Thor said. He took a seat beside Loki and pulled a scroll close. "But... if the ritual days do not correlate to the convergences of the universal lines... why else would they be timed as they are?" Thor asked. Many people found that the movement of the solar systems, stars, planets, and other celestial bodies greatly influenced different sorts of tasks - especially when dealing with seidr. That was why certain rituals -usually more complicated ones- could only be successfully completed on certain days or nights when different geometries aligned.

Loki shrugged a little bit as he wrote. "Some rituals do not operate on such rules. I know of some protection rituals that you can activate at any time but to maintain it you must redo the ritual the next time that same pattern occurs whether that be one year or fifty thousand years in the future. It all depends on how complex you've woven your magic. And, of course, the more involved the ritual, the more ley lines and celestial positions would need to be taken into account."

"So... a simple protection spell might need to be renewed every year on the day where a couple specific bodies align, but others, that have more parts, might need six or seven that only come into the same positions every ten years?" Thor said as he tried to visualize that.

"Very good, Thor," Loki said, finally looking up. "See, you can figure it out if you break it down far enough."

Thor chuckled some. "That is only because you know how to explain it to me," he said. "How do you figure out if a ritual will need such alignments or not?"

"Usually there are mentions of it if you find the ritual in a book. If you learn the ritual by word of mouth, then usually it would require a certain structure that would lead the well educated to knowing it had such restrictions. And, of course, if you design the ritual yourself, you'd factor that in from the start," Loki said.

"Have you ever made a ritual, Loki?" Thor asked. He hadn't been aware that was even an option.

Loki seemed surprised. "Me? No, I've had no need to. Everything I've ever wanted to do there's already a ritual for. I've tweaked a few from time to time. Like the one I used to ward my balcony back home..." Loki went silent for a few heartbeats before shaking his head. "But that's not really the same thing. I just made the spells stronger and longer-lasting and that just meant layering another set of runes on top of the ones that were already there."

"I see. And ritual magic is different from spells, right?"

"That's right. Spells and rituals are related but not the same," Loki said. "Spells are one-time use instantaneous effects while rituals are persistent effects. And then, of course, there are enchantments which are permanent spells anchored by something physical. The runes on Mjolnir, for example, hold the spells permanently, thereby making them enchantments instead."

Thor shook his head a little bit. "It's amazing that you can remember these sorts of things, Loki."

"You can remember the difference between Kovas' Gambit and the Mangala Maneuver, which I
"They aren't, though!" Thor said. "The Mangala Maneuver takes much more time to set up and can only really work if-
"
"You prove my point!" Loki said before Thor could really start on the intricacies of the two battlefield plays. "You're almost as good as Tyr with remembering all those silly things. I'd much rather come up with my own solutions to problems, thank you."

Thor chuckled some and pulled a sheet of parchment closer to watch the diagram rotate around itself. Thor wasn't sure off the top of the head which system he was looking at, but it did seem somewhat familiar. "Do you need any help with all this?" Thor asked as he tried to place the bright white star system with twelve planets that were being depicted.

"If you think you can, I won't be opposed," Loki said as he jotted down more note in his heavily slanted and narrow writing. The runes almost blended together and it was only through centuries of knowing his brother that Thor could read it at all. Especially with the random shorthand symbols that Loki would throw into the mix.

After what had to be nearing two hours of pouring over various scrolls and documents, Loki put down his quill with a sigh. Thor looked up from what he was doing to see his brother rubbing his ample stomach. "Are you alright?" Thor asked cautiously.

Loki nodded. "Yes. Just the baby is moving a lot right now."

Thor let his eyes drift down to the spot where Loki was rubbing. "Just moving?"

"You'll know if he kicks me, Thor," Loki said with a small quirk of his lips that didn't quite seem like a smile, but Thor didn't know what else to call it. "It's like having a hammer flailing around on my insides. He's quite strong for not even being born yet."

Thor eyed his brother for a moment as Loki seemingly absentmindedly rubbed his stomach. "Loki... can I ask you something and can you promise to not get upset?"

Loki gave him a bland stare. "Thor, I broke down crying the other day for literally no reason. I cannot promise any sort of emotional stability right now."

"Try?"

Loki sighed but nodded. "Fine. I'll try."

"Do you... do you actually want to give away the baby?" Thor asked.

"W-what?"

"The baby," Thor said softly. "Are you sure you want to give him away?"

Loki shifted, and Thor decided to not point out that his hand still hadn't left his stomach. "Mother's already found several families that would take care of him," Loki said.

"That wasn't what I asked," Thor said. "Do you want to give him away?"

There was a heartbeat of pause. "I can't raise a baby, Thor!"

Loki's face twisted. "It doesn't matter, Thor. I'm not even a thousand! I can't have a baby!"

"Loki-"

But Loki was already pushing away from the table. "I'm not having this discussion with you, Thor." Loki got up quickly and made it a full two steps from the table before stopping. Thor saw his brother sway unsteadily and jumped up.

"Loki!" Thor only just got there in time to catch Loki on his way down to the floor. "Loki, what's the matter?" Thor asked as he helped lower Loki fully to the solid ground. The younger prince was pale and looked dazed in Thor's arms. Thor wasn't even entirely sure if Loki was awake. "Loki?" Loki didn't so much as twitch, and now Thor was certain that he was unconscious. "Loki!"

Thor felt his heart trying to escape his chest as he picked his brother up like a bride. Loki's eyelids didn't even flutter as Thor carried him quickly out of the library. Thor spotted a few startled looking servants. "Find my Mother and the Lady Eir!" Thor shouted without bothering to stop. Thor was distant aware of the servant hurrying off, but he was only focused on making it down the stairs with his brother in his arms and not falling. Why were there so many steps in Aztlan, anyway?

Thor got quite a few looks as he rushed through the city and he was aware of Ofnir prowling the rooftops off to the left and letting out noises, but the Thunder God didn't have time to pay the Wyvern much attention. Ofnir was probably upset, but he wouldn't be able to do anything but get in the way. Thor didn't even get all the way up the main pyramid before his Mother, Lady Eir, Gerd, and a few others came rushing down the stairs to meet him. "What happened?" Lady Eir demanded.

"We were in the library. We had a disagreement, and he went to get up. He walked a few steps and then collapsed," Thor said quickly.

"We need to get him to his room where it is cooler, and I can examine him," Eir said.

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Thor carried Loki back through the halls and to his enchanted room. As soon as he laid Loki down on the bed, he was ushered back out so that the healers could find what was wrong. Thor didn't want to leave, but he didn't want to somehow be in the way either, so he reluctantly allowed himself to be pushed out into the hall again. Thor leaned up against the wall and was forced to wait for news. He hoped that he hadn't somehow done something to endanger his brother. He certainly hadn't meant any harm.

Thor heard a little noise by his feet and saw Huld pawing at his leg with huge eyes. With a sigh, Thor bent down to pick up Loki's pet. "He will be alright, Huld," Thor said, partially for himself as well. "Mother will not let anything happen to him."

Huld made another noise and curled up in Thor's arms, her fifth hand gripping Thor's bicep a little too tightly. Thor wasn't about to protest and simply scratched her head. Not only was petting the small carnivore something to do, but it was oddly soothing as well. Thor kept reminding himself that Loki would be fine. He simply had to be.

After what felt like an eternity of waiting, most of the people who had rushed in to help Loki slowly started to file out. Thor perked up that none of them looked too distraught. Things might not be as bad as he was fearing. Carefully, Thor edged closer to the door and stuck his head in. Huld's ears perked up, and she jumped out of Thor's arms at the sound of Loki's voice. "I'm fine, Mother."

"You are not fine," Frigga said. "You collapsed, and if Thor hadn't been there, you might have
"seriously hurt yourself."

"But I didn't," Loki said.

Thor came fully into the room just as Huld was jumping up onto Loki's bed and began begging for attention. "Nonetheless," Lady Eir said, "You are not to get up from this bed except to go to the bathroom, My Prince. And I don't want any of your wordplay to try and get out of it."

"This truly feels unnecessary," Loki said.

"Little one, you knew this was a very real possibility," Gerd said from where they were sitting beside Loki's bed. "You should be glad that you lasted as long as you have... Eir wanted you to be on bed rest two weeks ago."

"Is everything alright?" Thor asked as he came up to Loki's bedside.

"Yes, Thor," Frigga said. "Your brother just had an issue with his blood pressure. Not unexpected but now he's going to be on bed rest." She said that very firmly and sent Loki a stern look that made it clear to Thor, at least, that it wasn't something up for debate. Not that that was something Loki ever really cared about before.

Loki made a face. Thor sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry, brother. If I hadn't upset you this would never have happened," Thor said taking hold of Loki's hand. "This is all my fault."

"Nonsense, Prince Thor," Lady Eir said with a gentle pat to Thor's shoulder. "We have been worried about Prince Loki's blood pressure for a while now. While I'm sure the argument wouldn't help, I imagine it had more to do with how quickly he got up from his seat than whatever you were talking about."

"No, Thor," Loki muttered. "It wasn't your fault... Lady Eir is right."

Thor might have argued that but didn't want to agitate his brother so allowed the subject to drop. "How long does he have to stay in bed?" Thor asked, looking from his Mother to Lady Eir.

"Until the baby is born, Thor," Frigga said. "It is too dangerous otherwise."

"Mother-"

"No, Loki," Frigga said firmly before her youngest could start arguing. Loki huffed in annoyance and Frigga sighed. "If you don't follow this rule, you might end up needing more than just bed rest, darling. I'm not willing to risk your health in such a way. So please, I know it's not enjoyable, but please follow Lady Eir's instructions?"

Loki still looked terribly unhappy, but after a few minutes of glaring off at nothing, he sighed. "Very well... For you, Mother."

Frigga smiled and leaned down to press a kiss to Loki's forehead. "Thank you, Darling. I will do my best to make sure you're not too bored being stuck in bed."

"I will as well, brother," Thor said instantly.

Gerd reached over to gently clasp the back of Loki's neck and gave it a squeeze. "You know this is only because we care, don't you?" Loki stared at Gerd for a heartbeat but then nodded. "Good. Now. You rest, and I will see you later."
"Thank you, Heillr Gerd," Frigga said as Gerd got up from their seat and started for the door.

"Of course."

Eir stayed another few minutes and reiterated the importance of Loki following her instructions (for once, she had said with particular exasperation) and letting her know if he felt anything strange at all. Loki had promised solemnly to do so, but then he always did that, so it probably didn't mean a whole lot. Frigga, however, didn't seem inclined to leave and instead had her weaving brought in. She then made herself comfortable in a chair by the window to work.

Loki sighed and scratched Huld's head. "I don't suppose you brought the scrolls we were working on?" he asked Thor.

"Er... no, I did not," Thor said. "I'm sure they're still there, though. I could go and get them for you."

"Don't bother," Loki said with a wave of his free hand. "I don't much feel like studying right now anyway."

"Well, what do you want to do?" Thor asked.

"Honestly?" Loki shrugged. "I'm not feeling like doing much of anything. I'm kind of tired, though. I shouldn't be. It's too early to be tired."

Thor nodded. "Then, you should rest."

"If you're going to start harping on my health too, you can go find something else to do," Loki said with a frown.

"I won't!" Thor promised with his hands up to show he meant no offense. His brother was particularly touchy today it seemed.

Loki sighed and lifted a hand to push his hair back into place. All the excitement earlier had mussed the usually slicked back locks. Loki's fingers combed through his hair twice before catching on a knot. "Thor, get me my comb since I can't get up," Loki said with so much annoyance in his voice Thor knew that while Loki might do as he was told he would be protesting his required bed rest for the entirety of the time, he was on it.

Thor got up off the bed and went to where Loki was pointing to the bathroom. After rummaging around on the tables for a moment, Thor managed to find the silver and bone comb on the side of the bath and snatched it up. Loki held his hand out for the item as Thor came rushing back to the bed. "I'll do it," Thor said as he got comfortable and started working the wide-toothed comb through his brother's hair.
"Oh, I'm sure you'd find a way," Loki said. Huld chittered for attention and Loki chuckled before going back to petting her. "Huld agrees with me."

"She didn't say anything," Thor said.

"She doesn't have to," Loki said. "I just know she's smart enough to agree." Thor rolled his eyes but was too glad that it didn't seem as if Loki was mad at him for earlier to bother arguing about whether or not Huld would agree. Loki was probably right anyway and his pet would agree. If only to spite Thor.

Chapter End Notes

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**Thor's Intelligence... again** - I wanted to get a little more into Thor's smarts since I made the claim earlier in this fic that Thor might be the 'jock' of the brothers but he wasn't as stupid as he seemed. Just kinda naive and not as smart as his genius brother. Plus, he's getting private tutoring from one of the wisest Goddesses in Asgard. She would probably have lessons geared specifically for Thor's style of learning and be able to give him any one on one time he needed. Hence it made sense to me that the reason he would struggle with school was if he were struggling to keep up with someone placed higher than him like Loki.

**Loptr** - So, yeah... another of those nasty family secrets comes out. Some of the mythological stories I'm shifting off of Loki and giving to Loptr are of the more outright betrayal-y flavor... and that's because he himself had been betrayed by Bor. Odin doesn't know who Loptr's lover was btw so he has no idea what might or might not have happened to Loptr's relationship with said man after what Bor did. But between that, the casual racism that Bor was flinging out, and Loptr's own emotional traumas it's no real wonder that the situation culminated in someone getting killed. Unfortunately it was Loptr and not Bor.

**The Five Worlds** - In Aztec myth... the gods made the world five times. The first four ended... poorly. To put it mildly. There was fire raining from the sky in one a world wide flood in another... just all in all a bad time. But the fifth time they all got gold stars and decided to keep the world that was made. Hence the pillars in the library represent those four other versions of the world.

**Aztec Calendar** - There are two. And they are complicated! I wasn't about to try and go into detail but each calendar has a different number of days and ways of dividing them and one is based off of the sun the other isn't and... yeah. It's a lot. The Mayans have the same dual calendar thing going on too.

**Ritual v. Spell v. Enchantment** - I hope I explained it pretty good up there what the difference is between the three types of magic. But as I was thinking about the system I realized each of those things in my head were slightly different. There are some overlaps like rituals that require multiple spells and spells that require bits and pieces of real things like a ritual might but on the whole spell is a hand wave to light a candle, ritual is drawing out a circle and chanting to curse someone, and enchanting is engraving the magic permanently into something. Because I haven't gotten magic complex enough for my tastes yet, apparently...
Kovas and Mangala- Two war gods. Kovas is Lithuanian and Mangala is sort of like the Hindu version of Mars from what I understand. I figured it made sense for battle maneuvers among the gods to be named... after other gods.

Loki's Condition- There was just no way I could see Loki getting through this pregnancy without being forced to bed rest. It's super high risk on top of being his first. Preeclampsia (which is basically what he has) seemed a perfectly reasonable complication for him to develop.
Loki had never been very fun to be around when he was not feeling his best. Thor knew that from the get-go and had prepared himself for the sharper edge of Loki's tongue. But he had not anticipated just how bored Loki would get when restricted to bed rest. He probably should have, but Thor had been more concerned with making sure his brother was actually following those orders.

Very little seemed to get Loki's mind off his predicament for long. In fact, it took the combined efforts of Coyotl, Thor, Frigga, Gerd, and Huld to sufficiently entertain him as the days ticked by. Loki and Eir had several arguments as Loki tried to worm his way out of the restrictions, and Eir refused to budge. As the days ticked by slowly, Thor started to notice something a bit alarming.

More and more often, Thor would run off to fetch something Loki wanted only to return and find Loki had fallen asleep. At first, this was fine as a sleeping Mischief God couldn't then disobey orders and endanger himself. But it started to become excessive rather quickly. Eir examined Loki usually once a day much to his annoyance, and couldn't find an obvious cause for the Prince's fatigue aside from the general strain that he was under. Gerd seemed to agree and said they would have been more surprised had Loki not experienced such exhaustion. According to Gerd, many Jotnar became increasingly tired as their pregnancies wore on, which was just one of many reasons they remained hidden throughout the time they were carrying children. Their bodies, while perfectly capable of conceiving and giving birth, sometimes did struggle with the process. Considering that and the added strain from such a large babe, they had said, it had been practically a forgone conclusion in Gerd's mind that Loki would grow so tired.

A side effect of all the naps was that the circles under Loki's eyes finally started showing significant improvement. Thor didn't doubt that his brother was still having nightmares, but the pure number of naps seemed to be helping him recover from months of bad nights. Also, because Loki wasn't up and about -mostly he was just resting and eating- he was filling out a bit more. His stomach had, of course, been large for quite some time, but the rest of him had remained on the skinnier side. Now those areas such as his face and his arms were becoming slowly less rail thin.

But, as Loki's due date drew steadily closer, Loki's naps started occurring more and more often as well. Though he had initially begun looking better from the increased rest, the strain was starting to become very apparent. Loki would usually be up for the morning but spend most, if not all, of the afternoon asleep. He would wake up for dinner but then go right back to sleep, looking as if he just couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. It was genuinely becoming worrisome.

Thor tried to take comfort in the fact that the healers were closely monitoring his brother and that his mother had agreed to let Thor stay until the baby was born. Loki's due date was close enough, and Thor was worried enough that she hadn't fought him on the idea very hard at all. She seemed far more concerned with waking Loki periodically to make him drink some water or nibble on
some fruit. Loki never seemed particularly happy at the interruptions. Still, after a few days, he just did what their mother wanted before rolling over to go back to sleep.

Through some unspoken agreement, someone was always with Loki in his room. Usually, it was Thor or Frigga, but sometimes it was Gerd and rarely Coyotl. Loki's due date came and went without incident, and Thor found himself getting very anxious. It had been half-expected that Loki would go into labor early given the size of the babe, but the fact that he hadn't was worrying. At least for Thor. Eir tried to be reassuring about the whole situation.

"It could be a simple matter of the babe's Kelpie blood. Kelpies have longer gestation that Jotnar," she had said. "I don't think we need to worry until Prince Loki or the babe seem to be in distress."

"How long is a Kelpie gestation?" Gerd asked with their arms folded over their chest.

"Around a year. Like all Noble Breeds," Frigga said. "But with the amount of Jotnar blood in the babe, I wouldn't have immediately thought it would be that long. That's why we had Loki's date set for when we did." She was looking particularly anxious, and Thor definitely agreed with the sentiment. Loki already looked as if any wrong move would split his belly in two. Thor couldn't imagine how much larger he would get if he had to go several more months.

"I don't think he will make it that far, to be honest," Eir said. "I don't think his body will be able to carry that long."

Gerd's brow furrowed. "Will that affect the babe then?"

"It depends on how long he manages," Eir said with a sigh. "It could just be the babe won't be as large as he would have otherwise been, or it could be that the babe would have some difficulties if it's born too early. I have plans in place for the latter, but I am hoping for the former."

"I worry about the stress on Loki's body," Gerd said. "He is still so small, and the babe is only getting larger. He already cannot lay in certain positions due to the size of his stomach." Loki had taken to sleeping partially propped up on several pillows so that he was able to breathe easier.

Eir nodded. "I am contemplating removing the babe, but since we do not know how long gestation is meant to be in this situation, I am wary of doing so too soon and causing more problems than I solve," Eir said.

Thor didn't particularly like any of the talking that was going on, mostly because there were no definite answers to give. The only thing that they all seemed to agree on was that the chances of Loki being able to give birth naturally were slim to none. It was practically a forgone conclusion that they would have to deliver the baby surgically, and all the necessary supplies for such a thing were already gathered and kept ready.

The talk continued for several more minutes about contingency plans and possible complications. Still, Thor didn't want to listen to something that would only serve to worry him more. So, he slipped back into the room where Loki was again sleeping. Huld was curled up on top of the pillows Loki was using to prop himself up with her tail draped down near Loki's shoulder.

Thor smiled a little bit and went to the desk where he had been working on wrapping fresh leather around the handle of some of his smaller weapons. It was a simple task that kept Thor occupied while Loki rested. He'd found many minor issues to fix over the weeks, and Thor's equipment had never been more pristine, except perhaps for when he first received it. He had even polished the metal buckles and studs on Megingjord until the belt had gleamed. Thor had never ignored his equipment, but he'd rarely had so much free time to devote as much attention to it as he had.
Loki slept on until Frigga came to rouse him again for dinner. He said very little but cleaned his plate with startling efficiency before going back to sleep. Thor was growing more used to this, but he still found it disturbing. A not insignificant part of him had the urge to shake Loki awake just to be sure he was alright, but he didn't particularly want his brother to lash him verbally for the interruption. Or physically. Thor was well aware that Loki had regained the habit of sleeping with a dagger hidden away nearby. Thor no longer found that quirk as silly as he had in his first life and instead found it too sad to dwell on.

Another week or so, and Loki started turning from fair-skinned to sapphire. He had been losing control of his glamour for a while, but this time, as he slowly turned colors, he did not return back. Luckily, Loki didn't freeze anything in contact with him, either because of his genetic condition or because he was so often asleep.

Thor was bracing himself for a bad reaction when Loki noticed, but he never seemed to. He just continued on with what little he appeared to have the energy for and then went back to sleep as if nothing had happened. In a way, it was one of the most unnerving things Loki had ever done, and Thor was sure it wasn't even intentional. On the plus side, because Thor was desperate for any positives to this situation he could find, it no longer struck him as odd to see Loki blue and with blood-red eyes. Thor had grown almost as used to seeing that side of his brother as he was to seeing Loki pale as the moon with big green eyes.

In fact, now that the shock of seeing it had faded, it was startlingly easy to realize his brother didn't actually look all that different. Loki's bone structure was still the same, his brow continued to still furrow in the same way it always had when he was annoyed, and all of his expressions were precisely the same. Thor figured he should have realized that would be the case, but he hadn't ever really consciously thought about it. Thor only realized he'd expected his brother to somehow be different when there were none to be found. Looking past the blueness of his skin, while it took some practice, was indeed the only thing separating Loki's Aesir appearance and his Jotnar one.

Almost a month passed Loki's initial due date, and again there was a discussion of the situation. Unfortunately, not much had actually changed aside from the glamour's seemingly total failure. Frigga, who apart from Odin knew the most about how the glamour worked, put forth the hypothesis that because of how tired Loki was, his seidr might also be getting drained. Since the glamour used Loki's own abilities to work, it would make sense that it would fail when he reached the very bottom of his massive reserves. That reasoning didn't imply anything good, but it at least meant it was just an extension of the difficulties that Loki was already having and not additional ones.

Eir took a more in-depth look at the babe to try and get a better idea of when Loki's actual due date might be. Or at least when the babe would be able to be safely born to remove the strain on Loki's body. The scans showed that the baby did still need some time for his lungs, but Eir was hoping as little as a month more would be enough.

Thor hoped that she was right because the longer that Loki was in such a condition, the more anxious Thor became. He had King Loki's assurance that his brother would survive, but that was hard to keep in mind sometimes when he saw Loki sleeping easily for eight to ten hours at a time multiple times a day.

Luckily, when Loki did manage to be awake, he seemed to be his old self. As evident by the arguments that he started and the errands he sent Thor on that turned out to be pointless wastes of time. Thor remembered one particularly annoying situation where he went all over Aztlan, looking
for a specific fruit Loki had called Sugar Apsa.

Loki said it had a thick green skin and a firm pale interior. The fruit was reported to grow in clusters close to the ground. Also, it was mild of flavor and didn't even have any seeds to worry about while being eaten. Loki had been quite sure it would be somewhere in the city.

Thor spent a good hour and a half asking everyone he could think of for this stupid thing that Loki insisted would be easy to find. Nobody had ever heard of it, though. Huehuecoyotl had seemed amused as he offered some places for Thor to look for this mystery fruit. That should have been a big tip-off, but Thor had been too consumed with his task of hunting the food down to really notice the other God's smirk.

Thor eventually realized the truth of it, although it took him longer than he'd like to admit. Sugar Apsa turned out to be 'Asparagus' backwards. Loki had found it hilarious, and Thor had thrown a paper ball at his brother's head since he was in no condition to dodge something hefty. Luckily he did, as even if Loki had been able to avoid the projectile, he was too busy laughing to actually do so.

"You think you're so funny," Thor grumbled as he sat down with a huff on Loki's bed.

"I'm hilarious," Loki said with a certain smugness.

Thor rolled his eyes. "I take it you weren't actually hungry and were just looking to get rid of me?"

Loki shrugged. "Not really. For once."

"Well, that's good," Thor said. "Tired?"

"Uncomfortable," Loki corrected as he rubbed his stomach almost absently. "I can't ever find a way to lay down that doesn't have him near crushing something sensitive. He's too dratted big..." Thor supposed that Loki meant for that to sound more exasperated than it really did.

"Have you thought of names?" Thor asked.

Loki looked up, quite startled. "Names? Why in Asgaardia's name would I think up something like that?"

Thor shrugged in response, "Why wouldn't you?"

"I'm giving him away, Thor," Loki said. His tone was trying to be flat, but he didn't quite manage it.

"So?" Thor asked. "He's still your son. I don't see why you shouldn't name him." Honestly, Thor had no idea anymore how Sleipnir had gotten his name. He didn't remember what with the other Loki's potion. But, even if his nephew's name somehow ended up changing, Thor didn't think that a particularly big deal.

Loki frowned and looked off to the side. "Those that adopt him will probably want to name him," he muttered.

Thor's eyebrow went up. "And what you want doesn't matter?"

Loki glared. "Don't make this harder than it already is, Thor! I'm trying to do the right thing."

Realizing he was agitating his brother more than he wanted, Thor held up his hands. "I'm sorry. I
didn't mean to upset you, Loki," he said sincerely.

Loki huffed, clearly still agitated. After a moment where neither brother said anything, Loki let out a long sigh. "No... I'm sorry. Mother says you're just worried and mean well, and I know you do. I just-I don't want to talk about things like that, brother."

Thor reached over and took Loki's hand to give it a squeeze. "I know. If you wanted to talk about it, I'm sure that your meetings with Lord Ixtlilton would last longer than they do."

Loki rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'm sure he'd be delighted if I had a nice long talk with him. But... saying it out loud is- it makes it more... real somehow," he said as he fiddled with the thin blanket over his legs. "That doesn't make sense. Of course, it was real."

"It doesn't not make sense," Thor said. Loki looked over at Thor with a particularly exasperated expression. "Well, I'm just saying that I can see why you would want to not think about it or talk about it. And if you never think about something that happened... makes sense that it wouldn't always feel as real."

"Have you been talking to Lord Ixtlilton, Thor? Because that was very well said," Loki said.

"Mother, actually."

"Ah. Of course," Loki said as he finally allowed a small smile to pull at his lips again. He reached for a nearby cup and frowned when he went to take a drink only to find it empty. "Thor, get me some water, would you?" he asked, holding the goblet out.

Thor did as he was asked, and when he returned, they talked about anything other than the baby and Loki's situation. That turned out to be easy enough to do as Loki wanted to know as much about what was going on outside of his room as he could. He was, as he constantly complained, unbelievably bored stuck in bed all the time.

Thor spent quite a while explaining how Ofnir was discovering his natural skill at fishing. It was a frequent sight now to see the blue reptile diving down to the surface of the lake only to pull up at the last second. His dangerous claws or tail would splash, and as he flew back up, he'd have a large fish hooked. None of the creatures in the lake were truly big enough to satisfy the Wyvern or particularly easy for him to catch, but the effort seemed to entertain him well enough and had the added benefit of strengthening his wings. Ofnir had gone from clumsy and slow on the ground and in the air, to rather quick and agile when using his wings. Loki seemed disappointed that he couldn't see it himself but was resigned to have to spoil his pet later.

At least Huld got plenty of Loki's attention when he was actually awake. She couldn't curl up in his lap any longer with his stomach so large, but she was always close enough for Loki to scratch her ears or rub her belly. In fact, Huld only seemed to leave Loki's side when she was off getting food or fetching something that Loki would then throw for her to chase down again. This was actually somewhat comforting for Thor since he knew that the little five-handed creature was ridiculously fond of Loki and would kick up a fuss if something was wrong.

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Thunder shook the mountains and lightning filled the sky with rapid, blinding flashes. Thor had been told to go to bed, but he couldn't. He knew something was going on, and his anxiety had fed the storm, which only made things worse, he knew. Thor watched from an out of the way corner as various servants rushed to and fro, heads down as they shared orders that they had been given. Another flash of lightning turned the air white, and thunder followed immediately after.
Even if Thor were to go to bed, there was no way that he would be able to actually rest, he reasoned. He made his way through the halls, ignored for the most part by all the servants and guards. There were other -far more pressing- matters to deal with than him going where he oughtn’t. Rain was pounding the windows that he passed, making it impossible to see out of.

The main doors of the palace were closed and locked, so Thor silently made his way to the nearest servant’s entrance. Quite a few muddy trails were already going through the door, and water was puddled all along the corridor. Thor watched as a maid tried to mop up the mess so that nobody would get hurt, but it seemed to Thor like a somewhat futile effort. Thor went outside and was soaked to the bone in mere seconds. Thor blinked away the water from his eyes as he started forward into the storm of his own making.

His boots sunk down into the mud as he walked, and it was difficult to see where he was going. The path was overflowing with water and muck, and the dark meant it was impossible to tell where the garden beds were and where the walkways went. The only way he knew he was headed in the right direction was that Thor had spent all his life in these gardens, and he eventually spotted his destination by a faint glow in the distance. Thor shielded his eyes from the water with his arm and pulled his boot free to take another step forward.

After some struggle, Thor finally made it to the long building. The lantern giving off the light that Thor had been following swung and sputtered under an eave but was enough for him to see the door. The rain and wind made the door hard to open, but he managed it with his superior strength and slipped inside.

Inside of the building was chaotic, and Thor could only stand there and watch for several minutes as he dripped. He had no idea what to do, and yet he leaving and returning to the castle never even crossed his mind. Thor could smell wet hay and dung, blood and sweat mixing with the humid heat trapped by so many rain-soaked bodies crammed into one building. People were shouting back and forth and rushing around doing things. Some older hand nearly ran right into Thor, and the Prince hastily backed himself into a corner to avoid it. Thor didn't even think the old man had noticed so focused as he was on his task.

The animals that normally were in the building had been led out, but the screams of a horse still ripped through the air despite that. Thrashing and baying echoed from the far end of the building, and Thor had no idea what to do. After several minutes of standing there, Thor swallowed hard and forced himself to move away from the wall.

As he got closer, there were more people rushing back and forth, and the jumble of shouted orders was starting to be easier to pick out from one another. Thor recognized the head hostler's voice as well as Lady Eir's. But still, the horse was the loudest thing. It sounded as if a particularly unskilled slaughter was going on.

Thor hesitated and allowed the servants to rush around him for a moment. The smell of blood was even stronger at this end of the building, and it made Thor want to be sick. The horse shrieked again in pain, and Thor couldn't help but cringe.

Another moment of hesitation passed before Thor carefully edged his way around some servants that were doing something with jars of medicinal smelling substances. He had reached the door, which was flung wide open. Thor felt everything in his chest seize up painfully tight. The horse in question, a gorgeous blue roan, was on her side and breathing very hard. Hooves flailing and kicking against the floor and walls of the stall periodically. A sleek head and neck were in Frigga’s lap, and the Queen was trying her best to be soothing.

Frigga noticed Thor standing there and shot him a look. Thor knew he shouldn’t be there, but he
hadn't been able to stay away either. He'd known what had been going on in the stables. Thor had been there when the runner had come to get Frigga hours ago. The horse let out another loud scream of pain, and Thor swore he saw her distended side actually ripple. Nothing about this was going smoothly. Thor grew up around horses and other large animals. He'd even seen foalings before. He knew when things were going wrong.

"Thor, you should not be here," Frigga said without looking up at him.

"Mother... I-" Thor was cut off by another sound of pain.

"It's been too long," someone said. "If we don't do something now-" A rush of activity blocked Thor from hearing the rest.

Thor felt frozen and entirely useless as Lady Eir, and the head hostler worked to help the distressed horse. It took both of them, the help of several stable hands, and more time than any of them wanted to pull a huge colt from its mother. They'd even had to reach inside and adjust the horse several times throughout the process. Thor couldn't pull himself away even though he really felt he should. The black colt was odd with far too many limbs sprawled out on the hay. It didn't move at first, and they had to bring it around through frantic stimulation.

The mare was still huffing for air as Frigga stroked her cheek. "It's alright now. It's over, Darling," she said softly. "You did so well, Loki."

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Thor woke up with a harsh gasp. Adrenaline was forcing his heart to pound and his blood to race through his system. It took Thor a few moments to realize where he was and what had happened. Thor had been sleeping on a couch in Loki's room in Aztlan because he hadn't wanted to leave his brother alone in his condition. Thor had no idea where that dream had come from, although he suspected perhaps it was more than just a nightmare. Every sensation had felt too real to just be his mind tormenting him.

No. King Loki had said that birthing Sleipnir had been an ordeal, and he'd been stuck as a horse during it. Thor had more than a slight suspicion that he had been there, and that was one of the many memories that Loki had made him forget about. Perhaps his worry over Sleipnir's rapidly approaching birth had triggered that forgotten memory to return to him. Thor rather wished that it hadn't. He didn't need even more images of how things could go badly. Thor's imagination was plenty capable of providing images by the dozens.

Thor looked over and saw Loki sleeping in his now usual propped up position. His hands resting on his ample stomach and Huld sprawled out behind Loki's head. Thor's brother looked peaceful enough, and Thor forced himself to take a few breaths and shake off the last of the dream. That would not happen this time.

The healers weren't going to let Loki struggle to deliver what with what they already knew about the situation. Plus, Loki wasn't a horse currently. Not that being a horse would have stopped them from helping Loki. Loki had plenty of people monitoring him with plenty of back up plans in place. From what Thor understood, several healing Gods and Goddesses were nearby at all hours just in case. Loki would be fine. He had to be.

With a sigh, Thor got up from his cot and went over to Loki's bed. Carefully, so as to not wake his brother, Thor crawled in beside Loki and laid down close by. Knowing that he would be instantly woken up if something happened to Loki, Thor slowly forced himself back to sleep. The Prince did not sleep terribly peacefully with his first dream, still so fresh in his mind, but he did manage sporadic spans of rest.
When morning came around, Thor set out to tell his mother about the dream he'd had. Frigga had looked understandably troubled. Thor had wanted to spare some of the descriptions but forced himself to relay all the details he could remember in case they turned out to be necessary. True, Loki was not a horse at the moment, but Thor imagined that the difficulty he'd suffered would be at least somewhat translatable. "Lady Eir believes another two weeks will be sufficient for the baby to not have any complications from premature birth. Hopefully, Loki's body can hold out long enough so that we can deliver then," Frigga said.

"This balancing act is most unpleasant," Thor grumbled under his breath.

"I agree," Frigga said. "But, it is nearing the end."

Thor tried his best to take comfort in that thought. Unfortunately, when his mind was filled with his brother's obvious pain from his dream-memory-hybrid, comfort was not readily available. So, instead of support, Thor sought out some sort of distraction. Helping his bedridden brother did help, but with Loki sleeping so much, there were plenty of times when Thor was left with nothing to do.

So, Thor trained as best he could. He hadn't thought to bring many weapons with him. Just the smaller ones that he usually had on him. Little knives mostly. He certainly hadn't brought Mjolnir with him as his father still didn't let him keep the mighty hammer with him. Mjolnir always stayed in the vault when Thor wasn't training with her.

Thor had a spot not too far from the middle of Aztlan that seemed to be perfect for practicing. He wasn't sure if the flat area surrounded by a thick moat of water was, in fact, meant to be a place to train, but it was good enough for Thor's purposes. He probably should have asked if there was an actual fighting ring or something of that nature, but Thor had just assumed it would be easy to find, considering he knew that there were plenty of areas in Asgard set up for various forms of combat training. It honestly hadn't occurred to Thor that Aztlan would be any different in that respect.

After a few hours of practicing his knife work and doing his level best to emulate the grace and speed of his brother, Thor's muscles were pleasantly tingling. He also needed a bath, he realized. Thor checked over his various small knives as he put them away and used the nearby river of water around the ring to at least rinse some of the worst of the sweat and dirt off of his face and upper body. He would still need to go take a proper bath, but the heavy splashing with freshwater definitely helped him feel a little less monstrous. Also, his mind was much more settled now that he'd used some of his energy. Thor always found it easier to think through things while he was physically doing something.

Thor used a towel to wipe the water from his upper body and took it and his shirt back inside the main pyramid. He was still convinced that there was an easier way into and out of the pyramid, but nobody had ever pointed it out, so Thor was forced to yet again trudge up the long set of stairs only to go back down. At least it gave him plenty of time for his heart and breathing to settle into a more normal pattern.

As Thor was on his way to his now only sparsely used room, he paused when he heard his mother's voice. "-spoken to Freyr about it?" Frigga said.

"I... have," Gerd said, although they sounded a bit uneasy. Despite knowing eavesdropping was not an honorable thing to do, Thor shifted closer to the wall and listened in. "I am still not sure that it is a good idea, Queen Frigga."

"No?" Frigga asked. "It seems the perfect solution to me."
Gerd sighed heavily. "Freyr has been looking forward to children, true enough. He says he would be willing to take in Loki's child; I just fear that it would make him long for more."

"You're going to need to tell him at some point what the healers said," Frigga said. "I've told you this before. Keeping it a secret will only damage your relationship with your husband. And, I know he will love you no less if you cannot actually give him a child."

"You do not understand, Frigga," Gerd said. "I... I have always wanted to give him a child, but to know I might never do so... it is shameful."

Frigga scoffed so loudly Thor could have sworn she was right behind him. "It is hardly that. It is no fault of yours that this happened. Sometimes nature, as wonderful as it is, can have such difficulties in it. And, the healers only said it would be quite difficult. Not impossible. He loved you enough to not mind your genitals, he'll love you even if you never give him a babe as well."

"It's not that I doubt his love," Gerd said. "I am the one inadequate and not him. And I fear that if we take in Loki's child that... it will be difficult to accept that I cannot give him that as well."

There was a long moment of silence. "You place unfair burdens upon yourself, Heillr Gerd," Frigga said. "And I think you do not give yourself enough credit. I have seen how you are with Loki. I very much appreciate and am indebted to you for how supportive you've been to him when he needs it. I think you would be a wonderful mother, if you'll forgive our less accurate terminology, for any child."

"Your confidence in me is quite humbling, Your Majesty."

"I cannot make you take the babe, but I do truly think you are the best candidate possible. You have a wonderful disposition and the knowledge, as well. The babe is three-fourths Jotnar... that will come with challenges all it's own, and I simply don't see how any of my other candidates could be better suited than yourself. Add to that the fact that you have the resources for any difficulties that the babe might face... Well, I won't rehash it all again. Please, just don't give me your answer just yet. Think about it a little longer," Frigga said.

"Does Prince Loki know you are asking me this?" Gerd asked.

"No," Frigga said with a sigh. "He's refusing all attempts to talk about it. I think he's afraid of knowing too much. I don't think he actually wants to give the baby away..."

Gerd must have done something or had an expression on their face. "You agree?" Frigga asked.

"I do," Gerd said. "I've seen him when he thought nobody was watching. And I've heard him talking to the babe at times. He's more attached than I think he realizes."

"I think so too. But he gets so defensive when I ask him about it," Frigga said with a sigh. "I think... he is under the impression we expect him to give the child away. Or perhaps he thinks that he cannot change his mind."

Gerd made a thoughtful noise. "We shall see what happens in the coming weeks."

Thor moved away from the wall and continued to his room. In his mind, he went over what he'd heard. Frigga was right that of all the possible candidates, Gerd and Freyr were definitely the best option. There would need to be no further people brought in on the secret of where Sleipnir came from, as Frigga said Gerd already had knowledge of Sleipnir's specific biology, and Loki would be able to see Sleipnir if he wanted. It was probably the closest thing to a perfect solution as there was to be found.
Of course, Thor also thought that Loki might not be as alright with the idea of giving Sleipnir up as he was trying to be. That shouldn't really be a surprise, Thor realized. Loki had always been a devoted parent. Even though this Loki was still so young, he still seemed to have a strong bond with his child. It was just a pity the situation was one where Loki didn't think he should have such feelings.

Maybe Thor should try again to talk with Loki about it. No doubt, Loki would shut him down quickly, but Thor thought that he really shouldn't give up. The Thunderer didn't want his brother to make a decision he would later come to regret. Unfortunately, the only way Thor could see to make sure of that was to keep pressing even when he was sure Loki would very much rather he not do that. But, Thor wouldn't do that right then. No, he had just asked Loki not that long ago, so he would give his brother a few more days before prodding that sensitive topic again.

Later on that day, Thor heard that Eir had set an exact date for Sleipnir to be born. Ten days from then, which was not quite the two weeks she had initially said, but Eir seemed confident. When Loki woke up for dinner, he had been told of the news, but he'd said surprisingly little in response. Thor wasn't sure if he was just worried or if Loki was trying to not think about it at all.

With the date set, time seemed to start flying by at an even more alarming rate than before. Odin had sent word that he would be arriving the day before the scheduled birth but couldn't manage to get away from his duties before then. Thor was just glad he was going to be there at all. His terrible dream with Loki as a horse giving birth had been very distinctly missing the Allfather's presence.

Gerd was spending more time with Loki than before, and Thor had been asked to leave, so he had no idea what they were talking about. He could make guesses that it might have something to do with Gerd adopting the baby, so Thor left it alone. It was clearly a sensitive topic for both of them. Thor tried to recall if he had heard anything about Gerd and Freyr having children in his other life, but the couple had never really been close enough relations for Thor to pay much attention to. He couldn't honestly recall any mention of children.

Only two days before Eir had planned to deliver the baby, Thor was woken up by a piercing scream. Thor shot out of bed and looked around for the source. It only took a few seconds for him to realize it was Loki. He was grabbing at his stomach and moaning in pain. Realization sunk in, and Thor darted to his brother's side. "Loki!"

Loki's blue skin was gleaming with sweat, and his eyes were screwed shut tightly. "Thor... Thor, get Mother!"

Thor didn't want to leave his brother's side but knew he would be of no help himself, so nodded and ran from the room. He had barely taken two steps down the hall before he started shouting for his Mother and Lady Eir. Thor didn't particularly care who he woke up right then. Loki needed help because, apparently, the baby didn't want to wait two more days.

Hearing the shouting, Frigga, Lady Eir, and Heillr Gerd were already coming out of their rooms. "Darling, what is it?" Frigga asked, although she was already moving down the hall to Loki's room.

"It's Loki!" Thor said. "I think the baby's coming!"

Before anything else could be said, Loki screamed again from down the hall. Lady Eir immediately turned to Gerd and told them to retrieve various things, but Thor was hurrying down the hall with Frigga.

Frigga reached the room in record time, and though Thor was only a few steps behind her, when he got to the door, she had already reached Loki's side and was trying to calm him down. "Shh, it's
"Alright, Darling. I'm here. You're fine."

"It hurts..." Loki said through grit teeth. "It hurts so much, Mama..."

"I know. But it's alright. We're going to take care of you, alright?" Frigga asked as she brushed Loki's hair back from his pale blue face. The usual deep sapphire of his skin had washed out to a lighter version from the pain Loki was in. Loki gave a shaky nod, and Frigga kissed his forehead.

A moment later, Eir came in as well. "It's alright, My Prince. We've planned for this, remember?" Eir said as she went to Loki's bedside.

"We did not," Loki said in a near whine. "You were supposed to take him before this..."

"Yes," Eir said patiently as she carefully moved her hand over Loki's distended stomach. "But this was always a possibility. We will help you, My Prince."

"A-and... and the baby?" Loki asked so softly Thor almost didn't hear it.

Eir nodded. "And the baby."

Gerd came into the room with an arm full of various things. They noticed Thor there and paused. "You should wait outside, Prince Thor. A birth is no place for you."

Thor frowned. "I want to help, though..."

"That is very admirable," Gerd said. "But your brother, I think, would not be comfortable with it."

Thor's frown deepened, but he knew that Gerd was right. Loki would definitely not want Thor to see too much of this. Eir was saying something about needing to check Loki thoroughly, and Thor decided to not argue further. "Come on, Huld," Thor called.

The little creature jumped down from Loki's bed and hurried to Thor's side. Gerd gave him a nod, and Thor reluctantly left the room. As the door closed, he heard Loki scream again, and Frigga trying to soothe him.

Thor reluctantly found a nearby seat and let Huld climb up into his lap. He gave Loki's pet a bit of attention to hopefully distract them both. Loki's screams were loud enough to be heard through the closed door, and Thor didn't at all like it. Some servants came with other supplies to deliver to Loki's room before quickly leaving again.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Thor sat there and waited. His mind was filled with worst-case scenarios. What if there was too much blood? Or they couldn't get Sleipnir out as quickly as they had planned? Or Loki's own magic reacted badly to the surgery? That wasn't unheard of for very powerful mages, Thor knew.

He scratched Huld behind her ears as he tried his best to ignore yet another scream coming from his brother's room. Thor knew he wouldn't actually be much help in there -he had no real training on how to deliver babies or anything beyond essential field medicine- but that didn't stop him from wanting to be there. Even if he could only hold Loki's hand, at least, Thor would feel like he was doing something!

As the minutes crawled by, Thor kept an ear out for any change in the noises coming from the room. Footsteps came from the other side of the hall, and Thor ignored them. Until the owner of said footsteps stopped right beside him. "I heard it started," Huehuecoyotl said. "They kick you out?"
Thor nodded. Coyotl sighed and sat down beside Thor. "Figures." Just then, Loki screamed again, and Thor glanced up in time to see Coyotl wincing. "Ah, well... everyone does say it's painful..."

"I don't know how long this is supposed to take," Thor said as he stroked Huld's back.

"I don't imagine very long," Coyotl said. "It isn't as if he has to try and squeeze the little guy out."

Thor couldn't quite help the snort of derision. "He's not so little. That's part of the problem..."

Coyotl waved his hand a little bit, making the various beaded bangles he wore clatter together. "You know what I meant. Point is-" Loki screamed again and made both of them pause, "-from what I hear, it's pretty straightforward..."

"How late is it?" Thor asked. He hadn't bothered to look when he'd run to get his mother.

"About... four hours until dawn," Coyotl said. "I guess the baby isn't much for sleeping at night."

Thor scratched Huld's ears again as the two of them waited. Thor was oddly glad to have someone there waiting with him. Especially since none of their family had yet come for this since Sleipnir decided to ignore Eir's plans. Thor supposed they should have realized Loki's baby wouldn't abide to follow anyone else's timing.

Five minutes slowly moved by. Then ten. Thor was trying his best to not worry. That wasn't a long time at all, and Loki hadn't screamed in pain recently. That had to be a good sign, right? Loki, not in agony, would always be good. Occasionally, Thor considered going to check on things but knew that would only be distracting, so he forced himself not to.

Twenty minutes passed, and Thor was finding it hard to just sit there waiting for news. Surely they had to be done by now, right? The baby was practically bursting out of Loki already. It had looked like a paper cut would be enough to reach Sleipnir. But no, time kept creeping by without any sign of what was happening in Loki's room.

Thor gave up sitting and started walking the hall. He didn't go far, but moving helped his nervous energy. Coyotl watched him for a moment. "Is that helping?" he asked curiously.

"A little," Thor said with a shrug. "It gives me something to do with myself, at least..."

"Hmm, well, I am known to be willing to try anything," Coyotl said as he got up and fell into step with Thor. "I feel like turning into something small and sneaking in..." he admitted.

"I might not stop you," Thor said.

"Oh no, you can't leave me to be the sensible one," Coyotl said. "That will truly bring about the end of days..."

Thor sighed and turned on his heel to walk the other way. Huld was sitting where Thor had been before and just watched the pair of them walk back and forth. Her fifth hand swayed behind her as if waving at them. Thor supposed he should feel bad for not being even as patient as an animal, but, well, he didn't really.

Another twenty minutes past to bring the total to forty, and now Thor was truly getting worried. Surely, it shouldn't take this long to deliver a baby when they weren't even going to make Loki push or anything like that. Thor had expected things to be over long before that. Fifteen minutes tops was what he'd been thinking.
Thor couldn't stop himself from glancing at the door every so often as he paced along with Coyotl. He kept expecting to hear something or see someone leaving. Some indication of what was going on in Loki's room. The waiting was driving him absolutely mad.

After almost an hour of less than patient waiting, Thor finally heard the door open. A few servants were leaving with arms full of soiled sheets. Thor hadn't realized not all of them had left before. Wanting desperately to know what was going on, Thor hurried to the door before it closed. Gerd was the one on the other side and paused when they saw Thor. "Please, is it over yet?" Thor asked. Huld slipped past Thor's feet and darted into the room.

Gerd nodded. "Yes. It's done. It was not an easy process, but we managed." Gerd glanced behind their shoulder and then back at Thor. "If you promise to be careful and quiet, you can come in."

Thor agreed instantly, and Gerd stepped back to let Thor into the room. The very first thing that caught the young Thunderer's attention was the faint glow coming from the side of the chamber where Eir was still standing. The light was a spell woven across what appeared to be a bassinet. Worried, Thor made his way over to see what was happening.

Eir noticed and gave Thor a slightly strained smile. "He was having some trouble breathing, but I think it will only take a few days at most," she said. Thor looked past the healer and through the spell. The baby lying under the protective spell was indeed quite large. Thor had never seen a baby so large in his life, although he admittedly hadn't made a habit of looking for babies to judge their size. Sleipnir's skin was a beautiful golden brown as if he'd already been running around in the sun for days instead of just born less than an hour ago. He was just a little bit on the chubby side with one of four thumbs jammed fully in his mouth. Of his other three arms, one was up resting beside his head, and the two located beneath the first set were curled over his chest and resting near his chin. Four legs were sprawled out somewhat awkwardly and sticking out from under the blanket that had been put over him, making Thor think he'd kicked the fabric halfway off himself.

Thor studied his sleeping nephew for another moment, trying to square the image he was seeing with the image in his head of the powerful black horse that could outrace any other and crush a man's skull with a single kick. "It's so strange seeing him like this..." Thor murmured, mostly to himself.

"Yes, the eight limbs takes a little getting used to," Eir said. "But they all surprisingly seem fully developed. I had expected some to be small and mostly residual, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

Thor didn't bother correcting her. He couldn't explain he meant it was strange seeing him not as a horse. Instead, Thor looked to Loki's bed instead. Frigga was sitting on the edge of the bed, and Loki was lying there with his eyes closed. Thor wondered if he was asleep and carefully made his way over. The bedding had been completely changed, he noticed, and Frigga was stroking Loki's hair back with one hand.

"Is Loki alright?" Thor asked softly in case his brother was asleep.

"Yes. Just tired," Frigga said just as quietly as Thor had. "I gave him something for the pain, and he'll have to rest for the next few days, but hopefully, they'll be no more complications..."

"Complications?" Thor asked, immediately alarmed.

Frigga nodded. "Nothing we couldn't handle, but things took longer than we wanted it to." Thor thought about pressing for more details but didn't think that knowledge would do anything. From what it sounded like, whatever had happened had been taken care of already. Worrying about it
after the fact did nothing at all.

So, Thor sat down beside his brother and held his hand. It was almost odd seeing him without such a large stomach anymore, although he wasn't perfectly flat either. Huld was curled up beside Loki and seemed to have fallen right to sleep. Thor envied her the ability to do that. "The hard part is over now, at least," Thor murmured.

"The physical part is over, Darling. I wouldn't say the hard part quite yet, though," Frigga said. She glanced over at the bassinet holding the sleeping newborn. "Loki asked if I thought it would be wrong of him to name the baby. When I said no, he said that he wanted the baby to be called Sleipnir..." 

Thor felt his mouth curve just slightly. He was rather glad he'd pushed the issue now, even if Loki had gotten upset at the time. "It's a good name."

Chapter End Notes

**Noble Breeds**- I went more in depth with this in Tales and Lessons but basically the Noble Breeds are four mythological horse breeds. There's one with wings for air, one that is water based, one that is a more grounded type, and a 'dragon' horse that is fiery. Every time I write about them it makes me feel like I'm writing My Little Pony...

**Thor's Dream**- Though that is sort of what happened in the original timeline it isn't exactly right. It was still a nightmare after all. It just had bits and pieces of the actual memory wrapped up in it.

**Adopting Sleipnir**- Really, Gerd and Freyr seem like the best option here. As Frigga says in the chapter, they already know the situation, Gerd is plenty capable of looking after a young giant blooded baby, and they have the resources for any sort of special needs that might arise since Sleipnir has four extra limbs. The fact that Loki would also be able to see Sleipnir regularly is an added bonus.

**Sleipnir's Birth**- He's in my head a nearly twenty pound baby... there's no way that's being born naturally out of Loki. Also there's no way Eir was letting a lot of people into that room while doing a c-section. So, the actual process wasn't ever going to be in a lot of detail. Also, also, yes, Sleipnir is actually premature but only a few weeks. He was going by horse/kelpie gestation of 11-12 months. Then he went 'you can't pull me out! I'm doing it myself!' and decided to be born before Eir could do the planned procedure. The complications were pretty minor mostly related to too much bleeding and a very large baby being hard to get out of a very small space.
Problem Solving

Chapter Summary

The issue of Sleipnir's many extra limbs is tackled.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Odin and Tyr were moving at a fairly decent clip down the halls of the palace. Odin was leaving Asgard sooner than expected, but then he'd gotten an urgent message from Frigga early that morning saying that he had to go to Aztlan immediately. That Loki had gone into labor. So, Odin was giving last-minute instructions to his eldest son even as he hurried to the Bifrost.

"Allfather?"

Odin paused in the hall and half-turned. He wasn't particularly surprised to see Thor and Loki's group of friends standing there, although it was a bit early in the morning. They had been milling about for the last few weeks between their lessons. Obviously, trying to pluck up the courage to ask him something or trying to catch the occasional bit of news. Thor was supposed to have returned by now, but hadn't. "Yes?" Odin asked as if he hadn't already guessed what they wanted.

"It has been some time since Thor and Loki have been in Asgard," Sif said. Though she seemed slightly unnerved to be speaking directly to the King of Asgard, she held her shoulders straight and her chin up. "Are they to return soon?"

"Perhaps," Odin said. He wasn't willing to go into detail about the situation. Not even with his son's friends. "But don't worry. All is well," he said. Odin had been saying that for some time to discourage any further questions. His assurances were starting to become less effective, but he stuck by them. The youngsters exchanged some uneasy looks but weren't about to question him and so bowed and murmured some thanks before hurrying off.

"Has Mother said anything about Loki?" Tyr asked as they turned and continued down the corridor.

Odin shook his head. "The only thing she said when I spoke with her was that they were trying to dull the pain for him before starting the operation," Odin said. "I haven't heard an update, but then, the spell to speak across realms is draining. Unless something truly... momentous happened, she would not send me another message."

Tyr was quiet for a moment, his dark golden cape fluttered as they walked quickly. "I wish I could join you," the ex-Prince said finally. "I will be useless here."

"You are never useless, my son," Odin said.

"I am not sitting on the throne in your stead," Tyr said. "I could go with you."

Odin shook his head. "Though the council likes Baldr, he does not know the intricacies of day to day life from the throne," Odin said. "You can help him with that. If the laws had let me, I would have simply made you regent for the throne while I was gone."
Tyr made a face. "I am rather glad they didn't allow it," he said. "I wouldn't want them thinking it was possible for me to change my mind about wanting it. Bad enough, some still want me to beg you to give me my title back."

"Yes... they like to forget I can't do that," Odin said in annoyance. Tyr had abdicated. That wasn't something that was reversible. But Tyr had been adamant when he revoked his claim that he was okay with losing it forever. As it was, Odin had had to bend some rules to allow Baldr to serve as a proxy ruler, and it only worked because Baldr had technically lost his claim through a declaration that Odin did and not his own words. Tyr and Hodr both did not have that distinction.

As Odin went to get on Audun, who was waiting already saddled at the base of the stairs, Tyr and Odin were approached yet again. Kvasir's silver eyes caught the shades of the early morning sky like a mirror. "My King," he greeted. "The Norns wish to speak with you before you leave."

Odin frowned. "Do they indeed?"

Kvasir nodded, looking past the other two gods at some indeterminate point. "They claim it quite important."

"Well, you can tell the Norns that I am the King of Asgard and not one to be summoned by their whim," Odin said as he grabbed Audun's saddle and swung himself into it. "And even if I were inclined to speak with them, which I'm not, it would not be wise for them after what they did."

Kvasir tilted his head and rubbed his chin with his thumb like he tended to do. "They will not like being ignored," Kvasir said. It didn't sound like a warning, merely a statement.

"And I do not like them tormenting my son with dreams gruesome enough to cause sickness," Odin said fiercely. He grabbed up the reins. "This is their own fault. They attacked Loki and forced us to send him away to keep him safe from them."

The pale-eyed God hummed and fluttered his hand off to the side. "I will tell them what you said. They will want to talk to you anyway, though. They never change their minds," Kvasir said.

Odin was hardly impressed. "If they really wish to face me after I return, I will. But I doubt very much that my temperament towards them will be much improved," he said. Not waiting to see if Kvasir had anything else to say, Odin tapped against Audun's sides. The horse snorted and leaped into motion.

Audun raced down the bridge towards the observatory as the sun made its way higher in the sky over Asgard. With Audun's long legs, it only took a few minutes to reach the end of the multicolored path. Odin pulled up with a bit of extra room so that Audun could come to a safer stop. "Thank you, my friend," Odin said as he got off and patted Audun's thick neck. "I apologize that you had to be saddled for such a short ride."

"Think nothing of it. I hope you have a good trip wherever you are going," Audun said as he watched Odin walk towards the observatory with one big eye.

"I hope so as well," Odin said.

When Odin arrived in Aztlan, it was even earlier in the morning than it had been in Asgard. The sun was only just starting to fill the sky with light and wasn't even visible yet over the edge of the caldera. Frigga met Odin halfway to the main pyramid, and judging from the look on her face, she hadn't gotten much rest, if any. "Odin. I'm glad you're here."

"How is he?" Odin asked as he gave his wife a brief hug and kiss on the cheek.
"Resting," Frigga said. The royal pair immediately started walking through the city. "Even with the surgery, it was a difficult birth for him. The baby moved into position to be born naturally surprisingly quickly and, as we predicted, couldn't fit with Loki's narrower hips and pelvis. He got stuck and had to be eased back out. Then Loki bled more than anticipated. He got so very pale, Odin... I was worried."

Odin squeezed her hand. "But he survived and will recover," he said. "The babe?"

"He seems healthy. A little trouble breathing, but Eir thinks it should only take a day or so under the energy field to help him along," Frigga said. "Loki named him Sleipnir."

Odin nodded. "The extra limbs?"

"Surprisingly, they are fully developed and functioning limbs," Frigga said. "Eir doesn't think that we should remove them anymore. The arms would not cause too much trouble, she doesn't think, but the babe's pelvis is too oddly shaped to accommodate the extra legs that to remove them might cripple him. She says that it looks as if two skeletons halfway merged together. His anatomy is more unusual than we thought through the prenatal scans."

"Other options?" Odin asked.

Frigga shrugged a little bit. "Eir thinks it may be possible, since the skeleton seems to have split, to use enchantments to fuse it back into one. But such an enchantment has not been done before and will probably take several anchor points to keep stable."

"I do hope she doesn't think that we will allow the carving of runes into a newborn's flesh," Odin said.

"Of course not!" Frigga said. "That wasn't even suggested, Odin. Eir thinks that Chimeric Leather might be a more appropriate solution."

Odin lifted a hand to rub his forehead. "That does sound like a better solution. I'm sorry... the Norns tried to summon me before leaving Asgard. I assume it is not for any reason I will like, so perhaps I am jumping to unwarranted conclusions easier than I should."

Frigga frowned. "The Norns have some nerve trying to summon you to them after what they did," Frigga said, her anger tinging her words.

"I agree," Odin said. "Meddlesome hags."

"Odin. Though I most definitely agree with the sentiment, it is not wise to voice it aloud," Frigga said. "For they are vindictive as well as meddlesome."

Odin huffed but didn't argue the point as they started up the side of the pyramid. "Does Eir have enough Chimeric Leather to do what she thinks is needed for the baby?"

"She has none. We will have to send someone to collect it," Frigga said.

"Hephaestus has worked with Chimeric Leather extensively, if I remember correctly," Odin said. "Perhaps he could assist. At the very least, he may be able to sell us the leather to experiment with ourselves. I will send word to Hermod to travel to Olympus after I have seen Loki."

Frigga nodded, and as they continued up the side of the pyramid, told Odin of other things he had missed while he was in Asgard. There was not nearly as much for Odin to catch up on as there was for Frigga, but there was still enough that they had plenty to talk about on their walk. The sun had
fully risen by the time they entered the pyramid, and Loki was still sound asleep in bed when his parents checked on him. His skin still had a blue hue to it, but it was becoming paler as time went on. Thor was lying across a nearby couch with a blanket, only half-covering him and soft snores escaping every once in a while. Frigga pulled the cover back in place as Odin went to the bed Loki was curled up in.

Odin laid a gentle hand on Loki's forehead. Loki stirred slightly, and his eyes fluttered open. "Mmm... Father?"

"Rest, Loki. You had an eventful night, we will talk later," Odin said. It was proof of how tired he still was that Loki didn't put up a protest and just turned more into his pillow and went to sleep. Odin let his hand linger for another moment as he made his Seidr check over Loki's condition.

Though Odin was not a healer by trade, he'd done enough emergency procedures in battles to be able to judge when someone was in distress or the verge of a catastrophe. Loki seemed to be fine for the most part, so Odin brushed the black locks back from his forehead and then turned to the other side of the room. The King of Asgard approached the bassinet that was still glimmering with spellwork in Eir's colors.

The baby was sleeping while sucking on his thumb, and despite the oddity of his form was still adorable. Odin carefully pushed through the spell, allowing it to cling to his skin as protection for the newborn Sleipnir, and put a hand to the baby's head. The spell was a strange sort of barrier between them, but there was still enough sensation for Odin to know that the fine black hair that Sleipnir seemed to have inherited from Loki was already surprisingly silky. Then again, he was still a baby, so it could change as he got older. "He's a handsome babe," Odin said. "If a little strange..." the extra limbs took a few minutes to adjust to.

After a moment, Odin turned to Frigga. "Where is Eir? I'd like to discuss this spell she has in mind."

"Just down the hall. I believe she's consulting with some of the healers here about it," Frigga said. She went to Loki and kissed his forehead gently before the King and Queen silently slipped out of the room.

Thor wasn't sure how long he slept before he was abruptly woken up by wailing. He groaned and rolled over. Unfortunately, he forgot he was on a couch at the time and hit the ground with a thud. "Ow."

"Graceful, my son," Odin said.

Thor's eyes snapped open, and he pushed himself up to see Odin standing there. "Father." Loki was rubbing his eyes with his hand as he pushed himself up as well. Lady Eir was reaching into the bassinet, and Frigga was murmuring something Thor couldn't hear to Loki.

"Come, Thor," Odin said as he bent down to help Thor get to his feet. "Let us give your brother the privacy he needs."

Thor was mildly confused for a moment, and then his half-asleep brain kicked into gear. "Ah, yes," Thor said as he let Odin lead the way out. The crying Sleipnir was brought over to a reasonably terrified looking Loki, but Thor didn't wait to see how things progressed from there.

Once they were outside of Loki's room, Thor glanced back at the closed door. "Should they be removing Sleipnir from the spell?" Thor asked.
"He should be fine for short periods," Odin said. "And Lady Eir would have laid spells to ensure his lungs are bolstered for the short time he is being fed."

Thor made a face. "It is odd to think of... that."

"Then, I suggest you don't," Odin replied. "However, it is perfectly natural for your brother since he is not technically male. Or, I suppose most accurately, not only male."

Thor nodded. "I am trying to adjust to that, Father. Truly."

"I know. It takes time," Odin said. "Now, tell me while we walk, how has your time in Aztlan been spent? Well, I hope."

"I have been training as best I can, and Loki has helped me with my other schooling when he can," Thor said. "I do miss home at times, and I know Loki does as well."

Odin nodded. "And we miss you both back home," he said. "It should only be a bit more time before Sleipnir's new parents can take him, and then we can put this behind us all... as best we can, anyway."

Thor shifted uncomfortably. "I am not sure that Loki wants to give Sleipnir away, Father," Thor said.

"You think so, do you?" Odin asked.

"He seems upset every time it's brought up," Thor explained with a slight nod. "I think..." Thor paused as he tried to figure out how to phrase what was in his head. "I think he's grown attached to the baby."

Odin was quiet for a moment before inclining his head slightly. "Perhaps he has. I imagine it's easy to do when you are pregnant with a child for almost a year," Odin said. "But he insists to your mother he wishes to give Sleipnir away. And it may indeed be for the best. It would not be easy to explain Sleipnir's existence with us in any way but the truth."

"I don't see why it should matter where he came from," Thor muttered.

"It shouldn't, but it does," Odin said. "Especially for us. It is unfair, to be sure. If it were possible to claim Sleipnir as mine, I might do that... but his skin color proves he would not be a sibling of yours, Thor."

Thor sighed but nodded. If Sleipnir had been born as fair of skin as Loki's Aesir form, they might have managed such a story. But with as wonderfully warm and tanned as Sleipnir's tone was, it unfortunately also made that a very tall tale to try and sell. "You could say you adopted him... it wouldn't even really be a lie," Thor said.

Odin hummed thoughtfully. "Perhaps. But that might invite questions as to who we adopted him from and why. With your brother's absence from Asgard this past year... rumors would undoubtedly abound, and I don't wish to subject him to that."

Thor and Odin walked in silence for a few minutes before Odin sighed. "In the end, it will have to be Loki's decision. He has a little more time but not much to change his mind. I don't want you giving him a hard time about it, Thor. No decision he makes will be easy."

"I know, and I won't push him, Father," Thor said. "I promise."
Odin studied Thor's face for a moment before nodding. "Good."

"How much longer will Loki be in bed?" Thor asked.

"Until Lady Eir says he's healed from the surgery," Odin said.

Thor couldn't quite bite back the sigh. "He's going to be so impossible," Thor said. "He's getting quite bored."

Odin chuckled. "I'm sure. But his health should not be neglected in favor of satisfying his boredom. You'll just have to endure his sour mood a little longer. Just another week or so, I imagine," Odin said.

"A week seems a very long time," Thor muttered.

"I remember when my brothers Vili and Ve both came down with a particularly stubborn case of Nereid Lung. They were bedridden for months. And entirely insufferable the whole time," Odin said with a half-smile. "So believe me, Thor, I do understand. Just be glad you only have one brother stuck in bed opposed to two."

Thor shrugged. "I can't imagine any of my other brothers being anywhere near as bad as Loki..."

Odin laughed. "That is because you are so much younger than them. Baldr was the most dramatic boy I've ever seen whenever he got sick. You'd think he'd fall down dead at any slight malady," Odin said. Thor thought for a moment and remembered how dramatic his brother got whenever he saw mistletoe. Suddenly, Thor didn't find it that hard to imagine Baldr reacting the same way to a skinned knee. After another fifteen minutes or so of wandering, Odin started leading them back towards Loki's room, saying that Sleipnir would probably be done soon.

Hermod was sitting in Odrerir across from Meili, tossing a few coins into a pile before they started their next round of Tafl. It was a rare day off for the pair. Ever since the invasions at the border, the patrols had been increased to levels that were hard to maintain. Now that the barrier protecting Asgard was finally finished, however, they were getting back to the usual rotation. Meili met the bet and took his first move.

Meili took a long drink from his tankard as Hermod took his move with barely a glance at the board. Usually, Meili won since Hermod was too impatient to really think too many steps ahead. But, they still enjoyed a friendly game back and forth. Especially since to make up for winning nine times out of ten, Meili bought the drinks for them.

They got about three more moves into the game when a voice filled Hermod's mind.

Hermod.

You've been summoned by the King to perform an errand. Come to me.

Hermod straightened at the sound of Heimdall's voice and then sighed. "Alone?" Hermod asked. Usually, when given a task, Hermod was paired with his partner Meili. From the look on Meili's face, he hadn't heard Heimdall's voice.

You were the only one requested.

"So much for a day off," he said as he picked up his tankard. He drained the contents as he got up. Hermod put the cup back down hard on the surface of the table and sighed again. "We'll have to pick this up later, Mei. I'm being called for."

Meili looked incredibly unimpressed, and one eyebrow went up. "Don't give me that look,"
Hermod said as he split the betting pile in half to pocket his portion. "What am I supposed to do? Say no to a royal summons?"

Meili remained quiet for a moment as Hermod put away his money. "Be careful," Meili said. "You take silly risks."

Hermod put a hand to his chest. "Meili. I am always the very picture of caution."

Meili's eyebrow went up again, and he looked down at the Tafl board on the table. Hermod's King was ringed in by Meili's pieces, and there was no way he'd have won. "... uh-huh."

"Shut up," Hermod said. "I'll be careful. Besides, if it were anything too dangerous, I'm sure our King would send a warrior and not a messenger." Meili caught Hermod's foot under the table with his own to keep the faster God from immediately leaving. There was a moment's quiet between them, and then Meili's blue eyes flicked to the side where another group of guards was sitting and being a bit of a rambunctious mess.

Hermod quickly caught on and leaned back over the table so that their heads were close. "Don't let them get to you, Mei. You're worth ten of them." Meili frowned slightly. "I'm not lying," Hermod denied without needing to hear Meili's protest. "Ten. If not more." Meili had never had a large number of friends. He wasn't outgoing, and his pretty face led to some... unfortunate run-ins with other youths during their training. Even more unfortunately, not all of the bullies had fully grown out of that.

There was a moment's pause, and then Meili got up. "I'll walk with you," he said.

Hermod shrugged. "If that's what you want."

Meili quickly finished off his drink and pocketed his leftover money. Together the two scouts left the bar and started down the street. Once they got a few blocks from Odrerir, Meili ducked around a corner and pulled Hermod with him. Hermod gave a little bit of a yelp, but cut himself off quickly. He really should have guessed that was about to happen. Back behind a slightly overgrown bush, Meili turned to face Hermod again. "Do you know where you're going?"

"Not yet."

"It could be somewhere dangerous." Hermod sighed. "You're worrying over nothing, Mei."

"Someone has to worry about you. You don't do it," Meili said. "If I were with you-"

"Meili... come on now. The Allfather wouldn't send me somewhere so dangerous. And I already promised I'd be careful," Hermod said. "Worrywart."

Meili sighed and leaned forward to rest his head on Hermod's shoulder. "... I hate when you're sent somewhere alone."

"I know," Hermod said as he rubbed Meili's back soothingly. After a moment, Hermod pulled back and caught Meili's chin to make the slightly taller man look up. "Hey, if anyone gives you a hard time, tell me when I get back, and I'll kick all their backsides black and blue."

"That never helps," Meili pointed out.

"Makes me feel better, though," Hermod said with a grin.
Meili rolled his eyes. Then, after a quick glance in either direction, swooped down to press a kiss to Hermod's smirking mouth. "If you aren't safe, I will find out, and you won't like what I'll do," Meili said threateningly.


"I'll take away all your toys," Meili said.

Hermod laughed. "Well, that would be unfortunate. In the interest of not incurring such a horrible fate, I will be the most cautious I've ever been," Hermod said before kissing Meili quickly. "Now, I have to go. Don't let them upset you, yeah?"

"I'll try."

"Good boy," Hermod said before backing away. Meili sighed but didn't interfere with Hermod leaving.

No longer needing to pace himself to stay beside Meili, Hermod felt free to pick up his speed. Hermod ran the rest of the way to the observatory where Heimdall was waiting for him with his sword in his hands. "Said your goodbyes?"

Hermod shrugged. He utterly refused to be ashamed of what he felt and who he felt it for. Especially since he knew Heimdall saw far worse than that and never gossiped about it. "Meili worries," Hermod said.

"For good reason from what I understand," Heimdall said. Hermod frowned, but before he could ask what that meant, Heimdall was speaking again, "The Allfather requires Chimeric Leather. You are tasked to go to Olympus, to the forge of Hephaestus, and then bring it to the Allfather and Lady Eir."

"Oh, well, that shouldn't be too hard," Hermod said. "I like Hephaestus. I have visited him many times."

Heimdall inclined his head a bit. "That, along with your speed, is most likely a large part of why you were chosen to do this task."

Hermod considered that for a second and then nodded. "Yes, I suppose that would make sense. Well, I shall endeavor to complete the Allfather's request with all due haste," he said.

"Good. Prepare yourself, and I shall activate the Bifrost for you," Heimdall said as he turned to step up to the control of the Rainbow Bridge. Hofund slid into the slot, and the various mechanisms of the observatory whirled to life. "I will be watching your progress," Heimdall said as he turned the sword, and the bridge opened.

Hermod nodded in understanding and ran the few steps it took to send him flying through space in the beam of multicolored light. Due to the close relationship Asgard had with Olympus, there were multiple landing points for the Bifrost. When the dust cleared, Hermod found himself in a courtyard perhaps a mile from the entrance to Hephaestus' mountain forge.

Several olive trees were growing around the edge of the circular courtyard, and many marble pillars rung in the space where the runes had been scorched inches into the paving stones from multiple landings. Hermod took a moment to look around at the sights he hadn't seen in at least two centuries before focusing on his task. The path curved along a manufactured stream that he knew Hephaestus used in his crafting in some way. In the distance, Hermod could see smoke steadily
rising across the blue sky in one unbroken line.

With Hermod's speed, it only took the messenger a few moments to arrive at the entrance to the forge. Hermod was careful to keep out of the way of the bronze spider-like creatures about waist high that were trailing in and out through the arched entryway to the forge. Each one was carrying supplies of some sort in a never-ending train inside while another line was carrying finished goods back out. Hermod knew from experience that they would not halt unless Hephaestus commanded it, and Hermod was not interested in being trampled.

After going through the archway, the automatons peeled off to either side and disappeared into side tunnels. Hermod walked down the main corridor that was full of mosaics and intricate lanterns lighting the way. After about thirty yards of a gently sloping path, the walls opened up into a series of archways. Each pillar carved with incredibly life-like figures doing all manner of things. Some had monsters, some beautiful men and women, and some had various animals rushing through nature.

The path gently sloped down and around. Through the arches, Hermod could see the massive forge down below in the center of a circular room. The bellows were taller than Hermod by at least a foot, and a giant cyclops with a leather apron was working them. The fires in the belly of the forge flared with each rush of air.

Another cyclops was wearing a large glass lens over his singular eye as he bent over a large table and fumbled with something that seemed far too small and fragile for his large fingers. Hermod glanced around the room as he continued to spiral down and spotted the third cyclops pushing a cart full of raw rocks. As Hermod stepped down the two stone stairs that led from the path to the main workshop area, the cyclops with the cart noticed him. "Brontes," Hermod greeted now that he was close enough to figure out which one of three he was. "It has been a while."

"To speak with Hephaestus, if I may. My King is looking for Chimeric Leather," Hermod said. "Is he home?"

"Always," Hephaestus said as he turned to let Hermod into the room. Hermod stepped in even as
Hephaestus made his way to a nearby chair with the use of an intricately carved ivory and golden cane. Hephaestus' left foot was a wrecked, twisted shape that he barely put weight on unless he couldn't help it. "My wife loves pretty things."

Hermod closed the door to the forge and found himself a seat on a nearby shelf filled with jar after jar of bright gems that glittered as temptingly as candies. Hermod picked up one filled to the brim with sapphires and shook the pot a little to watch them shift and glimmer. They reminded him of a set of perfect blue eyes. "I shall have to get you to make something for Meili."

"Something to announce an engagement, I hope," Hephaestus said as he put his cane against the wall. "How long will the two of you avoid it, anyway?"

"Meili isn't comfortable being so open," Hermod said absently. "But that isn't why I'm here."

Hephaestus hummed and pulled a strip of golden chain that he was setting little diamonds into closer so that he could continue his work. "Then, why are you here? Need another toy? My son would no doubt have some thoughts for you to explore if you need them."

"Your son is a mad genius, and it's quite tempting, but no," Hermod said. "The Allfather is looking for Chimeric Leather. Do you have any on hand you'd be willing to trade?"

Hephaestus looked up. "Chimeric Leather? Well, I do, yes, but not much. It isn't particularly easy to come by. Skinning a chimera is... an ordeal," Hephaestus said. "How much of it does King Odin need?"

"I think he wants as much as he can get his hands on," Hermod said. "I'm not privy to whatever it is he's trying to construct. Only that he tasked me with trying to get it." Hermod turned the jar in his hands again before putting it back between a container of dark rubies and canary yellow diamonds. "What would you require in exchange for however much you have left?"

Hephaestus scratched his cheek. "Let's see... considering the effort involved in getting the hides and then tanning the leather... ten kegs filled with gold will get you what I have left."

Hermod waited for two or three minutes for any sort of contradiction from Heimdall. It wasn't as easy for Heimdall to speak in one's head across realms but still entirely possible. When nothing came, Hermod shrugged. "I suppose that will do," he said.

"Good," Hephaestus said. "I will get you your leather then. And I imagine Odin will send my payment along soon enough."

"Of course," Hermod said.

As Hephaestus picked up his cane again, Hermod got down off of the shelf he was sitting on. "Hephaestus?"

"Mmm?" Hephaestus paused halfway across the room to look back at Hermod.

"... how did you get your wife to marry you?" Hermod asked.

Hephaestus shrugged his well-built shoulders. "It was arranged. And she was not happy about it," he said. "Pretty sure she tried to kill me a few times. Certainly didn't respect me. But, after a few centuries... we've come to an understanding. We're friends now, at least."

"Ah." Hermod thought about that for a moment. "Well, certainly won't work for me... We're a little bit past the age of arranged marriages."
"At least he actually loves you," Hephaestus said. "Now. Your leather."

Even though Hephaestus had a lame foot, he was quick and sure when moving about his forge. Hermod chatted with Brontes and the other cyclops as he waited. About ten minutes passed, and Hephaestus returned carrying a bundle wrapped into a loose cylinder about the length of half of Hephaestus' forearm. Hermod wasn't sure how much it was, he didn't think very much, but he hoped it would do. "Here, I'm not sure what Odin could be using this for, but I guarantee it's quality. Let him know that if he needs more, it will take time to hunt the beast and then make the leather from it. I wouldn't say anything less than two months."

"I'll let him know," Hermod agreed before taking the package and giving a slight bow to the smith. "I will most likely be the one returning with your payment. So, until then."

"Always good to see you, Hermod," Hephaestus said with a nod.

Hermod was kind enough to not run while inside the forge as the speed would undoubtedly cause a backdraft that would knock things over or disturb the fire. Once he had gotten out of the mountain, Hermod let his feet fly across the path. He reached the Bifrost site in only a few seconds and then looked up to the endless blue sky. "Heimdall! I am ready!"

There was a heartbeat of a pause. Then, the shaft of multicolored light filled the space. When the light faded, Hermod was gone and the ground smoking.

Odin and Eir's prediction that Sleipnir would only take a day or so under the magical barrier proved correct. The fleet-footed Hermod had delivered something to Odin and Eir midway through the first day of Sleipnir's life, and Frigga had said it was to try and help with Sleipnir's limbs. Thor supposed it was a good thing, as having an entire extra set of arms and legs would be a hindrance but wasn't overly concerned with how his parents were planning on tackling that. By far, the more pressing thing was the way Loki was acting.

Loki tried to hide it, but Thor had caught his brother sobbing more than once. Loki always tried to brush it and Thor off. Unfortunately for him, saying he was fine wasn't convincing when he had tears on his face. Thor wanted very much to tell Lady Eir or their Mother or even Lord Ixtlilton about Loki's seemingly random breakdowns, but he was hesitant in case Loki reacted badly to Thor voicing concerns. Loki was being very... touchy after the birth, and Thor wanted to avoid stepping on toes.

At least Loki, while seemingly more emotional than average, seemed to be recovering physically. The cut along his abdomen had been easily healed by Lady Eir after the surgery, but he complained about soreness still. Not that it stopped him from sneaking out of bed when nobody had been looking. Loki was still sleeping more than usual, but his skin had faded back to his pale Aesir color.

Actually, seeing Loki pale again and his bright green eyes was almost shocking. Thor hadn't realized how used to his brother's Jotnar form he'd become. But that actually helped a bit because it made Sleipnir a bit less shocking when Thor caught a glimpse of the baby's eyes. Just like when he was a horse, and just like Loki's Jotnar form, Sleipnir's eyes were blood red. He also had a surprisingly secure grip. Thor had been shocked the first time Sleipnir grabbed one of his fingers and held on.

"Nothing fits him," Loki murmured so low that Thor almost hadn't heard.

"What's that, brother?" Thor asked as he looked up from where he had been watching Sleipnir
squirm in Loki's arm. Two of the baby's fists were always holding onto Loki's shirt, another had
refused to relinquish Thor's index finger, and the fourth was in Sleipnir's own mouth.

Loki sighed. "Nothing fits his body, so he's not properly dressed," Loki said. "... he feels warm,
doesn't he?"

Thor blinked a little bit and put his not captured hand to Sleipnir's forehead. "I suppose, a bit," Thor
said uncertainly. What was the right temperature for a baby anyway? Thor had no idea. He had
never in his life been around babies. "I'm sure if he was ill, Lady Eir would have said something,
though," Thor said.

"I suppose..."

Loki looked anything but convinced. Thor looked down as Sleipnir pulled on his fingers,
apparently trying to shove them into his mouth along with his own fist. "I don't think your mouth is
that big, nephew," Thor said in amusement as he let the baby guide his hand and try it anyway.

"He's putting literally everything he can manage in his mouth," Loki said with a ghost of a smile on
his face. "But he'll probably fall asleep soon. He's been awake for a while."

"He's a newborn, supposedly eating and sleeping are supposed to be all they do," Thor said.
Sleipnir gave up on Thor's fingers and released his grip on them to turn his face into Loki's chest
with little cooing noises that were honestly far too adorable. "Although he is squirmier than I
thought he'd be." He was under the impression babies just laid around for a while after they were
first born.

Loki shifted his rather large son in his arms a bit, but Sleipnir didn't seem to mind. "Lady Eir thinks
he will develop quicker than an average Aesir or Jotnar. She thinks that it could be as much as ten
times as quick for him. Though, she doesn't know for certain."

"Oh," Thor said. He hadn't thought about that. But it would make some amount of sense if
Sleipnir's Kelpie blood made Loki's pregnancy last longer, it might affect the boy's aging too.

"I suppose it doesn't matter much," Loki said. "Seeing how Mother will be taking him to his
parents once they finish whatever enchantment they are working on."

Thor wasn't sure what he could say to that -if he even should. So, instead, he tried to focus more on
what was in front of him and not the future for once. "He looks heavy."

"He is heavy," Loki said dryly. "He was heavy in my stomach, as well. Twice as much baby as he
should be."

Thor chuckled a little and tickled Sleipnir's side with one finger. "He was well fed." The baby
squealed and flailed one arm and his legs, causing Loki to scold Thor as he struggled to keep hold
of Sleipnir. "He seems he got your ticklish side, brother," Thor teased.

Loki kicked Thor in the gut, causing the young Thunderer to fall back with a grunt. "He's hard
easy enough to hold without you riling him up."

Thor lifted his head. "I could hold him if you want, brother," he volunteered. He hadn't held
Sleipnir yet. That had been reserved for Loki, Lady Eir, and their Mother, and not even Odin had
held the baby. Although the Allfather tended to visit when Sleipnir was sleeping and only briefly.
Even here, Odin was quite busy.

Loki eyed Thor skeptically for a moment and then jerked his head. "Come here, then, oaf." Thor
was surprised at Loki's agreement but scrambled back up and shifted to sit beside Loki on the bed rather than across from him. It took some effort since Sleipnir still did not want to release Loki's shirt from his grasp, but Loki got the baby into Thor's arms and then helped the blonde cradle the newborn properly. "Don't drop my son, Thor. Or I'll banish you somewhere unpleasant."

"I won't, Brother," Thor promised as he adjusted his arms a little more to support Sleipnir's head. The baby's big eyes, the exact color of cinnabar crystals, were staring up at Thor. Sleipnir grabbed at Thor's tunic like he had Loki's but also seemed interested in trying to grab at Thor's hair. Luckily, the blonde locks weren't yet long enough to be in danger of getting yanked. "He's quite a handsome boy, Loki," Thor said.

"Yes..."

Thor looked over at Loki, not sure what was going through his brother's head. Well, Thor was never really sure what went through Loki's head, but he hadn't had such a hard time reading him since before he returned to this life. Sometime around the end of his pregnancy, Loki had shut himself behind doors again. Slow enough for Thor to not immediately notice -probably not helped by the amount of time Loki had spent sleeping- but the distance was suddenly thrown into sharp relief.

"How are you doing?" Thor asked after several minutes.

Loki blinked and looked up at Thor rather than the baby. "What?"

"I asked how you were doing, Loki," Thor said. "Everything that's happened is... well, it's a lot."

"It is," Loki said as he reached over to hold onto one of Sleipnir's perfectly formed little hands. There was a long silence, but Thor let it linger. He wanted Loki to answer, and he certainly wouldn't if pushed. "I honestly don't know how I'm doing, Thor. Everything is very... it's too much to explain."

"You've been crying a lot lately," Thor ventured to say.

Instantly, Loki's tentative openness was shuttered with a wave of his hand. "Hormones is all," Loki said. "Now that Sleipnir is born, that should settle back to normal. Nothing to worry about."

"Motherhood seems hard," Thor said in a tone he hoped would be light enough that Loki would know he wasn't trying to be insensitive. Thor honestly couldn't imagine how hard it was after seeing his brother struggle. Loki didn't respond. Not even to get upset at Thor for the 'motherhood' part of the comment. Thor hadn't expected that in the least. "Loki?"

Loki looked up and flashed a smile that didn't reach his eyes. The expression made Thor shiver. It was too empty and reminiscent of others to not make Thor wary. "Sorry, Thor. I'm still a bit tired. Could you put Sleipnir down for me? I think I'm going to take a nap," Loki said.

Thor nodded but was wary. Still, he didn't want to push and carried the baby to his crib to put him down. Sleipnir squirmed as soon as he was on the thin mattress, so Thor gave him a stuffed toy that resembled a very fat dragon. Sleipnir seemed to calm a little bit and brought the tail of the creature up to gnaw on. "He doesn't seem very tired," Thor commented as he looked back at his brother.

"He might not be, but I am," Loki said. "You should go get some air, Thor. It's not like you to be cooped up inside so long."

"And you'll be alright on your own?" Thor asked. He could tell Loki was deliberately trying to get rid of him -and quite unsubtly at that.
"Of course, I'll be alright," Loki said in exasperation. "I'm not a child. I'm just going to take a nap, not dive out of a window."

Thor nodded and, though he lingered another few moments, Loki insistently told him to leave until he did. As Thor left, Huld slipped through the door with some sort of leafy foliage in her fifth hand. Huld constantly was bringing Loki things both useful and not. Thor still remembered the time that she very happily presented Loki with a fish head. Nothing else. Just the head. Minus the eyes which Huld had already probably eaten. Loki had been violently ill until the smell of fish had been aired out of the room. Hopefully, whatever she was bringing Loki this time was of the more harmless variety.

Eventually, Thor found himself in a small room near where his mother had been staying. He had almost walked past it until he realized he heard his father talking. The door wasn't closed, so Thor figured it wasn't anything too serious and entered. "-would be a problem. The leather doesn't have that much ability to shift its shape and size."

"What's going on?" Thor asked.

Odin, Frigga, Lady Eir, Gerd, and a few of the Gods of Aztlan were standing there having some sort of discussion. Many books and scrolls were spread across a large table, along with several layers of leather that seemed to defy Thor's ability to identify. Each second, it appeared to be a different color. First, definitely, it was brown, but then reddish? No, a dark black. Actually, brown did seem right. Or maybe... purple? Was that possible? It had to be possible. Then again blue-

"We are trying to find a way to solve the riddle of Sleipnir's limbs," Gerd said with their arms folded across their chest. Thor pulled his eyes away from the strange leather with some difficulty. "They will hinder him, at least at first. His extra legs, especially, worry us."

Thor nodded in understanding. He did have trouble imagining how Sleipnir was meant to walk as he was currently. He supposed it was possible with practice and coordination, but Thor had no idea how it would work himself. When Thor didn't ask any further questions, the conversation started up again. "I still don't know if a merging enchantment will be enough," Lady Eir said. "While it would fuse his limbs into one set of each, I don't imagine it will be a comfortable experience for him."

"Plus, if he is indeed a shifter, which seems likely, if he changes his shape, it would break the bracers," Gerd said. "Chimeric Leather is best for holding disparate elements together, not so much stopping change."

Thor nodded in understanding. He did have trouble imagining how Sleipnir was meant to walk as he was currently. He supposed it was possible with practice and coordination, but Thor had no idea how it would work himself. When Thor didn't ask any further questions, the conversation started up again. "I still don't know if a merging enchantment will be enough," Lady Eir said. "While it would fuse his limbs into one set of each, I don't imagine it will be a comfortable experience for him."

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Thor sat down in a nearby chair and listened with only partial understanding as the older Gods and Goddesses tossed various ideas back and forth. From what Thor gathered, the biggest worry was if Sleipnir did shift while wearing the enchanted splints. There was no proof he even could, but if he did, it would likely break whatever enchantment they used. Every other concern, such as how to make it comfortable and not accidentally removable, were all relatively easy to deal with compared to that one. Shifting, from what Thor understood, was not an ability that was at all easy to stop.

Thor hummed thoughtfully to himself. His own dampeners worked by stopping his Seidr from escaping and thus affecting weather patterns. Shifting was harder because all the power came from the person and then changed themselves. A dampener then was about as useful as trying to stop milk from souring just because you put it in a jar. But then... wait a second... "How did the other one do it then?" Thor asked.

The conversation, which had carried on without him paying attention, stopped, and Frigga tilted her head slightly. "What was that, darling?"
Thor felt his cheeks heat, he hadn't actually meant to draw attention to himself like that. "Well, how did the one that attacked Loki keep from shifting all the time?" Thor asked. Thor would have assumed that Svadilfari would have shifted to fight him or try to get away, but he hadn't. Maybe he couldn't for some reason?

"Kelpies have special talismans that prevent them from shifting while they wear it," Frigga answered.

"Can't... can't Sleipnir just wear that then?" Thor asked.

There was a somewhat awkward silence, and Thor felt his embarrassment climbing again. He shouldn't have opened his big mouth. Thor knew better than to try and get involved in Seidr work. He was so hopeless at it. "He brings up a good point," Gerd said just before Thor could take back what he said. "You said you still had it didn't you, King Odin?"

Odin nodded. "I do. I'm not certain if it would upset Loki, though."

Gerd shrugged. "I would discuss it with him first, but it seems to me as if we might have been overthinking the problem."

"At the very least, studying it might tell us how the enchantment works," Frigga added. "I take it you left the bridle in Asgard, though?"

"Of course," Odin said. "I had no need for it here."

"Well, we shall simply have Hodr or Tyr bring it to us," Frigga said. "And then we will get these splints made, and Sleipnir will be well on his way."

Chapter End Notes

**Hephaestus**- We're getting to the good ol' Greeks now. Hephaestus is the Greek Smith God with a lame foot. Sometimes also depicted as a club foot but either way, he's got an ailment there. Sometimes the story is he's born that way and sometimes he fell off Olympus and damaged it then. In this story I'm not going with him being a Son of Zeus like he's sometimes called or a son of Hera. I'm trying to de-incest the Greek Gods a bit... A bit difficult since it's rampant. But a lot of the sons of Zeus-y boy are getting any and all alternate parentage used if it makes sense. I had to do a lot of pruning to some other mythological families too after all.

**Chimeric Leather**- Leather made from the skin of a Chimera. A beast from Greek myth that involved a lion, goat, dragon, and a snake all smashed together. Well, sometimes it seems like the snake and dragon sort of get put together but either way. A bunch of animals are all together. Chimera is a female beast that is from the mother of all beasts, Echinda. Just like Cerberus and the Hydra are. Also Chimera breathed fire.

**Hermod and Meili**- These two just sort of happened... It wasn't originally my plan but as I was writing them they just sort of became a couple. And who was I to stop them? They aren't brothers in this telling after all. Also, yes, Meili is described as being quite pretty in one of the only references to him.

**Hephaestus' Forge**- He really did supposedly have a constant line of brass automatons
carrying stuff in and out of his mountain all the time. Also, he worked with three cyclops. Brontes, Steropes and Pyracmon. Fun fact, Brontes and Steropes means thunder and lightning and they made Zeus' thunderbolts. The last cyclopes' name (Pyracmon in this case) changes depending on which poet you ascribe to. Some versions of the Prometheus myth has that fire he stole coming from Hephaestus' Forge.

**Hephaestus' Family**- He's still married to Aphrodite in this telling and she's slowly warmed up to him a little bit... but was quite unhappy with the situation at first. Eros is their son and hence why he'd be good at coming up with ideas for 'toys'.

**Loki's Postpartum**- Because I can't cut the poor boy a break. He's got a pretty low opinion of himself anyway and mixed feeling about his son so it seemed natural to me that all that baggage mixed with the hormones would lead to a postpartum depression situation. He's trying to muscle through it because that's what he always tries to do but as he proved in the one-shot I posted Loki would ultimately do more harm to himself than to his child. No matter what dark impulses he is currently having. For however much comfort that is to you...
Progress is Measured in Baby Steps

Chapter Summary

Things still happen in Asgard even without her Princes and Loki finally is convinced to try and open up ever so slightly.

Chapter Notes

A mighty long chapter for you all, but I'm rather sure nobody is going to complain about that, haha. Have a happy holiday season all.

The sun was shining up above, and the clouds were white and fluffy as they slowly made their way across the cornflower blue sky. Sigyn had taken a seat beneath a large oak tree where the leaves offered a bit of shade. In her lap was a familiar handsome face with his black hair spilling across her skirts. He was dozing off it seemed, and she brushed her fingers over his head gently. Just a few feet off, a wolf, the size of a cart, was sprawled out across the ground with a coil of dark scales casually draped across his back. The scales were the tail end of a long snake that disappeared around the tree and then reappeared on the other side. A girl -well, a woman really- was curled up against the base of the enormous snake's tapered jaw looking sound asleep and perfectly at ease against such a massive predator. Outside of the shade of the tree, an impressive black stallion with eight legs stood amid the patches of waving grasses, looking out at something or another she couldn't figure out.

Oddly unbothered by the strange creatures all around her, Sigyn looked back at the man using her legs as a pillow. She continued to brush her hands over his head and was glad that he seemed to be sleeping well for once. He hadn't been for so long. The breeze rustled the leaves overhead and knocked a few free from their branches.

As Sigyn watched one leaf fall, the breeze turned hot and dry. The sky went red, and the leaf became ash as it fell. In the distance, it sounded like a raging fire. She didn't bother to look for the source. Those around her continued to sleep soundly as if nothing had changed at all. The hot air pulled strands of hair from its braid and tugged at her clothes. There was a groan, and she looked over to see the wolf stretch with a wide, slightly red-tinged yawn.

Sigyn smiled as the wolf laid his head back down on his scarred forepaws and seemingly went straight back to sleep. "It's been a long day," she said mostly to herself as she petted the head on her legs.

There was a distant crash, and she looked off to the distance where the horse was staring and saw the beautiful rainbow bridge shattering into a million shards and falling into a boiling sea. Her eyes followed the line of the bridge back to shore, where the golden city was crumbling. A large tower collapsed in on itself, and flames ate greedily at the blackened buildings. Not particularly concerned with the fate of the once magnificent city, Sigyn bent forward and placed a kiss on her
love's forehead.

His eyes fluttered and then opened to look up at her. His brilliant green eyes were duller than usual and bloodshot. Odd furrowed scarring was across his face making it look as if he were permanently crying. She thought that fairly apt considering all he'd been through. "You should rest," Sigyn said, brushing his hair back. "You haven't recovered yet."

He reached up and brushed her hair back from her face to put behind her ear. "I do love you," he said, his voice was raspy and harsh, but she didn't mind. He had been through a lot, after all.

"And I, you. Rest, Loki, I will keep us safe." His lips twitched upwards in a smile, and she ducked down to give him another kiss, this time on the lips. Just to show him that he was indeed safe, Sigyn made a symbol in the air that glittered with her magic. The sigil burned, and blue energy spiraled out until it circled the entire group of them. Loki's smile widened, and then he closed his eyes again.

Sigyn woke up quite confused at the bizarre dream she'd had. It felt real, but how could it have been? Pushing herself up, she rubbed her eyes of sleep. Perhaps she had spent too long the night before studying. Sigyn sat in her bed another few minutes to fully wake up and then got up to go wash her face. It was still very early in the morning, and Sigyn's roommate was still sound asleep.

Sigyn should probably go back to sleep herself considering how late she was up the night before, but she didn't feel tired after that dream. Not particularly wanting to just be in bed staring at the ceiling, Sigyn changed from her nightshift to a pale yellow dress with an orange smock. She pulled on her shoes and then wrapped a shawl around her shoulders before heading out into the early morning.

The sky was only just starting to lighten, and the air was filled with fog that left a chill on whatever it passed over, but Sigyn was used to such things from growing up in Vanaheim. Sigyn wandered through the gardens for about half an hour before deciding that she was hungry. It was still early for the kitchens to have finished breakfast, so Sigyn decided to go to a tavern in town for an early meal and then maybe spend some time in the library. Her shift in the healing ward was not until late that afternoon, so she should have plenty of time to continue her book studies.

As Sigyn walked past the entrance of one of the smaller training areas of the palace, she heard the sound of someone practicing. That wasn't entirely surprising. Most hours of the day meant that someone was up training somewhere in Asgard. Still, Sigyn glanced into the courtyard as she went by. She almost continued on before she realized it was Sif practicing, and she looked particularly enraged.

At first, Sigyn was doubtful about interrupting but changed her mind when Sif hacked the training dummy's head off and then kicked it hard into a wall. "Sif?"

Sif whipped around, looking ready to snap and lash out. But then she saw who it was and the tension in her shoulders loosened ever so slightly. "Sigyn. What are you doing here?"

"I was going out for an early breakfast," Sigyn said as she stepped into the courtyard proper. She kept her hands tucked into the warmth of her own elbows as she went to the dummy to examine the cut. "I heard someone practicing and glanced in... are you okay?" she asked. The wood had splintered near the end of the slice, but the fact that Sif had managed to cut through it at all was a little scary if Sigyn was honest.

"Yes. Fine," Sif said as she went to the side to pick up a rag and wipe the sweat off her forehead. "Just getting some moves down."
Sigyn nodded and circled the dummy. "So, what's the purpose of kicking the head once you remove it from one's shoulders?" she asked, glancing over to where the straw stuffing had spilled out across the damp flagstones.

Sif shrugged. "Just... seemed like the thing to do," she said.

"Riiight," Sigyn said. "Well, you certainly showed the dummy who I'm sure wasn't representing anyone in real life at all. You want to go with me to breakfast?"

Sif hesitated. "I'm... a bit sweaty."

Sigyn lifted an eyebrow. "We're in Asgard. That's a general state nobody seems to notice. Come on, put the sword away, and hop to. I'm hungry, and I'm sure you could use something after your little practice session."

"I don't."

"Sif. Hop. To," Sigyn said firmly.

"Are you ordering me around?" Sif asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"Cheeky," Sif said although she put her sword in its sheath before fastening it to her waist and wiping her skin one last time with the cloth. "I should argue with you more, but I happen to be pretty hungry myself. So, if you're paying, I'll come with."

Sigyn shook her head slightly. "I have found you Asgardians need very firm, simple words for it to get through properly."

"Better than wilting at the sight of a little hard work like Vanir do," Sif replied with the same light tone as Sigyn was using.

"Considering your Queen is Vanir, you might want to rethink that comment," Sigyn said as she led the way to the main streets. "I doubt anyone could say that Queen Frigga is afraid of hard work."

Sif waved her hand to the side. "Queen Frigga is an exception, not the rule."

"Oh, I see," Sigyn said with a nod. "So, who upset you?"

Sif frowned. "Nobody upset me."

"Sif, I think we've known each other long enough now that I can tell when you're upset," Sigyn said. "So, either something or someone upset you. And it's usually someone. Can we just... skip the part where I worm it out of you bit by bit, and you just tell me all at once what happened?"

There was a long silence between them as they walked. Sif was scowling at nothing, but Sigyn was content to wait. She was sure that Sif would tell her sooner or later. Finally, Sif huffed in exasperation. "It's Haldorr."

"Haldorr?" Sigyn repeated. She searched her memory and recalled the rather good looking but typically arrogant Asgardian that fought with a pike and had short auburn hair. "What has Haldorr done?" Sigyn asked. Admittedly, she wasn't terribly familiar with the various interactions between the soldier trainees, but Sigyn hadn't heard of anything about Haldorr before.

Sif huffed and kicked at a stone. "He asked when I would get tired of playing the warrior and go
back to learning how to be a wife. Then, when I said I wasn't playing, he laughed!

"I see... well, that's hardly the worst thing anyone has ever done," Sigyn pointed out. "Didn't you say Bjarke threw all your armor in the water tanks? And you were searching for it for a whole week?"

"Yes. But that's Bjarke, he's a moron about everything," Sif said dismissively. "I thought Haldorr was smarter than that. He's seen me practicing. He knows I'm skilled with a sword!"

"It doesn't sound like he's doubting that so much as your conviction," Sigyn pointed out. "Which... I mean, the only way to prove him wrong is through time. Don't let his laughter get to you. Just show him up next time the two of you are in the training ring."

Sif sighed. "That's what Auntie Brunnhilde says, but that doesn't change me wanting to punch him in the face every time he gives me that obnoxious grin like I'm doing something silly or cute like a puppy tripping over its own feet."

"Maybe he likes you," Sigyn offered.

Sif scoffed. "I doubt that," Sif said. "He's obnoxious and condescending, and I want to strangle him every time he talks!"

Sigyn didn't think that necessarily meant that he couldn't possibly like Sif but also didn't believe Sif would want to hear that. "Well, have you ever sparred with him? If not, maybe you should and knock him on his backside."

"I've done that!" Sif said in exasperation. "Multiple times!"

"Maybe he's a slow learner," Sigyn offered. "Either way, he doesn't seem worth the aggravation that you're experiencing."

Sif huffed again and folded her arms across her chest. "Probably not... but he's such a pain! And my stupid brother agrees with him!"

"Which brother?" Sigyn asked.

"Which one do you think?" Sif asked. "Svipdagr. He's all upset that I'm in the same training as he is, and he's being a complete ass about it! If Thor were here, none of this would be happening!"

Sigyn frowned. "I'm not so sure about that."

"It's true!" Sif insisted. "Thor has been nothing but supportive and has even helped me catch up to the others. If he were still here, not a one of them would think to question my resolve."

"Out loud, perhaps," Sigyn said. "But most likely, they would still question it in their minds." Sif scowled at that. "Anyway, where would you like to eat at? I don't go out for food very often."

Sif shrugged. "How about the Sleeping Stag?" she suggested. "It's quieter than Odrerir, and they have good food still."

"I don't think I've ever been there," Sigyn admitted. "Alright. Lead on."

The two of them chatted a little bit as they walked about nothing in particular. Sif led the way through the early morning mist to a small building with a cottage aesthetic, and a sign which was a curled up and sleeping deer carved out of wood. The glass in the windows and door were
shimmering with various colored energy that would shift like oil between lines of golden metal that held the pieces into diamond shapes. The building was wedged between two much larger and more ornately decorated buildings that looked like artisan homes or workshops. If Sigyn hadn't been led here, she doubted she'd have ever found the place.

Sif pushed open the door and stepped in. Sigyn followed and was immediately hit with the warmth of a fire crackling in a large hearth on the side of the building and the smell of fresh bread and simmering fruit. There were dried herbs hanging against walls, and all the wood was stained a dark color that looked nearly black. There weren't many tables, only about half a dozen, but there were still places to sit. Sif went to one near but not directly next to the fire and leaned her sword against the chair she chose.

Sigyn sat down across from Sif as she looked around the room. There were various paintings of trees and flowers and animals. There was even a series of pressed flowers hanging on one wall behind the short counter. A person, who was very hard to identify a gender for, stepped out from a back room and smiled at them. Whoever it was looked like they might be Vanir, but Sigyn could tell the appearance was not quite right. The person was just a little too tall and willowy. Their eyes were slightly too large and were reminiscent of a doe despite being the wrong color. Plus, their nearly pure white skin tone wasn't at all typical on Vanaheim.

Long black hair was pulled half back into a bun tied there with a string of ivy while the rest cascaded down their back. "Hello there," they said. Their voice was soft and pleasant, and their eyes were a mossy green with little flecks of amber here and there. Their lips were thin, and their cheekbones sharp.

"Kodama," Sif greeted. "It's been a while."

"It has," Kodama agreed. "You tend to spend your time in Odrerir now. With all of the warriors."

Kodama moved around the counter. Sigyn immediately noticed that Kodama had an odd sway to their step that was somehow graceful and alien at the same time. No person moved like that, almost as if their skeleton was a suggestion. "Well, you don't serve meat," Sif said.

"I don't know why you would need it," Kodama replied. They sounded genuinely unsure about the reasons. "But who is your friend? She seems familiar."

"My name is Sigyn," Sigyn said, although she wasn't sure how she would seem familiar to someone she'd never met before in her life.

"A pleasure. What can I get you two?" Kodama asked, still swaying ever so slightly. They didn't seem capable of standing perfectly still.

"Those apple dumplings you make," Sif said. "And some of your oatmeal."

Sigyn nodded a little bit. "That sounds fine for me, too," she said. Sif had said that the food here was good, so Sigyn was willing to follow her friend's lead in ordering. "And if you have any tea, that would be lovely."

"Of course. I'll be back in a few minutes," Kodama said before gliding into the back room.

Sigyn watched the strange person move off before turning to Sif. "How did you find this place?" she asked curiously. The entire little tavern didn't seem quite right here in Asgard. Not in the least because it apparently didn't serve meat. But also because the decor was just a little bit off.

"Meili brought me here one day after he caught me having a shouting match with some of the
idiots in class. Said this was a place he liked to go after a hard day in the ring," Sif explained. "I didn't really get it, but Kodama told me later that Meili got picked on a lot during training too."

"Meili... that's the really pretty scout, yes?" Sigyn asked.

Sif nodded. "Yes, usually you never see him apart from Hermod. They're practically attached at the hip, but he was alone for once. He said he was coming here anyway when he heard the shouting. He was nice," Sif said with a little shrug. "But then Hermod came in, and they both left so we didn't even finish lunch."

"Do you come here a lot now?" Sigyn asked.

"I haven't in a while. But I didn't feel like going to Odrerir today and facing all those warriors that give me the side-eye all the time," Sif said. "Plus, the dumplings here are really very good."

A few moments later, Kodama came back with a tray in their hands. Kodama put down two plates, each with a fist-sized cloth wrapped dumpling on it, two bowls of oatmeal topped with various fruits and nuts, and a teapot decorated with little white humanoid figures playing in a forest. "There we go. Anything else?" Kodama asked.

"Some honey?" Sigyn asked.

There was a light scraping noise, and Sigyn looked down to see a jar getting pushed along the table by a strange little creature. It was pure white but had a peculiar hat made out of fresh mint leaves tied together, a pair of huge purple eyes, and tiny little specks of brown freckles. "Oh, hello there," Sigyn greeted as the small figure finished pushing the jar closer and then scampered away to jump into the large sleeve of the tunic that Kodama was wearing. The end of Kodama's sleeve was abruptly pulled closed, but Sigyn could still just make out a pair of purple eyes staring at her.

"They're quite shy still," Kodama said. "But they like to help."

"They're very cute," Sigyn said.

Kodama smiled. "I'm sure they appreciate the compliment. If you need anything, just let me know," Kodama said before making their way back behind the counter. Now that Sigyn was watching, she spotted several other small ghostly white figures hidden around the room. The one in Kodama's sleeve reappeared to dart across the counter, and Sigyn saw it climbing up a dangling rope to the rafters where several others were crowded around.

"Ignore them," Sif suggested. "They're curious but ultimately harmless."

"They're adorable," Sigyn said. Sigyn watched a few clusters of them before turning back to her breakfast.

"You think Ofnir is adorable," Sif pointed out dryly.

"He is!"

Sif shook her head. "You and Loki both, I swear. I was hoping you'd be a good influence on him."

"You know, you and he aren't that different from one another," Sigyn said as she unwound the cloth from the dumpling to cut into it. "You'd get along quite well, I think, if you both stopped trying so hard to prove yourselves. What does what other people think matter, anyway?"

"What other people think always matters, Sigyn," Sif said. "Especially when you're part of the
courts. But I'm going to prove them wrong. I'm a better warrior than at least half of those silly boys."

Sigyn inclined her head. "Yes, and those that are important would already know that. You have nothing you need prove. Especially to those that are already dismissive of you." Sigyn cut through the dumpling in front of her, slicing a large chunk off of the whole but peeled and cored apple inside the dough. "Those that believe in you already or are willing to give you a chance don't need you to try so very hard, and those that will never care how well you do would be a waste of your time."

"Easy for you to say," Sif said with a sigh as she poured some honey over her oatmeal. "The only people who don't like you are the harpy sisters, and they're in Nornheim and hardly show up anymore."

"That's not entirely true," Sigyn denied. "There are plenty of people who don't like me besides those two."

"Like who?"

"Bjarke doesn't like me."

"That's only because you won't give him the time of day," Sif said. "You know very well he wants to court you."

Sigyn couldn't help the noise of derision that escaped. "He would be far more appealing if he was... well, nice in any sort of way. He's a bully who thinks he can get his way just by throwing his fists around," Sigyn said as she poured some tea into a cup. "Plus... you know he told me once that I was 'too pretty' to worry about schooling?"

"From him, that's hardly surprising," Sif said. "Even Amora and Lorelei get fed up with him, and it takes a lot to get those two upset with you if you have male chromosomes." Sigyn laughed, and the two of them turned more of their attention to the breakfast in front of them. Sigyn found that the food was indeed quite good even though it wasn't made in a typical Asgardian or even Vanir style.

After breaking their fast, Sigyn and Sif split off from each other. Sigyn to go to the library, and Sif to return to her training. When Sif arrived at the main training ring, she had to roll her eyes at Fandral and Astrild, showing off for a group of girls that were nearby. Said girls were casting little glances their way and giggling, but Sif couldn't tell if that was because the blonde boys were succeeding or failing.

Fandral and Astrild were sparring with too much flourish. Sif was impressed they didn't poke their own eyes out or chop off their hair with some of their swings. Hogun was sitting on the fence watching. "How long have they been at it?" Sif asked with a nod in the boys' direction.

Hogun shrugged. "About an hour. Give or take."

Sif was less than impressed. "Where's the instructor?" Since Tyr was helping Prince Baldr act as regent for the King, they'd had substitute instructors for the past few days. Usually, it was one of the Elite Einherjar, but they were also there to run them through drills as soon as practice started, which was any moment.

"No idea," Hogun said. "Where's your brother?"

Sif scowled. "Being a sore loser," she said. "He was complaining to Father all last night about me being in his class. And then when Father told him that if I earned my place and could keep up,
Dagr had nothing to complain about. Well, he didn't like that much."
"Ah."

It took another three or so minutes for Dagr to show up and almost ten for an instructor to appear. Their substitute for Tyr was a very peeved looking Thraell. His long braids were thrown back into a haphazard bun, and his Einherjar uniform slightly rumpled. He had a sword on his hip but no armor on like he normally would have. Knowing her nephew as she did, Sif could guarantee that he wasn't whoever was supposed to be teaching them that day but had been called in the last minute to cover for someone else. His mood was sour because of it and made them all run drills like a slave driver and only barked out instructions and corrections when needed. Thraell was not a morning person.

Thraell started them off with a punishing series of drills before even allowing them to pick up weapons. Thraell specialized in blunt weapons like hammers and maces, and so that was what they practiced in the beginning. They did eventually move onto swords, but that didn't mean they were criticized any less. Any time they made a particularly grievous mistake or failed to correct one in enough tries, Thraell would send them off into another series of drills or run laps around the training ring.

Several hours later, Thraell dismissed them and then immediately disappeared. Probably to return home. Haldorr was nearly gasping for air from the dozens upon dozens of laps around the training field he'd had to run for having poor form. "I thought... he'd be nicer... since you two... are in the class," he said with a vague gesture at Sif and Dagr.

"Opposite, actually," Dagr said as he wiped his forehead off with a damp cloth. "He's harder to make sure nobody thinks he's giving anyone special treatment."

"I'd rather the special treatment," Fandral said, where he was sprawled out across a bench. "I'm so beat..."

"It's because you weren't taking it seriously," Astrild said although he didn't look much better than Fandral did where he was leaning with his back against the legs of that same bench.

Fandral batted the side of Astrild's head lightly with one hand. "Shut up," Fandral said. "Nobody asked you."

"I never thought I'd miss Tyr," another student, Gaut, said as he pulled off his shirt and used it as a makeshift towel. "Compared to Thraell... Tyr's actually nice."

"You say that, but when Lord Tyr finally returns, you'll be complaining about him too," Dagr said.

"You know who I really miss?" Gaut asked. "Thor. He even makes drills entertaining."

There was a murmur of agreement. "When is he coming back anyway?" Haldorr asked. "Does anyone know?"

"King Odin won't say," Fandral said as he pushed himself up on his elbows. "We tried to ask right before he left, but he just gave us that answer he's been giving everyone."

"Where do you think he is?" Gaut asked. "I mean... he can't be with Lord Baldr again. He's here!"

"Doesn't mean that the Princes can't be in Vanaheim though," Astrild pointed out. "Could be with their grandfather or something like that."
"But why?" Haldorr asked.

Sif shook her head to get her long blonde hair down and then pulled it back into a fresh horsetail that wouldn't feel as gross and messy. "I'm sure there's a reason," Sif said. "They might be getting special training for being Princes and running Asgard or something."

"Maybe it has something to do with Loki going missing before they left," Gulbrand suggested. "We never did find out a reason for all of that."

Liulfr nodded a little and brushed his riot of dark curls from his face. "He's got a point. Loki seems the type to throw a huge fit just to stay out of training for a while," Liulfr said.

"I don't know," Astrild said. "Loki didn't seem thrilled to be leaving Asgard."

"Probably acting," Gulbrand said. "Like he did that time that he pretended as if he didn't know who glued Gaut's sword into the scabbard."

Sif frowned. Normally she would have immediately just agreed. It was easy to agree with them about something like the little pranks Loki pulled to earn just a little goodwill. Especially when he wasn't around. But what Sigyn had said was still fresh in her head. And she remembered the incident that they were talking about and, though she was pretty sure Loki had done it, there hadn't been any sort of proof to pin him to the act. "You know... you never actually proved Loki did that," Sif said.

"Oh, he did it," Gaut said. "He had that annoying smirk you want to punch off his face that he has every time he thinks he's going to get away with something."

"Sif's right, though," Astrild said. "Nobody saw Loki anywhere near your sword or scabbard the whole day."

"Probably used his witchery," Gaut grumbled unhappily.

Hogun sighed. "This was literally over a year ago. Can't we move on yet?" he asked.

"I had to get a whole new sword and scabbard commissioned!" Gaut said angrily. "Do you know how expensive that is for us who don't have rich lords for fathers?"

"Yes," Astrild said. "Stop acting like you're the only commoner in the class, Gaut. It's annoying," he said, looking over his shoulder at the other boy. "I didn't even get a sword passed down to me. My father's not a warrior at all like yours is."

Fandral popped up off the bench. "Alright! Let's change the subject before this turns into another one of those arguments that never have any winners, shall we? I'm too tired for a drawn-out debate."

"Agreed," Dagr said. "Food?" After a few comments back and forth, they all agreed and headed to the recruit's dining hall to have a hearty lunch.

As the group of them wandered into the long hall, they noticed Sigmund, the purveyor of exotic meats in Asgard, heaving a large animal of some sort onto the spit. It looked a bit like a horse but wasn't large enough and had long curling horns. "What's that?" Dagr asked as they got closer to the creature.

"It's called a Tabrin's False Deer," Sigmund said. "From a remote plain in Alfheim. This one had a broken leg when I found her."
"How do you travel so much, Sigmund?" Fandral asked. "I'd think that the Bifrost would be going off all the time with how often you travel, but it doesn't."

Sigmund smiled. "That would be a trade secret, young one," Sigmund said. "I don't enjoy staying in one place for long. Going on hunts eases those desires."

"Makes sense to me," Hogun said.

"When Thor returns, we should all go on a hunt," Dagr said. "Welcome him home properly."

"And what would we hunt?" Astrild asked as they went to take their usual seats on the left side of the building. "There's hardly much in Asgard worth it. A few boars, some wolves... we've done those before."

Fandral hooked an arm around Astrild's shoulders. "Well, we'll just have to think of something, Astrild. There are plenty of beasts in the nine we've yet to try for!"

"Who says you'll be allowed to leave Asgard?" Sif asked.

"As Prince, I'm sure Thor could get access to the Bifrost," Dagr said.

"You're assuming he wants to go on a hunt," Hogun said.

Dagr looked affronted. "Who wouldn't want to go on a hunt?"

"Well, it's not as fun since we have to go to with chaperones all the time," Astrild said. They hadn't yet been declared skilled enough by Odin to allow his heirs to go out on hunts without supervision. Although they were definitely past the age where most young boys would be expected to be perfectly capable of such a thing.

"Well, that's true," Dagr admitted.

"Maybe Odin will finally ease up on that," Gaut said. "He has to at some point, right?"

"One would think," Liulfr said. "But... I mean... Thor is crowned Prince. Kind of more important than us."

"Maybe we should figure out what we'd want to hunt and where first," Gulbrand said. "Then we can try and get permission to do it."

"We'll need something really interesting to get Thor's attention," Liulfr said. "Something with teeth that would be a challenge."

"Sigmund!" Gulbrand called. Sigmund, who had been putting several braces of fanged and antlered rabbits on a table, looked up. "What sort of beast would you go hunting if you were us?"

Sigmund seemed to think about that for a moment. "I suppose it depends on how much of a challenge you're looking for. A basan is quite dangerous as it breathes fire. A jue yuan which can be quite clever and strong. A bilgesnipe would probably be a bit beyond you yet, but that is always a good hunt. Various sorts of dog and wolf-like creatures throughout the realms... how far are you looking to be going for this hunt?"

"We're not sure yet," Gulbrand said. "We were just looking for ideas."

"Ah, well, there are a great many things that could be hunted for a great many reasons," Sigmund said. "You could easily spend all your lives looking for beasts to hunt. If you come up with any
more requirements than just 'something to hunt,' let me know, and I'm sure I can think up something for you."

"That would be very appreciated, and we'll keep it in mind," Fandral said.

Sigmund nodded and finished unloading the various animals he'd hunted down from the sled he'd brought them in on before leaving. "He's a great hunter, but he's so strange..." Gulbrand said. "I haven't been able to figure him out..."

"I like him," Liulfr said.

"I didn't say I didn't like him," Gulbrand said.

"Anyway," Sif interrupted. "Sellers of exotic meats aside, if you all want Thor to venture off on a hunt, you'd best find something worth his while," she said. "It's starting to really take a lot to catch his interest. He has Mjolnir to master still, after all. I'd think that a little more exciting than chasing after monstrous wild dogs."

"She's got a point," Dagr said. "It took us almost an hour to convince him to go to Naotun with us last time."

"He was also moping about Loki not being here," Fandral pointed out. "Hopefully, they both will be back soon, so everything will go back to how it was."

"Optimistic, Fan," Astrild said.

Fandral shrugged and picked up his mug. "I like optimism. My love life would be very sad without it," he said with a grin.

"Despite it, you mean," Astrild said without missing a beat. Fandral gave his best friend a shove that nearly toppled him even as the others sitting around the table laughed at the quip.

"Shut up, Flower," Fandral said, pulling out the old nickname from when they were much younger, and their teacher mistook Astrild's name for that of a kind of flower that the Queen had planted all over the public gardens and thereby had assumed Astrild was a girl. It probably wouldn't have been so bad if said teacher hadn't then explained her thought process and the flower mistake.

Astrild elbowed his friend in the ribs with a pink face. "I told you to stop with that!"

"It suits you," Fandral teased.

Astrild made a face, and the two of them devolved into a tussle that took them both to the floor. Sif sighed, "I would have thought you two were too tired to wrestle more."

"He started it!"

Haldorr shifted to avoid getting yanked off the bench while the two boys fought on the floor behind him. "How long do you think before it's done?" he asked, eyeing the roasting deer-like creature hungrily.

"Probably hours yet," Dagr said. "It only just got put on."

"We could always go out to eat," Liulfr said.

Sif frowned. "I don't want to go out," she said. She had just gone out with Sigyn that morning.
"You don't have to come," Gaut pointed out.

Sif narrowed her eyes. Why'd he have to say it like that? Just because she was a girl and turned their class of ten into an odd eleven didn't mean he had to be so rude. They were supposed to be classmates. "Don't make me toss you into the dirt, Gaut."

"One pair fighting on the ground should be enough," Hogun said.

"Yeah, Sif'll probably give you a black eye, Gaut. She's slippery," Haldorr said.

Sif was momentarily taken aback by the defense of Haldorr since he was usually one of the bigger pains. Her surprise was quickly morphed into annoyance, though when Gaut just laughed. "That's because you're not as good as me, Hal. I wouldn't go down so easy," he said with a huge, cocky grin.

Haldorr scowled. "You're not any better than me. We get the same ranks all the time."

"Not all the time," Gaut argued. "And Tyr's said I'm definitely better close range than you are. You do all that range fighting with your pike. I could definitely hold my own. Especially against a girl-"

Gaut went flying back as Sif punched him in the mouth. He cried out and ended up flat on his back as Sif stood from her seat. "Don't seem that much better to me," Sif said nastily before turning and leaving the hall. She didn't have to nor want to deal with the boys right then. It was frustrating that no matter how well she did in her own rankings, they all just assumed they would definitely best her.

Sif heard Astrild and Hogun call to her but didn't bother to even look. They were nicest about her place in the class, but she didn't have the patience for even them right then. Sif wasn't even sure where she was going other than away from the boys. It was at times like this she really missed Thor the most. He would have taken her side. He'd never laughed at her for wanting to be a warrior. He hadn't even hesitated to say he could see her fighting alongside them.

Thraell paused in his path from the bathing chambers to his own when he saw his baby brother, Jarl, staring out of the window to where their father's observatory was. Thraell wiped some more droplets of water off his bare chest as he approached where Jarl was sitting. Jarl had been staring off into space quite a lot lately. Everyone had noticed, and, although their Father hadn't made any mention of it, Thraell knew that the behavior was odd enough to cause some worry. "Brother?"

Jarl actually gave a start and turned his head sharply. "Thraell! I didn't know you were back."

"I have been back almost an hour," Thraell said with his eyebrow up. He had even walked right past where Jarl was sitting when he came in the door after returning from the unplanned class he'd been roped into teaching. "Something on your mind?"

"Just... I mean... kind of?" Jarl said as he picked at a knot in the table that he was sitting at.

Thraell hummed a little and wiped the water from the back of his neck and shoulders. "Kind of? How can you 'kind of' have something on your mind? That's not really a question that has a middle answer." Jarl picked at the knot again and refused to look up from the table. "Jarl," Thraell said in a sing-song tone. The elder son of Heimdall leaned over and gently poked his brother in the side and then again in a different spot, ignoring the batting from Jarl as he kept repeating the motion. "Come on... tell Brother what's keeping you so occupied."

"Stop it, Thraell!"
"Tell me, and I will."

"Brother!"

Jarl recoiled and batted at his brother's hand more fiercely, but Thraell had a longer reach and was able to easily follow, using his other hand to poke at an unprotected spot if Jarl managed to block the first. "You can't win, little brother! You best tell me now!"

"Tyrant! It's none of your business!"

"Don't you realize yet everything you do is my business?" Thraell asked as he managed to hook his arm around Jarl's neck and pull him close. Jarl yelped and struggled, but Thraell had the advantage. "Come, come, surely it's not so horrible to confide in your brother!"

"You wouldn't say that if you had to confide in you!" Jarl said before managing to squirm enough to get his head out of the lock that Thraell had him in.

Thraell snorted and put his hands on his hips. "Now you're just being dramatic. I am an excellent secret keeper, and you know it."

Jarl stuck his tongue out at his brother and ran a hand through his dark braids that kept his hair somewhat tamed. "Brute."

"Ow," Thraell said insincerely with a hand on his chest. "You wound me so. And after I so caringly took notice of your distraction too."

Jarl rolled his honey-colored eyes. "Now who's being dramatic?"

Thraell just flashed a grin. "I believe still you." Jarl looked amazingly unimpressed. "Oh, come now, Jarl... everyone has noticed you're acting off. Why even Karl has noticed your moping, and you know how oblivious he can be."

"He'd smack you if he were here," Jarl said.

The eldest son of Heimdall just snorted. "The day I fear Karl is the day I hang up my armor," Thraell said. "Now. In all seriousness, what is bothering you?" Thraell asked, dropping the teasing tone finally. "Because something clearly is."

Jarl was quiet and looked away from his brother. Thraell was not the most patient of Heimdall's sons (that went to Jarl himself), but the eldest resolved to give Jarl as much time as he could. After what felt like at least five entire minutes of waiting, Jarl sighed heavily. "Nothing's... bothering me... per se."

"Oh no?"

"No... it's just," Jarl sighed again. "Have you ever liked someone?"

Thraell could almost feel the gears in his brain grind to a halt. Oh! Oh. *Ooooh*. He had not anticipated that. "... I have," he said even as his brain rapidly re-contextualized all the previous times he'd seen Jarl staring off at nothing. Thraell had assumed Jarl had been upset not... well, lovesick. "Why do you ask?"

Jarl's embarrassment flashed across his expression. "It's just... I think I might, but I don't... I don't *know* if I do or not. So, how do you know it wasn't just... ya know..." Jarl made a vague hand gesture instead of trying to verbalize whatever Thraell supposedly 'knew' he was referring to.
Thraell assumed Jarl meant that he wasn't sure how serious his own feelings were.

"Ah," Thraell said. He took a moment to think and then sat down beside his brother. "Well, the first person I felt that sort of thing for was an Alfr girl who came to study under Eir for a time. She was so beautiful... just absolutely stunning with her bronzed skin and golden hair that hung to her waist. I couldn't quite stop myself from trying to get close to her incessantly. I probably made a nuisance of myself, honestly."

Thraell smiled a little as he remembered how at the time, he'd been entirely too oblivious about how annoyingly persistent he'd been in his excitement over his first crush. "She was polite about it but also about five hundred years older than me, so... she wasn't terribly interested in me like I was in her."

"So, nothing happened?" Jarl asked.

"Well, not really," Thraell admitted. "But, that doesn't mean that I didn't adore her. It wasn't just that she was pretty, although she very much was. I liked her laugh and her smile, and she didn't talk down to me even though I was younger. I just wanted to be around her because of who she was. The things she would tell me about her home and her studies... she made them interesting to me even though I've never had a huge interest in the healing arts. That's how you know it's not just infatuation, brother. Do you like this girl because of her looks or because of who she is? The things she does and says?"

Jarl seemed thoughtful. "I... I think it's more than looks," he finally said. He seemed a little confused but soldiered on, "I don't even really think about if people look good or not. I don't think I have ever thought about anyone that way, which I know is weird, but I thought it was like how General Tyr said he doesn't like anybody like that every time someone tries to court him. But then this happened, and I just... it's something else."

"Well, sounds to me like it's more than just physical," Thraell said. He wasn't terribly surprised to hear his brother didn't seem attracted to many people. Part of why he had assumed Jarl's trouble was something else in the first place was how little he seemed interested in physical looks or acts of affection. Thraell had even asked Tyr specifically to have that discussion with Jarl when his little brother seemed to finally notice and be bothered by the fact that he had no interest in gossiping with others his age about sex and relationships. It had seemed to do both of them good to share their mutual disinterest in that facet of social interactions.

"But that's just it," Jarl said. "Now I think about it, and it's strange," he said. "I've never thought about it before, but now I do, but it's only with..." He broke off with a glance at his older brother, obviously still not willing to spill the identity of who was driving him to such distraction.

Thraell hummed. "I see. So now that you like this girl you've been thinking about that sort of thing. Well, there's nothing wrong with that."

"But General Tyr said he didn't even think about that with the lady he loved!" Jarl said. "And everyone knows that he wanted to marry her and gave up the throne for her!" Thraell knew that was an exaggeration and simplification. Very few people knew actually knew the circumstances behind that, but he wasn't about to correct his brother about it right then.

"Not everyone is the same, Jarl," Thraell said. "Some people never feel those urges; some only feel it for certain special people. Neither is wrong. How could it be?"

"I just... I thought..."
Thraell reached over to wrap an arm around his little brother. "Don't worry. There's nothing wrong with you. Although now I think it's time we had a different sort of talk..."

Jarl's face went aghast. "No! Absolutely not!" he sprung up immediately.

"Now, Jarl, when two people love each other very much-

"Stop it!" Jarl spun on his heel and ran from the room. Thraell cackled with amusement and resolved to tie his little brother down and force him to endure that talk sometime in the near future. Thraell had been forced to go through it as had Karl. It was only fair Jarl do so as well. "You're evil!" Jarl shouted from further back in the house.

That was not nice, their Father's voice floated through his head as placid and even-keeled as ever.

Thraell's grin grew wider, and he looked out of the window at the observatory where Heimdall was stationed as usual. "I'm his brother, I'm not meant to be nice to him."

Heimdall's sigh was audible. Don't scar him too badly.

"I would never!" Thraell said. His grin fell a little. "Do you know what girl's caught his eye then?"

There was a moment of silence. I'm aware of who he's been mooning over, yes. He'll tell us himself when he's ready, Heimdall said. Be patient. First crushes are not always easy.

Thraell snorted. "Don't I know..."

In Atzlan, Loki seemed to be struggling to find some sort of equilibrium again. It had been almost a week now since Sleipnir had been born, and Loki was allowed to start getting out of bed again. The first thing he did, of course, was to go to reassure Ofnir that he was, in fact, perfectly alright. The wyvern practically kidnapped Loki the moment he came into view, wrapping his wings around Loki and drawing him close. Loki had been incredibly amused and treated his pet to hours of long-overdue affection that had Ofnir purring in pleasure.

Thor was also amused and found a nearby spot on a giant step to sit and watch as Ofnir curled his massive body around his owner. Thor was convinced that Ofnir saw Loki as a mother figure but knew better than to mention it aloud. Not with how unpredictable Loki's moods currently were. Sometimes he didn't seem to notice or care about the title, and other times it would send him into a spiraling dark place or raging at whoever said it. Thor supposed it perfectly exemplified his brother's complicated feelings about the situation, at least.

Loki curled up against Ofnir's side and let the wyvern cuddle with him in a way that he hadn't let too many others do since he was assaulted. "He certainly looks happy to be with you again," Thor commented as he watched Huld crawl with her many hands across Ofnir's spine to reach the top of his head.

"I am happy to see him," Loki said, rubbing Ofnir's long neck that curved down and around. After a brief moment, Loki's expression twisted, and he quickly put his face into the bulk of Ofnir's neck, his arm wrapped around the wyvern's deadly snake-like head.

"Loki?"

Loki shook his head without looking up. "It's nothing," he said although Thor wasn't convinced.

Thor heard strange noises like half-stifled gasps. He slid off of his perch and carefully stepped over
Ofnir's tail to reach Loki. Loki's shoulders were trembling in time with each noise, and Thor felt his heart wrench terribly. Thor hated this so much. He reached out and cautiously put a hand to Loki's shoulder.

Loki froze for a moment but didn't turn and just tightened his hold on Ofnir, who let out a low trill but accepted the hug. Huld climbed closer, little nose twitching as she sniffed in Loki's general direction. "It's alright, brother," Thor said as he rubbed between Loki's shoulder blades in comforting little circles. "It's alright."

"It's not alright," Loki said, his voice sounded strangled. "I'm a monster."

Thor froze for half a second in surprise before his brain kicked into gear again. "What? No, you're not!"

"I am! A horrid, detestable monster!"

"Loki!"

Loki's shoulders came up around his ears, and Thor wasn't sure what to do. He wasn't sure what he could do to reassure his brother that he wasn't the things he'd said but, Loki had always been difficult to convince of things he'd already decided about. Thor hesitated another moment before deciding to take a risk and wrap his arms around Loki's chest.

Loki stiffened under Thor's grip. "You're not a monster, Loki," Thor said calmly and evenly.

"... I am, though," Loki said softly. "The things I... I think about doing such horrible things."

"That doesn't mean you're a monster."

Loki shook his head. "You wouldn't say that if you knew what I thought about doing..." His voice still sounded broken and muffled despite how close Thor was. "I don't know what's wrong with me, Thor. I don't want to be like this. I don't!"

Huld scampered closer despite Ofnir's low grumble of disapproval as she walked down his face. Loki's second pet leaned down to be nearer to him and let out a little mewl for attention. Loki tilted his head just a little bit to see Huld. She mewled again, and Loki reached up to scratch her by the ears. As he did that, however, Thor caught sight of something that made his heart freeze in his chest.

Thor's hand moved like lightning and grabbed Loki's wrist. He turned it more so that the pale, delicate skin of his inner wrist was facing the light. Thor had thought it odd that Loki had been wearing sleeves despite how he always complained about the heat of Atzlan. True, they weren't tight at all, but they had covered the thin pink lines that ran across Loki's wrist with distracting patterns. The lines matched some of the ones that King Loki had shown Thor before, and it was frightening. "Loki."

Loki ripped his arm back down. "It's nothing, Thor."

"It's not nothing," Thor denied as he forced Loki to turn and face him. Loki refused to meet Thor's eyes, and his face was wet from tears. "Loki, please, talk to me!" Thor absolutely could not allow this to continue. Not when King Loki had been very clear about what it could lead to.

"I'm sorry," Loki said, burying his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, I don't even know why I did it. I don't! It was just so much, and the knife was there and-" Loki cut himself off with a broken sob, mostly muffled into his hands.
Thor was not knowledgeable about how to deal with things like this. So, instead, Thor acted mostly on instinct and pulled Loki into a hug. "It's alright. I'm not upset, Loki. I'm not. I'm just worried. I don't like seeing you hurt, Brother."

Loki was stiff in Thor's arms but slowly melted against his brother. He was still shaking and burying his face, and Thor let him. He really didn't know how to fix this. Ofnir trilled and curled tighter around them as Huld jumped down to rub against Loki's leg. Thor reached up to brush his fingers through Loki's hair. "I'm here, Loki. We'll figure this out. I promise you."

The two of them stood there for several minutes until Loki's breathing evened out a little bit, and he was able to wipe his face and look up. "I'm sorry."

"Loki, you needn't apologize," Thor said. He wiped a bit of wetness that Loki had missed away with his own hand before trying his best for a smile. "Come. This heat cannot be helping. We should go inside. Maybe get something to drink."

Loki hesitated for a moment but then nodded. "Let me just... give me a moment."

Thor agreed and backed away. Loki turned back to Ofnir even as Huld climbed up his side to all but force Loki to hold her. Loki did so with one arm while wrapping his other around Ofnir's snout. Thor waited, and Loki murmured something to Ofnir while petting him before backing away. Ofnir made to follow, but Loki held a hand up. "Stay, Ofnir. I'll be back," Loki said.

The wyvern chirped, not sounding happy, but settled back onto his haunches and just watched. Loki gave a wane smile. "Good boy," he said before turning and walking back towards the front of the pyramid. Thor glanced at Ofnir, who was shifting in his spot but obediently staying put and then moved to follow Loki.

The brothers walked in silence for a few minutes until they were midway through ascending the stairs. Loki still had Huld in his arms and was not looking up from her fur that he was petting. "... please don't tell Father."

Thor frowned. "Loki... he won't be upset with you."

Loki shook his head. "He can't know, Thor. He just can't."

Thor was caught between a rock and a hard place, as it were. He didn't want to betray his brother's trust, but at the same time, this wasn't something that Thor felt he could reasonably keep to himself. "Loki... you hurt yourself."

"I know, and I won't do it again, so you don't have to tell anyone!"

"Loki, if you don't even know why you did it... how can you promise you won't anymore?" Thor asked gently.

Loki scowled and looked away. After a long minute of climbing, he sighed. "I lied," he said so softly, Thor almost didn't hear it at all. "I... I know why I did it. But I had to Thor. I know you probably don't think that, but I did. I swear, I did!"

"Why?" Thor asked. "Why do you think you had to do it?"

"Because I would have done worse if I hadn't!" Loki snapped. He looked at Thor with wide, panic-stricken eyes. "It was late, and Sleipnir was crying, and I was just so tired, and I hated him so much that I just... I had the knife and-" Loki closed his eyes tight and buried his face in Huld's side. The ahuizotl let out a noise of protest and squirmed so that Loki was forced to drop her. "I'm sorry. I'm
sorry... now do you see why I'm a monster?"

Thor was stunned silent as he tried to process what he'd just heard. Loki sunk down into a crouch on the stairs and buried his face in his knees. Huld, which had hopped a few steps away, slowly came closer again and sniffed at Loki's arms, which were wrapped around his legs tightly. Thor slowly bent down onto one knee beside his brother. "Loki... you have been through so much. I cannot imagine how difficult it must be. But if you are hurting yourself and thinking of hurting others... we must tell someone so that they can help," Thor said.

Loki shook his head slightly. "No... once Sleipnir is with his parents, then all will be well," Loki murmured in a way that made Thor think he'd repeated it often.

"What if it isn't, though?" Thor asked.

"It will be. I know it."

Thor reached over and gently pulled at Loki's arms until his brother unwound from himself. "Loki." It took a moment, but Loki slowly looked up at Thor. His eyes were bloodshot and swollen from crying. Thor reached up to clasp a hand around Loki's neck. He felt the slight shudder that went through Loki, and ever so slowly, the muscles there under Thor's hand relaxed bit by bit. "I will not see you as weak if you tell me the truth, Brother," Thor said. "I cannot possibly ever think of you as weak."

Loki's eyes widened a bit. Thor squeezed the back of Loki's neck gently to try and reassure him more. To let Loki know that Thor truly meant every word he'd said. Tears quickly built again in Loki's eyes. "I... I don't know what's wrong with me, Thor. Everything is wrong..."

Thor brought Loki into a tight hug. "It will get better. I promise you, Loki. You will get through this hardship."

"I don't see how," Loki said although his voice was muffled by Thor's shoulder.

"By letting us help you, Loki," Thor said. "We are here for you. All of us."

Loki didn't answer and instead clung tightly to Thor. It was almost painful how much his fingers dug into Thor's shoulder and back, but the young Thunder God wasn't about to complain. After some time, Loki slowly pulled away and wiped at his face again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be causing all this fuss. It's not at all dignified."

Thor snorted. "You know I am hardly one to care about 'dignified,' Brother. And I care not if you 'cause a fuss,' as you put it." Loki didn't immediately answer, and Huld crawled back into his lap to let Loki pet her again. Thor gave his brother another few moments before helping Loki to his feet. "I think perhaps we should go find Lord Ixtlilton."

Distaste immediately crossed Loki's face. "That's not really necessary-"

"Loki, please," Thor said. "I will stay with you if you'd rather. But... I worry for you and think he might help. He hasn't failed your tests, has he?"

Loki looked up sharply. Thor gave a wry grin. "Come now, Loki, I've known you all my life. I can't imagine you trusting someone with your deepest thoughts without testing their ability to keep their mouths shut first," Thor said. Thor himself had failed a similar test spectacularly before, in his first life. Although he'd only learned about it centuries after the fact. He'd been much more careful this time around. "Did he tell anyone?"
Loki glanced away before shaking his head. "I know he couldn't have. Mother would have done something if he had...."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "What was your test?"

"That I was thinking of running away. Mother never said anything to me, so there's no way she'd heard of it," Loki said.

Thor nodded. "So, then... why won't you talk to him?"

Loki's fingers dug into his own knees. "I... it's embarrassing, Thor. And I hate talking about it."

"You hate ranking tournaments, but you do those," Thor said.

"That's different. I have to do those," Loki said with a bit of a sigh.

"I think... you might have to do this too," Thor said. Loki looked up with his eyes flaring, but Thor held up a hand. "Not because someone said you have to. But because I think it might help you with these things that are upsetting you. Nobody can make you, Loki. I just think that you should maybe give it a chance first. Especially if things are getting worse."

Loki visibly swallowed. "I feel sick when I think about it... I don't know how I'd ever say it."

"Do you want me to be with you?"

"No," Loki said immediately. "No, that would make it harder."

"Well, Lord Ixtlilton has done this sort of thing before, I think. Maybe he can suggest a way to say it. Bit by bit perhaps," Thor suggested. "But, maybe we should find something to do that would help you relax instead? We never did get a chance to go back to the library."

Loki looked up at Thor slowly. "You hate libraries."

Thor shrugged. "It's not so bad. I found some new stories last time. Did you know that Jaguars fell from the sky once?"

"... I hadn't come across that story yet, no."

"It was quite good. I shall have to try and find it again. I think you would enjoy it," Thor said. Loki didn't immediately answer, so Thor carefully helped him to his feet again. "You will feel better after you've lost yourself in a book for a while, brother. Come. You can explain things to me that I don't understand."

Thor only had to prod Loki a little more to get his brother to agree to go to the library, and they spent the next hour or so there. Then a servant came saying that their mother was looking for them. Sleipnir needed Loki's attention no matter if Loki had fully regained his calm or not.

Loki was not looking thrilled as he was handed the baby, and Thor was yet again shooed outside. But he also didn't argue, and Sleipnir seemed positively delighted to see Loki, smiling up at him and clinging to him. Thor couldn't be sure as he was being pushed out of the room at the time, but he thought he saw his brother soften at the sight. After being let back in a little while later, Thor volunteered to look after Sleipnir, which Loki seemed immensely relieved for.

Loki disappeared for a while. Thor hoped he was going to seek out Lord Ixtlilton to finally try and confide in the healer. Not knowing how long his brother might take, Thor stayed in the cooled...
room to play with his nephew, who was developing almost frighteningly quickly. Sleipnir was already rolling over on his own and crawling around. But Gerd didn't seem worried in the least. Apparently, the Noble Breeds became mobile very quickly due to their equine nature.

Sleipnir was even managing to pull himself upright with the help of whatever was solid enough - Thor included. "You're quite ambitious, nephew," Thor said as Sleipnir held on tightly to Thor's side and tried to figure out how to balance with four legs. The braces for his limbs were almost done judging by what Odin said.

Sleipnir reached up to tug at Thor's hair and managed to grab a handful of blonde locks. "Ah! Thank you ever so," Thor said as he moved his head to lessen the pain of his hair being yanked. Sleipnir giggled and then promptly fell back onto his butt, not that that seemed to bother him much.

At least it got Thor's hair out of his tiny iron-like grip, although not without some amount of pain. Thor sighed and quickly braided the chunk of hair to then push it back and hopefully make it harder for little fists to grab. While he was doing that, Sleipnir used the chance to move onto his hands and knees and start crawling. He was making a direct line for the bathroom. Thor quickly grabbed him. "Ah, ah, I was told to stay with you on the carpet. You're too adventurous for one so small, Sleipnir," Thor said as he put the baby back down in the center of the rug.

Sleipnir continued to crawl, and Thor had to get him back at least four or five times before Sleipnir stopped trying to escape. The stuffed dragon that Sleipnir liked was pulled along by its tail as Sleipnir went to the edge of Loki's bed and used that to again get onto his feet. Thor shifted closer to be able to intervene should he need to do so.

It took Sleipnir a few tries, but he managed to get his feet under him again. "Well done," Thor said as he kept his hands nearby to catch the baby should he lose what looked to be a somewhat precarious balance.

The door to the room opened, and Thor looked up to see Loki. "Loki. Back so soon?"

"I needed my journal. I've decided to let Lord Ixtlilton read some of it..." Loki said absently. Sleipnir was reaching out with one set of arms and keeping a grip of the bedspread with the other. He was wobbling a little but still standing upright. "He's getting good at that very fast..."

"He is," Thor agreed. "He doesn't seem to like sitting still."

Loki nodded and took a few steps closer. "I've noticed that as well."

"I wonder if he'll start talking so quickly too..."

Loki shrugged and reached for the black book on the side table. He reached down to where Sleipnir was reaching for him and held one of his little hands for a moment before drawing back. "I'll return soon, Sleipnir..."

Sleipnir whined, but Loki was already walking off. Thor saw his nephew let go of the bed entirely and lurch toward Loki. "Loki!" Thor moved to catch what he was sure would be a face plant otherwise, and Loki instantly turned, but both reactions were aborted as one of Sleipnir's feet managed to shift forward fast enough to stop him from falling.

Shocked, Thor saw Sleipnir take two unsteady steps before finally losing his balance. He was close enough that he managed to still catch the baby before he fell to the ground. Thor looked up at Loki, who was looking equally shocked. "I figured it would be soon but not that soon," Thor said as he
stood up with Sleipnir in his arms.

Loki was still staring but took his son as Thor handed him over. "He always shocks me..." he murmured as Sleipnir wrapped his little arms around Loki's neck.

"Seems fair since you shock everyone else," Thor said lightly. "Maybe you should take him with you."

"... I don't think it would be appropriate," Loki said although he didn't immediately put Sleipnir down either.

"Since when do you care about appropriate?" Thor asked. "He wants to be with you, and he won't understand anything yet anyway. What's the harm?"

Loki was quiet and shifted his son in his arms. He lingered there for several minutes, just holding Sleipnir before handing him back to Thor. "I'll be back. Hopefully, before too long."

Thor wasn't that surprised and nodded. "Don't worry, brother, he'll probably tire himself out soon anyway, right?"

Loki gave a false smile. "Of course."

After Loki left again, Thor glanced down at Sleipnir, who was swinging his stuffed dragon around and nearly clocking Thor in the head with it. "Well, perhaps we should go tell Grandma what you've figured out, hmm? She'll be very proud of you, you know."

Chapter End Notes

**Haldorr**- He's a marvel mention but there's really not much about him so I'm going full hog with my own thoughts about him.

**Kodama**- A kodama is a tree spirit. They can look sort of however they want to although the most iconic version that most of you probably know is the little creepy doll like spirits from Studio Ghibli's Princess Mononoke. I'm sort of using another thing that I find happens in Japanese mythology where the older the spirit is the more powerful it is, which is why Kodama the tavern owner is larger and more humanoid looking than the other spirits that hang around his/her shop. That Kodama is significantly older and more powerful than the others.

**Gaut, Liulfr, Gulbrand**- These three make out the rest of Tyr's special training class. Originally there were the ten boys: Thor, Loki, Hogun, Fandral, Dagr, Astrild, Haldorr, Gaut, Liulfr, and Gulbrand. Then Sif was added to throw off their numbers. This group of now eleven youngsters will have rolls to play in the next arc so I wanted to be sure to give you all a little glimpse of them now.

**Tabrin's False Deer**- I made this up. I wanted to use an extinct antelope type of creature but I couldn't find one I liked... so I came up with one of my own and said it came from another realm. Hey, if Marvel can make up a Bilgesnipe I can make up a pretend antelope.

**Basan**- Kind of a chicken like bird that breathes 'ghost' fire. It is from Japanese
mythology.

**Jue yuan**- Chinese creature. A monkey that lives long enough to become a dark blue ape and proceeds to kidnap women to mate with. Ya know... like gentlemen... If the woman can't get pregnant the monkeys keep them until the women turn into jue yuan themselves. If the women do get pregnant then the Jue yan let the women go again to have their babies.

**The ranks**- The ranks that the group is referring to is how they are basically graded on how skilled they are figured out through a series of sparring matches and exhibiting their various talents.

**Jarl**- He's also going to have an important role in the next arc including that crush he's alluding to. The word he doesn't know for his sexual preference however, is Pansexual.

**Sleipnir's Progress**- Normally quite a lot of creatures are able to get up and walk around pretty quick after birth. Sleipnir, known for his speed, I thought would follow this trend. His advancement is going to slow a bit after he gets the braces though.

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