One Hundred Steps There

by Icemaidenstory

Summary

Prompted on Norsekink

Prompt:

Thor and Loki (both are adults) are secret lovers. They've been in relationship for a while, and they really love each other.

One day a delegation from Vanaheim arrives. Their relationship with Asgard hasn't been good lately; while their king is loyal to Odin, there are people in his kingdom that want to be independent from Asgard. Most people know that it won't do much good to Vanaheim, but a group of revolutionists keep spreading their ideas.

They manage to find some more-or-less good decision. But then the old king sees Loki and secretly admires the young, beautiful prince for hours. He can't help but suggest Odin an arranged marriage, saying that the presence of an Asgardian consort in Vanaheim can make things better. He's a widower, already has heirs, so it doesn't matter to him if Loki gives him children. Odin thinks that it makes sense. He announces that Loki is to marry the king of Vanaheim.

Rest of prompt in notes.

Notes
Loki is shocked, Thor is furious and possessive. Loki is his! He was even going to propose! Angry, Odin sees what's going on and takes his sons for a private talk. He makes it clear that Loki will marry the foreign king, and that Odin would've never approved and allowed any legal union between Thor and Loki. But he offers them a bargain; if Loki marries the king, when said king dies, Loki can come back and Odin won't stand on the way of his and Thor's relationship; if they won't change their mind, of course. But they can't see each other until Loki's husband's death. And if Odin suspects that Loki somehow helped the old king to die sooner, Loki and Thor will never see each other again; the same happens if Loki is too difficult and uncooperative.

Thor and Loki are devastated. Loki marries the old king and is taken to the realm of his husband. The king is fascinated with Loki's young body and likes to strip him naked and touch him everywhere.

Years later the old king is still alive and still admires his young consort. One of his adult children (who is even older than Loki) makes Loki's life even harder since they've always disliked him, which is mutual. Loki is depressed, he misses Thor so much it hurts.

There are more years of miserable life for him. But then his husband finally dies. At first Loki is glad, but then he's terrified to come back to Asgard, afraid to find Thor engaged or in relationship with someone. What if Thor doesn't love him anymore after all these years of them being apart and not keeping in touch? What if Thor no longer wants him after Loki belonged to another man?
The room was almost empty. Boxes of clothes, jewels and books were stacked all over the floor. Loki stood in the middle of it all and tried to decide whether he would need the book in his hands the moment he got home, or if he could survive having it get lost among the others.

A knock on the door caught his attention and he looked up.

It was Camtan. He smiled at the sight before him and edged into the room.

"Packing away the last of it all?" He asked.

"Just the important things. The servants shouldn't touch my books, they might get hurt if they are packed together incorrectly." Loki said.

Camtan just smiled sadly.

"You're really going." He said. "After all the fun we had. What am I going to do now?"

"Visit." Loki said. "And I'll visit. I still have those charities that I patron. I will come back now and then."

"I know. I'm still going to miss you." Camtan said. "Are you finished? It's time for lunch, then goodbye forever."

"Stop being melodramatic." Loki said with a smile. "I am done. The book can be packed."

He set the book down into the box at his feet and followed Camtan to the dining room.

Lunch was simple. All the meals were simple at the moment, until Dorgen was crowned, the palace was in mourning. Loki ate with the three princes but said little. He had enough worries of his own.

After they had eaten, the three sons of Dimcken escorted Loki, King’s Consort, to the Bifrost Site in the Hall of Greetings.

The open end at the far side of the hall seemed vaguely ominous. Loki had been gone for two hundred and forty seven years, eight months and nine days. That was a long time for anyone.

Would Thor still love him? Never mind that, would Thor even be able to look at him, knowing what he had been forced to do here?

He was a hundred steps away from finding out.

Chapter End Notes

Just so everyone is on the same page.

1) Loki doesn't know he's Jotun. Nor will he find out in this story. You may consider
him fully Aesir which is what everyone else does, including him.

2) Intersexed Aesir exist due to Jotun interbreeding over the years. They are rare but not stigmatized.
Loki thought back to the moment he had lost his heart.

"You reckless buffoon! That was my favourite throwing knife! Father gave it to me!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry brother! I did not mean to drop it! I only wanted to look at it!"

"Why do you have to look with your hands?! Everyone else looks with their eyes!"

"I said I was sorry!"

"I don't care! It's at the bottom of the lake! The lake is so deep it will be lost forever!"

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"No, I know that look. Thor no! NONONONONO!!" *Splash!!!* "Oh great, you jumped in, you idiot. THOR!"

*Surface splash!!*

"Thor! stop it and get back in the boat right now!"

"No brother! I will find it for you!"

"Thor!"

*Splash!!*

"Oh Thor."

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"Thor?"

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*Triumphant surface splash!!*

"Thor!"
"Brother!"

"You found it? You actually found it?!!"

"Of course brother *pant* I had to. It belongs to you."

"Get back in the boat you...you...you big moron."

"Brother are you alright?"

"Yes."

"Your eyes look funny."

"They're fine, stop looking."

"Loki?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry I dropped your knife."

"I forgive you."

"Loki?"

"Yes."

*Kiss*

It was a golden moment. The most special moment in the whole of time itself. Thor was dripping wet and spreading the dampness through Loki's shirt, the boat had rocked wildly and almost spilled them out, and Loki accidentally put his boot in the fish bucket. But still it was the single greatest moment of his life.
Two Steps

Chapter Summary

But less than three nights later their world had changed forever.

"I'm so sorry about the raiders. They are causing such a lot of trouble. I'm grateful that your Heimdall has told my men where to find them. We will of course seek them out immediately." King Dimcken said to Odin as they sat around the table.

He had come to discuss Vanaheim's continual support of Asgard. At least, support in name. The Vanir people were beginning to mutter to themselves about why they should be considered a vassal when they had a royal family in their own right.

The most recent example of this frustration took the form of raids in Asgard. There were more than a few secret pathways, and more than a few people who knew about them. The rebels were rallying more people to their cause every day.

Odin Allfather sat and smiled a tight, political smile. He knew that old Dimcken was loyal, but his people were young and hasty, they did not know the Aesir and few had ever visited Asgard. They did not remember why Vanaheim was originally brought under Asgard's protection, or what could happen if they broke away.

"I am grateful for your efforts in this regard. Surely there must be something more we can do to soothe the people? I'm afraid that hunting down the raiders may turn more of the population against you." He said in his deep rumble.

"I fear such a thing also. There must be a way to show the people that the Aesir are welcome for a reason." King Dimcken said. "I remember when you married Queen Frigga, how before her the Vanir were not as welcome in Asgard. She turned their minds to peace soon enough."

"That she did. Frigga is a remarkable woman, and her presence in Asgard's court won the people's hearts." Odin said.

"It is a pity you have no daughters. My eldest son and heir is already married, but my middle son is still available." King Dimcken mused.

"Sadly I was not fortunate enough." Odin said. "I do not suppose Loki could be considered? He is young, but clever, and as the second son he could be quite useful."

"Sadly my second son would like children, and he is not interested in the sights of the male form. I would not force him to wed under such circumstances." King Dimcken said. "Not to quell the unrest in my people that may only last a generation."

"That is fair." Odin said. "Although if it is children he wants, Loki is capable."

King Dimcken's eyebrows raised. "I was not aware." He said. "I don't suppose he looks particularly feminine?"

"You may judge for yourself tonight at the feast. He will be there, along with Thor." Odin said.
The moment King Dimcken laid eyes on Loki of Asgard, he knew he had to have him.

He was not feminine at all, but that only made him more pleasing to the King's eye. The Aesir were mostly tall with large shoulders and thick muscles. Loki was slender, like a Vanir. But his dark hair and green eyes made him look... exotic.

King Dimcken had to remind himself not to stare.

"Do you think your son would like him?" Odin asked calmly as they watched Loki talking to a group of Vanir nobles.

"I'm afraid he would not." King Dimcken breathed. "I would hate to put them together for millennia for the sake of a generation, as I said."

"Pity." Odin said. "Frigga's presence was the best thing that could have happened for the Vanir in Asgard."

"I suppose." King Dimcken said, and hesitated. He had to play this line carefully.

"Hmm?" Odin said, eyes still watching his youngest son as Loki managed to outrage one Vanir and make the other three laugh loudly.

"If it were for the sake of a generation, I suppose I could always marry him."

"Hmm - what?"

"I am old, Odin Allfather, near my time. I have perhaps three centuries left in me. That should be long enough to endear the Vanir people to Asgard's royal family, should it not? And Loki is young, he can come home and find a love of his own in time. With three grown sons I have no need for an heir, so whether he births or not is not of any consequence and brings no pressure."

King Dimcken stopped then. He did not want to seem too eager, but if that boy did not wind up in his bed then he would certainly go mad. Loki was beautiful, a rare treasure. Did Odin not know what he had?

Odin appeared to be dwelling on it. He sat silently and watched his younger son make his way through the room.

"I think that would be an acceptable arrangement." He said at last.

King Dimcken nodded in reply.

"The details can be worked out in good time." He said and drank deeply.

Loki was his, it was just a matter of waiting.
Loki remembered his last day with Thor. If he had known at the time that they would not see each other again for two and a half centuries then he would have done something to make it more special.

"Loki, Thor, come in. I have something to tell you both." Odin said as his two sons entered his workroom.

"You understand that the Vanir visit was to strengthen ties between our two peoples?"

"Yes father." Loki said. Thor nodded.

"Well a solution has been proposed, one that I have agreed to, as there is a high probability of success."

"That's wonderful Father." Thor boomed. "Now that they are gone we have something we wish to tell you."

"Don't be so hasty Thor, I haven't finished yet." Odin said. "It occurred to King Dimcken and myself that the best way to strengthen ties between our nations is a royal marriage."

"Marriage." Loki said, his face was so shocked for a moment Odin thought he had guessed his own fate. "I didn't know King Dimcken even had any daughters."

Thor too looked stricken. Odin looked back and forth between them where they sat, leaning slightly towards one another.

"He doesn't. This marriage does not require the production of children, nor does it have to be eternal. You Loki, will marry King Dimcken until his natural death. Then you may come home."

"WHAT?!!" Loki and Thor shouted together, so much in unison that Odin heard only one voice.

"Father you can't! Not Loki! He's..." Thor trailed off helplessly. Odin frowned as the two of them looked at one another. "I love him." Thor said. "I want to marry him."

This declaration echoed in the room. The silence that followed was heavy and thick.

Odin stared at his sons in shock. Surely not? There was no moral objection, and Loki was intersexed and presumed fertile, but even so, he had never thought his two sons would fall in love.

"I have already agreed to it." He said.

Loki looked horrified.

"He's old enough to be my great grandfather. Older!" He gasped.

"That is the point." Odin said. "His natural life has only a few centuries left, you will be home before
"No. Father. NO. I won't." Loki said stubbornly.

"Loki's too young anyway, his majority -"

"Is two months away." Odin cut in. "By the time the wedding arrangements have been made he will be of age."

"No. NO! I love Thor! I belong -"

"You belong where I say you belong. You are a Prince of Asgard. Your life is not your own! If I say you are to marry then you will marry! And if I hear one more argument about this I will ban you from ever returning!" Odin shouted. "Do you not realise how important this treaty is?! Do you?!!"

“Father please.” Thor whispered, his eyes desperate.

Odin looked back and forth between his sons. They both looked miserable. He sighed heavily.

"If Loki marries King Dimcken and lives with him in Vanaheim until his *natural* death, without making trouble or causing mischief, and without being difficult, if he strengthens the ties of our two peoples as this marriage is meant to, then when he returns you may marry. If you still want to.” He conceded.

Neither one of them looked any happier. Thor looked as though Odin had crushed his very soul. Loki looked frightened and apprehensive.

"You give us your word?” He said in a quiet voice.

Thor turned to face him with a look of horror.

"Loki you can't - " He began.

"I will come back to you." Loki said with tears in his eyes. "I will do my duty as a Prince of Asgard and then I will be yours forever."

Thor was shaking his head stubbornly.

"Loki no.” He said.

"If you cannot be mature about this Thor I will have you locked up until after the wedding. This is the bargain that I make you both, if you argue further then I will part you forever."

Thor bowed his head in defeat and turned to Loki.

"I will love you every day that you are gone. I will love you for all time. I will wait for you, and when you come home. I will be there at the Bifrost to hold you in my arms." He vowed, holding Loki's hands tightly in his. Odin found that he was reminded disturbingly of a primitive wedding.

"I will come back to you." Loki whispered. "I will always love you, no matter what happens, never doubt that I love you."

Odin coughed to break the moment and turned once more to his younger son.

There are a number of wedding preparations you need to study, as well as the common Vanir customs. No one will expect you to be an expert in everything, but you can make a good first
impression if you start now. Tomorrow morning, King Dimcken's own Master of Ceremonies will arrive to teach you what you need to know. I expect you to be in the great hall to greet him at eight."

"Yes Father." Loki whispered. He looked pale.

Odin looked back and forth between them. "Have you two lain together?" He asked suddenly.

The blush on their respective faces answered him even before Thor spoke.

"No Father, we were going to wait until our wedding."

"Good, from this moment on Loki is to have a chaperone."

"What?!" Loki exclaimed. "Why?! I have accepted my fate."

"To stop rash actions." Odin said sternly.

"Swear it thrice." Thor said suddenly. "You have made us a bargain, swear to it thrice."

Loki looked shocked at Thor's audacity. Odin was both mildly insulted and faintly impressed.

"I swear that if Loki marries King Dimcken, is a proper spouse to him until the end of his natural life and does everything he can to strengthen the ties between the Aesir and the Vanir people, then when he comes home he may marry you if you both still desire." Odin said. "This I swear, once. This I swear twice. This I swear thrice."

Thor reluctantly let go of Loki's hands.

"I will be waiting." He promised again.

It was the last time they would see each other. Loki was kept for two months with his chaperone and King Dimcken's master of Ceremonies, learning everything he must to be the King's Consort. Thor spent his time in the training yards and with his friends, trying to resist the urge to smash his way into Loki's bedroom and steal him away.
Four Steps

Chapter Summary

Customs and Clothing

The Vanir did not wear trousers. Not unless they were warriors going into battle. No, first they wore an undergarment; a thin, sleeveless robe that fell to mid-thigh. It was made of light material such as cotton or very fine wool, depending on the season.

Over this came the Long Robe. A woven wool garment with long sleeves, cinched at the wrists and waist. On men the skirt hung straight down, on women it was flared outwards.

Over this was the middle garment. It had flared sleeves which ended at the elbow and the skirt fell to mid-thigh. There was a time, the Master of Ceremonies informed Loki, that the sleeves were also cinched, giving them a kind of puffy look. Not so the fashion of today.

The over garment was the final one for wearing indoors. It had no sleeves and hung in two halves at the front, so that the middle garment could be seen beneath. The royal family wore ones made of silk, with delicate embroidery upon it.

Outdoors of course there was a coat and a cloak, depending upon the weather. The Vanir did not wear leather on their clothes, only their shoes, and only outdoors. Indoors they wore slippers made of soft pelts from their herds.

Loki’s measurements were sent to Vanheim so that he would have a proper wardrobe when he arrived. The Master of Ceremonies made several notes to dress the young Prince in soft greys and greens, with black and emerald accents to his stitching. He would look best in those colours.

For two months Loki sat and listened daily to the things he was meant to know.

Most of the time was taken up by the wedding ceremony. He would wear the traditional bridal dress. He would be carried on a chair by four of the King’s most trusted friends. They would try to stop him from reaching the King but he would duck under their arms in a choreographed move and take the King’s hand, proving his determination. Once he had done this they would back off and allow the marriage.

The Master of Ceremonies, who not once revealed his name, made Loki practice the movements over and over again until he dreamed them in his sleep.

The ceremony would involve hand-clasping. Loki would say the ritual words in response to the question of whether he wished to wed. Then there would be a feast until sunrise. At sunrise the happy couple would be escorted to the bridal chamber. The one used by all Vanir nobles for their first night. Traditionally the family provided sheets for the new couple. The weavers were right now preparing a brand new set for Loki to lie on. They would be the finest that could be made.

The curtains would be closed, but the crowd would still wait outside to ensure that the couple consummated their vows and thus began their marriage with the new day. The curtains would be drawn back when they were finished and each of them would be asked in turn whether they had
consummated their marriage. After both had answered yes, they would be left to sleep.

Loki took all of this in with a slightly detached manner. It was hard to believe that this applied to him at all. For two months it felt like a lesson from his tutors, an example of a foreign court.

Until the day he came of age, and left home to get married.
On the day of his departure, Loki had held his mother tightly and struggled not to cry. Frigga had given him as much advice as she could about her former home. She had sworn over and over again to visit him once he was settled.

"You will be alright my son." She whispered. "Make us proud."

Odin had drawn Loki into a hug which felt strangely foreign. Ever since he had announced Loki's betrothal their relationship had been full of awkwardness and silence. Loki returned the hug anyway. He wasn't about to let anything get in the way of his true wedding to Thor. He had been perfect with the Master of Ceremonies, and not once complained about having a chaperone. When the time came, Odin would have no possible objection to Loki and Thor's union.

Then it was time to go. Loki turned away from his parents and his home, and prepared himself to face his new future and role.

He could not stop the single tear that trickled down his face as the Bifrost activated and he was pulled away.

King Dimcken was having second thoughts. In the last two months he had not laid eyes on Loki once and he was starting to doubt that he could have seen such a beauty. What if his memory was better than the real thing? He’d have to marry the boy anyway, or risk angering Odin.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. He knew what he’d seen. Loki was magnificent. The memory of him was like an elixir to Dimcken’s loins. Soon Loki would be here, and he would be the King’s.

The Hall of Greetings was packed with nobles, all of them wanted a glimpse of the Aesir Prince who would sit on the throne by their King’s side. For two months Vanaheim had spoken of nothing else. Very few of them had ever seen Loki, they visited the Aesir court rarely over the years and had only rumours to whisper among themselves.

Rumours that he was beautiful, graceful, dark and slender, was unlike his brother. Rumours that he ate little, or lots, that he liked this type of flower, that kind of wine. He was a mystery, an enigma. King Dimcken could not have hoped for a better start to Loki’s time in Vanaheim, the people were intrigued.

The light of the Bifrost appeared, and the nobility froze in place, eyes locked onto the landing site.

The light faded, and Loki stood there next to the Master of Ceremonies, who had been away all this time.

He was just as beautiful as Dimcken remembered. Soft black hair, stunning green eyes. It was all the
King could do not to ravish him right here in the Hall.

Dimcken stepped forwards and watched as Loki bowed to him.

“Welcome, Loki of Asgard.” He said, trying to make his smile kind and not predatory.

“I am pleased to be here.” Loki said, a little woodenly, but not overly so.

King Dimcken had no illusions about Loki’s feelings. The boy would be reluctant, after all he was only just of age and Dimcken was far, far older. But he would do his duty, and that was all the old King wanted.

That and to peel back the unflattering Aesir clothing the boy was wearing. But that would have to wait.

The King extended an arm and watched as Loki carefully took it.

“Allow me to escort you to the guest chambers.” Dimcken said. “You will of course move into the Queen’s Chambers after our wedding.”

“Thank you.” Loki answered softly as behind him the servants started to gather up his belongings to take them to what would soon be his new chambers.

Feeling as though he had won a battle against an entire army single-handedly, Dimcken escorted Loki from the Hall.

Loki was already having trouble. He had barely met the Vanir King at the last feast, preferring to spend his time talking to the younger nobles that had accompanied him instead. Now that he was able to look at him properly he felt as though he had swallowed a ball of lead.

The man was tall, but had a slight hunch to his shoulders that tall men often get with age. He was extremely thin and had long, almost freakishly long, fingers. His skin looked like paper, but his hand felt like leather. His hair was wispy and grew from around his head, rather than on top of it. His teeth were yellowed with age.

Soon those hands would be all over him. Soon those fingers would…would….touch him. And he could not refuse. There was nothing he could do at all. He had to go along with the King’s desires or he would never see Thor again.

He told himself over and over as they walked down the corridors that he could survive this, that it was not forever, just for now, that Thor would be waiting and that Loki would not let him down.

Packed with Loki’s belongings was Thor’s gift to him for his coming of age, delivered by Frigga and chosen with love.

A knife, a twin to his favourite so that he had an even pair. It must have been ordered months ago. It certainly explained why Thor had been so desperate to see Loki’s other one. He’d known all along that it had been Loki’s favourite. Thor’s present was his new favourite now. He would keep it in a box in his rooms and look at it every day to remind himself of why he was doing this.
Loki was finally alone. He sat down carefully in one of the sumptuous chairs in the guest chambers and tried to calm his breathing.

He knew he should approach this logically.

He was going to marry for political reasons.

There was nothing he could do about this.

His husband to be could not possibly expect Loki to love him, so apart from showing the proper respect he was probably not going to have to pretend to be devoted to the man.

He would be here for a generation. He would smile and be graceful in public and endear himself to the Vanir people.

He had a job to do, he would do it and then he would go home.

Putting it like that was almost enough to convince himself that he felt better.

There was a knock on the door. Loki looked up and rose from his chair just as it opened and a friendly smile looked in.

The smile was enormous, and almost seemed to split the face it was on into two. The face had kind blue eyes and a snub nose with freckles across it, and a glorious crown of bright red hair to complete the image.

"Hello." Loki said, a little uncertainly.

"Greetings Your Grace. I am Fosxyr, His Majesty sent me to see to your needs." Said the man, bowing low.

Loki relaxed slightly.

"Come in." He said.

Fosxyr stepped inside and smiled again. Loki had to remind himself not to stare; it really was a huge smile.

"Would Your Grace like anything in particular? Or perhaps you would prefer a few suggestions?" Fosxyr asked kindly.

Loki stood uncertainly.
"Such as?" He said at last.

"I can fetch you something to eat or drink. Or perhaps run you a bath? I am very good at head massages if you are feeling stressed." Fosxyr said.

"Head massages?" Loki asked. He'd never heard of them.

"Oh yes, better if done while bathing but if you would prefer you can just take a seat, it is quite in demand among the nobles here." Fosxyr said.

Loki sat, the feeling of being overwhelmed was coming back and he didn't know what to do. He knew almost nothing about Vanaheim or what its people were like. He felt as though he would start crying at any moment.

Fosxyr took Loki's sitting as a cue to begin a head massage. For a moment Loki thought about telling him to stop, but it was actually kind of nice.

"Would you like me to tell you about Vanaheim? Or do you prefer to sit in silence Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked as he carefully rubbed his fingers across Loki's scalp. He was following the natural parts in the hair with firm motions.

Loki didn't answer. He felt miserable. That last thing he wanted was to be told more about his new prison. And that's what it was. A sentence of three centuries in a prison of marble and gold.

He realised suddenly that his cheeks were wet. He was crying. Raising his hands to his cheeks he wiped them away roughly. They had no place here and their presence made him angry.

"Are you well Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked gently.

"No!" Loki shouted rising again in a rush. "No I'm not well! I'm *here*. I'm marrying someone I've barely met and I'm all alone - " He broke off, suddenly terrified. This man was a servant of the King, and besides that, he would have his own friends and family that he would speak to. If news of Loki's reluctance was revealed to the people then Odin would banish him. "I didn't mean that." He whispered, "It's just all so overwhelming. I'm honoured to be here, I just miss home."

Fosxyr looked at him with a great deal of understanding in his kind eyes.

"You are very young." He said at last. "It is only to be expected that you would feel a little sad to be separated from your home and family. Come and sit down, I'll have a drink sent from the kitchens and finish off this head massage, you'll feel better after that."

Loki sank back into the chair as Fosxyr disappeared for a few minutes. Then he came back and took up where he had left off as though nothing had happened.

About ten minutes later another servant arrived with a hot drink.

"Vanaheim tea." Fosxyr said. "It's famed for its soothing properties."

"Thank you." Loki said softly as the servant left. "I didn't mean to get so upset."

"Do not worry, you are young and far from home. It is natural." Fosxyr said. He leaned down until his mouth was level with Loki's ear. "And between you and me, marrying your great, great granddad's best friend probably isn't the easiest thing you've ever done. I won't be chatting about it in the kitchens if you want to have a cry."
Loki’s eyes filled with tears all over again at his words, but he managed to keep them from spilling.

"Thank you." He said again.

"The King told me to take care of you, and that's what I'm going to do." Fosxyr said firmly as his fingers pressed gently but firmly against Loki’s scalp.

Slowly, inch by inch, Loki managed to relax.

Fosxyr fussed over him for the rest of the day. He ordered dinner and wine to be brought, flowers known for their relaxing scent to be cut and brought in from the gardens, and told Loki about Vanaheim in small doses, carefully covering a wide variety of topics until he managed to tease out which of them would be best received.

He spent a good hour telling Loki about the great Tower of Magic, with its vast library of spell books and famed scholars.

At last it was time for bed. Loki would be getting married the next day. Fosxyr gathered Loki’s clothes when he was changed and went to draw the bed curtains around him.

"No don’t. I like to see the room when I'm sleeping." Loki said.

Fosxyr smiled his wide smile and regarded him.

"Personal preference or Aesir custom?" He asked.

"We don't have bed curtains, so the question is irrelevant." Loki said.

Fosxyr nodded. "If you need anything in the night, I will be in the next room." He told the young Prince. "Well, actually I'll be cleaning up out in the living area for about twenty minutes, *then* I'll be in the next room."

"Thank you." Loki said. He looked tiny in the big bed, and exhausted by the stresses of the day.

"I'll run you a nice hot bath in the morning and help you with dressing." Fosxyr said. "Try to get some sleep, tomorrow will be long, and lasts until dawn the following day."

"I know." Loki said. He sounded terrified.

"I can bring you a herb drink to help you sleep if you like?" Fosxyr offered.

For a moment, Loki looked as though he would refuse, then the fight seemed to go out of him.

"That would probably be for the best." He said, shoulders slumped.

Fosxyr nodded. "I'll be right back." He said and disappeared.

The drink did its job. Ten minutes after drinking it Loki found his bedroom changing into that of dreams. He danced on his mattress which was flying through the air. "Go to Thor!" He shouted, feeling the freedom of escape burning in his veins. The mattress obeyed his command, flying to Asgard through a tunnel of twisting light until he was at Thor's window, looking up against the glass. Thor saw him and waved cheerfully, before the sound of a tray being placed firmly on a table in the other room woke Loki from his slumber.

Chapter End Notes
Hi all. For those of you who are not aware, my work often sends me away sometimes. I write while I'm away but cannot post until I get back (because accessing Norsekink/AO3 on my work computer is likely to get me into trouble).

I am away tomorrow night and may not get back until late on Tuesday, we'll see.

Either way, a new part will be up by Wednesday night (my time) at the latest if you want to check back then.
"Good morning." Fosxyr said, poking his head around the door. "Breakfast is on the table. It's a light one, I thought you might prefer it, if not I can have something more substantial brought up."

Loki sat up slowly. He was still here, still betrothed, and still without Thor.

Fosxyr fetched a robe for his shoulders and soft slippers for his feet. Loki made his way silently to the dining room and sat down.

"I'll run you a bath." Fosxyr said and left him to his breakfast.

Loki stared at the bread and fruit on the plate. He didn't want it. He didn't want to eat anything ever again.

He shook his head and scolded himself mentally. He had already broken down once yesterday, he wasn't going to do it again. Nothing could interfere with his true wedding to Thor. He would be perfect, and he would certainly not yell like yesterday.

He picked up a bread roll and spread some butter on it. He could hear the sound of the water splashing as it filled the bath. 'No more crying.' He resolved to himself. 'No yelling, screaming, or acting any way other than calm and serene, use Mother as your guide. Be calm, be confident, be like Frigga.'

He forced down half a roll, but couldn't eat anything else. Fosxyr returned and informed Loki that his bath was ready.

Fosxyr stayed in the bathing room. Loki frowned at him uncertainly, but Fosxyr did not seem fazed.

"Do the Vanir not bath alone?" Loki asked, his hands still resting on the edges of his robe.

"It varies, Your Grace, but right now I have been instructed to stay with you." Fosxyr replied evenly.

"Why?" Loki asked.

"In case you need anything."

"And to keep an eye on me?"

"There was some concern from the Master of Ceremonies that you may wander if left to your own devices. Until you are settled, I have been instructed to accompany you."

"But surely not everywhere? I mean, I'm hardly going to lose my way in the bathing room."

"I understand Your Grace. I will turn my back if it will make you feel better."
Loki opened his mouth to argue and remembered his promise. No more yelling. He shut his mouth again and started tugging the robe from his shoulders.

Fosxyr stepped forward and took the robe, hanging it carefully on a hook by the edge of the bath. Loki tugged his nightshirt off next and stepped into the bath as Fosxyr folded the discarded garment.

Loki sank up to his waist and settled against the side of the bath.

"What are all of those?" He asked, pointing at the multitude of bottles that sat on shelving near the bath.

"Soaps, oils, perfumes, a few bottles of coloured water to make the whole thing look more impressive, things for your bath." Fosxyr said, settling himself on the edge by Loki's head.

He leaned forward and began to massage Loki's head again, carefully scooping the hot water in his hands and drizzling it over Loki hair.

"That is very nice." Loki conceded.

"So I have been told by pretty well everyone." Fosxyr said, smiling widely. "Which soap would you like?"

"I don't know. Do you have cedar scented?" Loki asked.

It was Thor's favourite. Loki normally preferred thyme or rosemary. But the scent of Thor was too tempting to deny.

"Hmm, no it doesn't look like it. After your wedding I'm sure we can order some from Asgard."

Fosxyr said, scanning the shelves.

"It doesn't matter." Loki said quickly. If Odin found out he was asking for Thor's favourite soap then he might accuse Loki of stirring up trouble.

"How about Teatree? It's supposed to be good for combatting headaches and stress." Fosxyr recommended.

"Alright." Loki said.

Fosxyr fetched the bottle and poured some onto his hand before passing it down to Loki. He washed Loki's hair thoroughly and then fetched a bowl to help him rinse it.

"You'll be taking another bath later today." He said. "Scented with traditional oils and whatnot, I'm not partial to the scent myself but all brides do it."

Loki had stilled again at his words. With an effort, he forced himself to start moving again.

"The ceremony is at sunset yes?" He asked. "Then we feast all night until sunrise?"

"Yes you do. You've got the morning to yourself before the preparations begin." Fosxyr said.

"They don't want me for anything?" Loki asked, surprised. He had expected to be shuffled from place to place all day.

"Not until the middle bells strike to mark midday." Fosxyr said. "They are all running around getting things ready now. The whole population of the city is going to be lining the streets for your tour."
Loki listened to this with growing alarm. It was finally sinking in that this was *real*.

"Tour?" He asked tentatively.

"After the vows are spoken, His Majesty and Your Grace will ride one circuit of the main streets. It takes about thirty minutes or so. All you have to do is smile and wave." Fosxyr said.

Waving would not be a problem. Loki could hit the centre of nineteen out of twenty targets flinging his knives with both hands at lightning speed while riding bareback at a gallop. But smiling? That would be much harder. He swallowed nervously.

Fosxyr caught the movement and his expression softened.

"You'll be fine. Don't worry, no bride looks truly happy on her wedding day. There's too much that could go wrong for her to relax."

Loki managed a slight smile at that. Fosxyr held out a towel.

"So what do I do after I am dressed?" Loki asked, stepping into it and allowing Fosxyr to rub the thick material over his back.

"If I might make a suggestion, Your Grace, the gardens are lovely at the moment, and a walk through the clear air would do you a world of good."

Loki walked slowly through the garden pathways, trying to pay attention to Fosxyr as he described how they came to be. He was dressed in Vanir clothing for the first time ever and it felt uncomfortable. His bare legs beneath his skirt kept alarming him and making him feel as though he wore nothing below his belt. He kept looking down to check.

There was something else odd about this garden. There seemed to be an awful lot of people in it, more than he would have expected.

"This garden is very popular." He commented to Fosxyr.

"It's open to everyone who lives in the palace. Those with nothing to do tend to come out here." Fosxyr answered. "I could have taken you to a private one, but given that you are here to make us all love Asgard, I thought letting people get a glimpse of you might be a good place to start."

Loki turned to stare at him, shocked by his boldness.

"You - " He began.

"I'm not stupid." Fosxyr said calmly. "I know what you are here to achieve. I have no problem with this, unlike many others I know what will happen if Vanaheim breaks away from Asgard's protection. You are here for a purpose and there is no sense delaying it, not when a tiny glimpse will be spoken about for days. You're making a good impression, by the way, the way you keep your head down looks very humble."

Loki felt a slight blush come to his cheeks.

"I knew I would be on display." He said at last. "I did not realise it would be immediately."

"Of course it is." Fosxyr replied. "You are the new Queen, although I believe they are going to call you the King's Consort. Same thing regardless, you are the softness to his iron fist, the tranquil sea to
his raging storm. Except when alone in the privacy of your chambers, you are always on display.”

Loki had to lower his head to hide his expression. His mother had never felt that way had she? Perhaps she had. Perhaps it had taken centuries before the scrutiny subsided and left her in peace.

"You were chosen on purpose to help guide me, weren't you?" He asked instead.

"I have had some experience with raising two of the three hellions known as Vanaheim's Princes, and turning them into men the public can be proud of. The King thought that I might be of some assistance to you in the same regard, yes." Fosxyr replied.

"How thoughtful." Loki commented dryly, and then clamped his mouth shut. Sarcastic comments were hardly going to help his cause.

"Good, now try pressing your lips together before the sound comes out." Fosxyr said with a teasing smile.

Loki looked at him uncertainly, but he seemed cheerful enough.

"Can we go somewhere else?" He said at last. "I think I need to be alone."

"Yes Your Grace, follow me." Fosxyr led him through a gateway, down a corridor and back into the palace. They travelled down a number of pathways until they reached another doorway, which led into a different garden, which was smaller and empty.

"Thank you." Loki said and sank down onto a stone bench.

"Do you require a drink of some kind? I can have wine brought?" Fosxyr asked him.

"No, I am alright. I just need a moment." Loki said. He straightened himself up with an effort. "I am alright." He said again.

"You look pale." Fosxyr said. "You can relax here, this garden belongs to Old Horundyr, and he's out picking flowers for the wedding."

"Horundyr?"

"*Old* Horundyr. He gets a bit upset if you forget the 'old'. He says he didn't live through all those years just to be denied the respect age should bring. He's a gardener, the best gardener actually, and this garden is his pride and joy. It used to belong to the Queen, but no one but Old Horundyr and myself have come in here since she died."

"He might object to me then." Loki said. "If he found out."

"He'll know as soon as he gets back, he always knows. But you aren't picking any flowers or walking on the garden beds, he won't mind."

Loki sat in silence for a while. His thoughts were troubled. He had never thought that having free time could be a bad thing, but without something to do he could not stop his own thoughts from intruding. Over and over again he told himself that he could do this. He could survive this. There was nothing he couldn't do. Was he not the stubborn younger brother of Thor? Was he not an Odinson? He would be calm. He would be serene. He would be a perfect King's Consort.

After a time, Loki rose. His expression was calmer and his breathing was slow.

"Do you feel better, Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked him.
"Yes, thank you. I do feel a bit better." Loki said.

"I'm glad to hear it." Fosxyr said as throughout the city bells began to ring, "because it's midday."
Eight Steps

Chapter Summary

A Royal Wedding

They bathed him in milk. It did make his skin extremely soft, and the scented water they used to wash it off as he stood naked on the tiles wasn't too bad.

They washed his hair again, drying it with black silk and oiling it just enough to keep it in place without letting it become greasy.

They rubbed a kind of scented powder into his skin that made it seem to glow lightly, and then they dressed him.

Each layer was carefully pulled over his head and fixed in place. Their one concession to his masculinity was to have the skirt sewn so that it fell straight; otherwise it was a traditional bridal costume in every way.

They painted his face. Loki sat frozen in his chair as they carefully applied the powder to bring out his complexion, a light colour to his lips and cheeks to make them stand out and a darkener to his eyelashes with the tiniest smear of green powder against his eye line. It was all very subtle, far less than a woman would wear, but even so Loki felt as though he was losing a part of himself with every little brushstroke.

Fosxyr stayed with him throughout it all. He was mostly silent as the others worked, although occasionally he greeted one of them with a nod and a few words.

Loki was perfumed and pampered. The preparations took the whole afternoon. By the time they were done Loki was wrapped up like a present. Fosxyr even had to help him use the toilet by holding up his skirts. Loki felt like a living doll.

But then it was time. Sunset was rapidly approaching and the moment was finally here. Loki was escorted to the entryway to the Throne Room, where he was met by the King's four closest friends. They bowed to him in respect and watched as the servants settled him on the chair.

The doors opened a moment later. Loki could feel his heart pounding in his chest. This was happening. He was getting married. There was no way out.

No way except forwards. Time was to be his ally. Every day he made it through was one day closer to Thor.

The chair moved as the men raised it. The ceremony had begun.

Loki sat rigid in the chair as it was carried down the centre of the long room. He tried to look calm and accepting, although he suspected that he was failing miserably.

After far too short a time, the chair reached the dais where the King stood. Loki was set down and the four men came to stand in their traditional positions.
Loki rose and took a deep breath. He wondered vaguely what would happen if he failed to slip past them, but it wasn't worth thinking about. This whole thing had been choreographed for centuries.

He stepped forward and ducked to his right, under the exaggerated arm movements of one of the men. He stepped back to allow another of them to swing his arm ridiculously slowly in an attempt to stop him and then ducked low and to the left, stepping through to the other side.

He reached out a hand and touched the waiting fingers of the King. Instantly, the men stepped back. They had done their duty.

Loki stepped up to stand beside King Dimcken and tried not to look as terrified as he felt.

"Here stand two, who will be one." The Master of Ceremonies boomed to the hall. "Together they will be united in love."

Loki very deliberately did not snort.

"Here they stand, by their own consent."

Loki bit the inside of his cheek.

"A union which we, the people, preside over. Do you, King Dimcken of Vanaheim, give yourself in marriage to Loki of Asgard?"

"I give myself freely." Dimcken said loudly.

"Do you, Loki of Asgard, give yourself in marriage to King Dimcken of Vanaheim?"

"I give myself freely." Loki said.

His voice did not crack. The sky did not shatter open. A thousand things that should have happened did not happen. The lie was told and it held.

"By your own words you are wed. By your own consent you are one." Intoned the Master of Ceremonies, as he wound a ribbon of deep purple around their joined hands. "Before the people, you are married."

The people cheered so loudly Loki thought his ears would burst. King Dimcken turned and waved to them, grinning broadly. Loki forced his own hand up and, with great effort, managed to get a smile onto his face. It was very stiff and not terribly convincing up close, but most of the crowd could not see that well from where they stood.

They walked back down the length of the Throne Room and along the corridors to the courtyard outside, where the horses stood waiting. Loki felt vaguely faint, as if he had entered a waking dream. His whole world had narrowed down to making it through the day. It was all he had to do, and if he just managed that then somehow everything would be alright.

He mounted with the help of Fosxyr and sat awkwardly in the saddle. His clothes meant that he had to ride side on, like all Vanir when not at war. He had no experience with this style of riding and found something new to worry about. What if he fell? How would that look to the people? How would that look to Odin?

Thankfully, he did not fall. Fosxyr led the horse at walking pace through the streets beside the King as the crowd cheered them.
Loki managed to wave. He even managed to smile a little, although there were times when he had to look down and to the side to hide his expression. Luckily, the crowd interpreted this as modestly. His tight grip on the horse's saddle also gave the impression that he was not a strong rider, coupled with his youth the overall effect was a propagandist’s delight.

Their tour took slightly longer than the thirty minutes Fosxyr quoted, but they finally reached the palace gates again and went inside. The crowd was still watching as they dismounted. King Dimcken reached up and took Loki's waist himself to help his new spouse leave the saddle. It was a delightful image, from the outside.

Then it was time for the feast, and yet another tradition. Asgard certainly had no monopoly on them, Loki had discovered. This tradition was to do with the food.

All the dishes were on the tables, which strained under the load. But no one was permitted to eat until both the King and his Consort had taken the first bite.

After they were seated at the high table, the servants laid a platter before each of them with a single mouthful of each type of food on it. Small glasses containing each type of drink were also placed in front of them.

King Dimcken began eating with enthusiasm. He had what he was after, and it was only a matter of time before Loki's sweet supple body was beneath him.

Loki was far less eager. He did not feel like eating at all. But there was no helping it. If he didn't eat, neither did anyone else.

He reached forwards and speared a morsel with his fork. Taking a deep breath to steal himself, he placed the morsel in his mouth and forced himself to chew.

It wasn't bad, flavour-wise. He recognised about half of the dishes on his plate, and resolved to eat his usual favourites last, to ensure he had something to look forward to.

Loki swallowed, and in the dining hall, there was a sudden clashing of noise as the nobles began to serve themselves from the dish he'd just eaten.

Loki realised with a start that King Dimcken had almost finished his platter, leaving Loki in control of what the room could eat.

At any other time in his life, this opportunity would not be wasted. Right now however, Loki was desperate not to cause trouble. He quickly ate another piece from his platter and listened as the serving noises grew louder.

The third one was spicy, and he reached for his water glass in surprise. The sound of liquid splashing after he had taken a mouthful reminded him that they were also not permitted to drink before he did.

The pressure of the day seemed to sink in on him. Everyone was watching him to see what he ate next. He could feel panic rising up, tears were prickling in his eyes.

No. He was Loki Odinson of Asgard. He had fought single-handedly against fierce enemies. He had mastered some of the most complex spells in Asgard before he even reached his majority. He could eat the food off a damn platter.

He had another bite, and another, and another. He drank the wines, interspersed with bites of food. One by one he got it all down, and the feast became a party.
The servants cleared away his empty tray and Fosxyr appeared at his shoulder.

"What would you like to eat, Your Grace?"

"I've had enough." Loki said softly. "It was delicious."

Fosxyr gave him a knowing look. "That platter is hardly fit for a happy bride." He murmured into Loki's ear. "I will bring you something."

He disappeared and Loki was left sitting beside his new husband, who was eating his own chosen dishes with great enjoyment.

He turned at that moment and their eyes locked together. King Dimcken smiled. Loki forced himself to return it, although he couldn't hide the faint horror in his eyes. King Dimcken's smile widened and Loki's expression froze. In that moment King Dimcken reminded him of a shark.

Their gaze was broken by Fosxyr, who set a loaded plate down in front of Loki and then reached forward to pour him some wine.

"This one is best for these dishes, it is lighter on the tongue." He said cheerfully.

Loki shot him a grateful look and picked up his fork. Eating was far more preferable than looking at his new husband right now. But then you could say the same about walking over broken glass.

After the bulk of the meal was eaten and only the more leisurely diners were left, a band began to play music and a troop of dancers came out to provide entertainment.

They were light and graceful, twirling through the air with great speed and skill. Loki recognised some of the moves that he himself had perfected when learning weapon-less self-defence. It was odd sometimes how two seemingly unrelated disciplines could overlap like that.

After the dancers came the orators, who told tales of Vanaheim's history. They took particular time over the great invasion, and how Asgard saved the Vanir people from an all pervading evil that crept into their minds and turned them into monsters. This mist was held at bay by the forces of Asgard still, according to legend. Loki did not know whether to believe it or not, but it was a good tale to tell if you were worried about your people wanting to break away from Asgard.

The band started playing again as two platters of desserts were placed in front of the Royal couple. Loki ate slowly, fighting back the feeling of panic as once again all eyes were turned onto him.

Fosxyr set down a serving of the lightest desserts in front of him once the platter was finished. In the room, the band changed their style to something livelier. Loki watched as the Vanir nobles who had finished their desserts rose and started to dance.

The dances had set moves as they often did in Asgard, however unlike Asgard there seemed to be no distinction as to how the partners were matched. Men danced with men and women with women, often talking loudly to one another, and occasionally turning about to locate their spouses to ask a question or tell a joke.

Some of the other dances had no partners, everyone formed rows, or circles, whatever was required, and they all moved about in coordination. Loki watched it all from where he sat next to the King.

"Do you like to dance?" King Dimcken suddenly asked him.
Loki resisted the urge to jump in his chair in fright. This man was his husband. He would see him every day. No jumping. Be good.

“I do, but I do not know these dances.” He answered.

“I will have my sons teach you, I would like to see you dance. Young things should dance at a feast, it is made for them.” King Dicken said, taking a drink of his wine. “Camtan! Come here my boy!”

“Yes Father?” Prince Camtan said as he stepped closer to the table. He was tall and quite handsome to look at. Loki thought that Camtan’s mother must have been a real beauty.

He was also not very old, a little older than Loki perhaps but not more than a few centuries. It seemed the Vanir King had a habit of marrying the young.

“You will have to teach Loki the dances.” King Dimcken said loftily. “He will have no fun up here every time we have a feast.”

“I would be delighted Father.” Camtan said merrily. “In fact the step-in-time is coming up, I could start teaching him tonight.”

King Dimcken frowned. “I don’t want him to look foolish.” He said.

Loki watched their conversation silently, aware that he was not, in their minds at least, actually present.

“He won’t look foolish. It’s an easy one to pick up, he’ll be dancing like the rest of us by the time the final chorus is played.”

“All right then, if you’re sure.” King Dimcken turned to Loki. “Camtan will fetch you when the step-in-time is about to play. You can dance to that.”

Loki smiled at him as best he could.

“Thank you.” He said, because it seemed the best response to make.

Two more songs were played, and then Prince Camtan appeared at Loki’s side.

“Mother.” He said with a twinkle in his eyes as he held out his hand.

Loki realised that he liked him. He was grateful for that, for it meant that he might be able to make a friend here, which would surely make the time go faster.

Camtan led him out to the floor, where the others had paired up in three lines.

“It’s easy.” Camtan said as the music began. “Watch my feet.”

Loki stumbled a little at first, and his wedding clothes were not making it any easier to move, but Camtan was right, the dance was quite easy and once he picked up the basic steps he managed quite well.

About halfway through the dance, when Loki was dancing without having to check his movements every moment, Camtan started to speak.

“I was surprised when Father made the announcement about you.” He said. “Most of us were. We didn’t know he’d gone to Asgard to get engaged.”
Loki didn’t know what to say to that. ‘Neither did I’ seemed a little like a protest, ‘peace is very important’ sounded like a politician. He looked down at his feet instead, although he no longer needed to watch what he was doing.

“Blink once if you found out you were engaged after your betrothed went home.” Camtan said, just loudly enough for Loki to hear it, but no louder.

Loki’s mouth twitched.

“That is hardly a fair action.” He said. “I must blink at some point.”

“I know. I am very confident in my assumptions.” Camtan said. His voice seemed a little harder. “Stay away from Dorgen if you can help it. He’s my brother, the Crown Prince, and he is not fond of Asgard. He thinks you’re here to manipulate Father.”

Loki shook his head slightly, but did nothing more. He did not even know if he could trust Camtan yet.

The dance ended and Camtan escorted Loki back to his seat. Loki saw Fosxyr nod at him approvingly from behind the King’s chair. Dancing, it seemed, was a good way to endear himself to the people.

King Dimcken was watching him too. Loki felt a chill go over him as the King caught his eye. The King’s expression was filled with desire.

It took all of his self-control to walk towards the King and not run away. For the first time Loki realised that this was not just about politics. King Dimcken *wanted* him.

He sat down again and tried to look calm.

“Did you enjoy dancing?” King Dimcken asked.

“Yes.” Loki answered. “It was fun.”

He couldn’t say more, his throat had closed in fear.

“Good.” King Dimcken said and turned away once again to watch the nobles celebrate the happy couple.
Nine Steps

Chapter Summary

The First Night

Chapter Notes

Okay, well we all knew it was coming. This chapter has some fairly graphic descriptions of non con sex. If you think it might make you uncomfortable you can skip this chapter and continue the story just knowing that it happened. Otherwise, you have been warned.

By the time the sky turned red and the sun began to rise, only the more energetic of the nobles were still dancing. Quite a few of the older ones had fallen asleep in discrete corners. Sadly, King Dimcken wasn’t one of them.

As the light began to filter in through the windows, the King turned to Loki and held out his hand.

Loki took it with trembling fingers. He reminded himself again that he was doing this for Thor. All of it. Even this.

The more senior nobles followed them as they walked to the Wedding Chamber. By the time they reached it Loki was fighting not to panic, and fighting doubly hard not to show it. His hand jerked just slightly in King Dimcken’s grip when he caught sight of the bed, but he managed not to pull away entirely.

He had to do this.

The only way out was to go forwards.

It would be over soon.

None of those thought were in the slightest way comforting.

Fosxyr led him to a little room to the left of the bed as King Dimcken disappeared to the right. Inside the little room Loki was undressed. He pulled on a nightgown as Fosxyr poured a drink from a very small bottle.

When Loki looked at it questioningly, the servant said:

“You’re not the first arranged marriage in the realms Your Grace and you won’t be the last.”

Loki swallowed it. He had no idea what it would do, but whatever it was it would likely make this easier.

He took a deep breath to steel his nerves and walked back out to the bedroom and the crowd beyond.
King Dimcken was already in bed, dressed in his nightshirt and chatting to one of his friends who stood by him. Fosxyr pulled back the covers and helped Loki to get settled.

Whatever was in the drink was starting to take effect. Loki felt strangely flushed and his muscles felt heavy.

The curtains were drawn around them, cutting the light to a dim glow and leaving Loki alone with his new husband.

Loki slowly turned his head to look over at King Dimcken. He could not hide the fear in his eyes, although he didn’t think that would matter right now. The King must surely understand that he would be nervous? At the very least he could blame it on his youth and inexperience.

Dimcken smiled at him. His eyes were shining with lust and desire. Loki fought the urge to pull back away from him, although at this moment moving his limbs seemed difficult.

Like something out of a nightmare, Dimcken’s hand slide slowly under the covers to reach Loki’s hip. It travelled across his body and curled around the far side. A gentle tug told Loki that Dimcken wanted him closer to the centre, and he managed to inch over enough to comply.

Dimcken shifted until he was lying on top of Loki, rubbing his hands over Loki’s thighs and stomach. He leaned down and pressed a hard kiss against Loki’s lips.

Loki lay as passively as he could, holding in his mind Odin’s threat of ‘don’t cause trouble’. It was the hardest thing he’s ever had to do. Especially when he became hyper aware of how he could feel every one of the wrinkles on Dimcken’s lips. He told himself that he would be alright. He would survive this and go home to Thor. He was willing to die for Thor, surely he could do this for him.

Dimcken’s hands were tugging Loki’s nightshirt up. He tugged until the material was bunched around Loki’s chest, and then ran his hands over the naked flesh, mouthing kisses against Loki’s neck and jaw.

‘I will survive.’ Loki told himself. ‘I will survive’.

Dimcken’s hand pressed between Loki’s thighs and, struggling not to let out a sob, Loki parted his legs to allow the King access. A moment later, long fingers were pressing against his opening, poking around until they found what they were looking for and the tip of one was pushed inside.

Loki let out a cry. He hadn’t meant to. He’d been determined not to protest at all, but it slipped out before he could bite it back.

Dimcken’s response was to kiss him hard on the mouth and press his finger deeper. Loki felt the uncomfortable burning of his opening stretching and fought to stay calm. The drink turned out to be the best thing he could have done. His arms and legs felt heavy and were slow to respond, making it easier for him to stay more passive than he otherwise would have been.

Dimcken forced another finger inside, and Loki barely bit back another cry. The Vanir King kissed him again as he started moving his long fingers in and out, working Loki open.

Loki’s moans and cries began to spill helplessly out of his mouth. He couldn’t stop them. A part of him hoped desperately that they would be interpreted as sounds of pleasure, so that Odin would have nothing to challenge him with.

No one drew back the curtain to intercede, so he must have been at least partially convincing. Or maybe they just didn’t care. After all, who was going to stop the King?
Slowly, far more slowly than it would have under normal circumstances, Loki’s entrance began to slicken in response to the intrusion. He was grateful, it made the poking fingers less painful. King Dimcken was clearly pleased with this response, as he sped up his movements. He was panting quite loudly and smothering Loki with wet kisses.

Suddenly the fingers retracted, and Loki felt another surge of fear. This was it.

There were tears in his eyes as King Dimcken reached between them, fumbling to free himself from his nightshirt.

Then the King shifted and Loki felt something pressing against his entrance. The tears trickled over and ran down the sides of his face.

A sharp stab of pain, followed by another, deeper, stab and he was fully speared. He could no longer muffle his cries as the King thrust above him. Each sharp movement tore another from his lips. There was a wetness growing that Loki feared was blood as his body was jolted by the King’s movements.

King Dimcken leaned down and kissed him hard, hands gripping his upper arms and body fully pressed against him. Loki did his best to stay passive, grateful that he had at least managed not to beg.

Then suddenly the King stiffened. Two red spots appeared on his cheeks and he gave a loud groan of pleasure as he emptied himself into Loki’s body.

He pulled out swiftly and rolled over, sighing loudly in pleasure. Loki lay stiffly where he was and didn’t move. He made himself think of Thor. Anything for Thor. Anything. Even this.

The curtains were pulled back and a crowd of faces peered in at them.

“Are you married?” The Master of Ceremonies asked the King.

“I am.” The King said with a contented sigh.

“Are you married?” The Master of Ceremonies asked Loki.

All eyes turned to his tear streaked, wide-eyed face.

“I am.” He choked out.

Definitely. Absolutely. Undeniably.

He thought he saw pity in some of their gazes.

The nobles quickly turned away and left the room. They had done their duty and now they wanted their rest. The curtains were pulled closed again and the royal couple were left to sleep.

King Dimcken started snoring almost immediately. Loki was grateful that he didn’t try to talk. He couldn’t. Not right now. It was all too much.

Loki lay silently for hours beside the King. He was afraid to move in case it woke Dimcken up. He tried to be logical, he tried to be rational.

It wasn’t working. He desperately wanted to go home, but he had up to three centuries before him. He didn’t know if he could survive it.

He would survive it. He would survive for Thor. Thor was all that mattered. As much as he had
hoped to lie with Thor as his first, he had known that coming here would prevent that. Still, Thor had Loki’s first kiss, and Thor’s hands had been the first to stroke Loki’s hair with love. They would make it work. In the future.

Hours after dawn, the King gave a snort and woke. Loki’s eyes snapped shut and he tried to look peacefully asleep.

He expected King Dimcken to wake him anyway, but to his surprise the King climbed carefully out of bed and conversed quietly with a servant. From what Loki gathered, he was dressing with plans to go out and see the people.

After a few minutes, Loki was left alone. He opened his eyes and sighed in relief. Suddenly he became aware of how the way he was laying had made his back slightly curved, how his neck had grown stiff from lying so still and how sore he felt between his legs and up inside of his body.

He carefully sat up and pulled the curtain back.

Fosxyr was sitting on a stool in the room. He looked up at Loki’s movement.

“Not really sleeping?” He said kindly and without judgement. “How do you feel?”

“Sore.” Loki said truthfully. His voice was raspy and his throat felt rough. His cries must have been louder than he’d realised.

“Stay there, I’ll fetch you some water to bath with. If you need a healer I can call one.” Fosxyr said, disappearing back into the little room from the night before. He came out with a basin and a cloth.

Loki took the cloth from his hands. Fosxyr didn’t protest, he just stepped back and waited as Loki peeled back the covers and looked fearfully down at himself.

There was blood. A decent stain of it on the bed and between his legs, making him feel sticky and horrible. He wiped carefully over it, working his way inwards to his entrance.

“Do you think you need a healer?” Fosxyr repeated gently.

“I don’t know.” Loki confessed. He was sore, but it felt like a wound that had already been attended to rather than one that was fresh.

“Perhaps it would be better to be safe in this regard.” Fosxyr guided carefully.

Loki nodded. He felt utterly drained.

The healer had been waiting outside ‘just in case’. She came in and carefully had a look.

“You hymen is torn, but that is normal. You’re quite tender, but there’s no substantial injury. You must have had quite a thick hymen dear, they can bleed quite a bit with the first time. Just rest, don’t do any horse-riding or strong physical activity for about a week, and send for me if you feel hot or feverish, or if you think you are not healing. But you should be fine.”

Loki mumbled a thank you and the healer left as Fosxyr helped him out of the bed and into a robe.

“I’ll escort you to your new chambers, Your Grace.” He said.

Loki followed without protest. He was exhausted, a fact that Fosxyr could see quite clearly.

“How about I show you right to bed?” He said as they entered a grand-looking doorway.
Loki just nodded. He didn’t so much as look up as he followed Fosxyr through a series of doors and to a bedroom beyond. The bed was enormous and the sheets crisp. Loki shed his robe and nightshirt, and managed to stay upright long enough for Fosxyr to get a new one onto him. Then he crawled under the covers and fell asleep in seconds.
Loki was woken by a gentle hand against his back. His eyes snapped open and he inhaled sharply, only to relax when he caught sight of Fosxyr.

“I’m sorry to wake you Your Grace.” He said, “But I was instructed to show you your chambers today. I think King Dimcken will want to ask you about them at dinner, which is in an hour.”

Loki clutched his sheets tightly at the mention of the King’s name.

“I have filled the bath for you.” Forsxyr continued in a gentle tone.

Loki released his grip and reluctantly pushed himself up. He followed Fosxyr through a doorway to his left and down a corridor, about six metres in length, which led to a large bathing room.

In front of him and to his left were enormous windows, three stories high, that bathed the room in sunlight. To his right was a wall with another door, and before him Loki could see two baths, a steam room and a table for massages. The room was tiled in blue and white, with another, blue green tile running through in a delicate pattern across the walls and floor.

“Why are their two baths?” Loki asked.

“One is hot and one is cool.” Fosxyr answered. “The cool one is for when you are using the steam room.” He pointed at the door to their right. “Through that door is the toilet area, a shower for when you must cleanse in a hurry and the servant’s waiting room, for when you wish for privacy.”

Loki noticed with a start that there was a servant standing just beyond the door, waiting calmly with his hands behind his back.

“Who is he?” Loki asked as Fosxyr ushered him to the hot bath.

“The bath servant. His job is to make them ready for you. When he is not required then he goes to the servant’s room and waits.”

“All day?”

“Sometimes. The servant’s room is not empty Your Grace, he can sit and read, or play a card game with the others. The servant’s rooms are connected.”

“There’s more?” Loki asked as he eased himself into the tub. He winced slightly as the hot water splashed between his legs but the pain was not sharp.

“Two more for your chambers Your Grace. You will meet them soon. That man’s name is

“He also looks after your possessions in your bedroom and takes your clothing away to be laundered.” Fosxyr said as Loki looked about for the soap. Fosxyr handed it to him and went to fetch a washing cloth from the neat pile on the shelving table.

Loki washed quickly. He’d had more baths than he cared to think about lately and he was impatient to do something else. Anything really, as long as it took his mind off the upcoming dinner.

Once clean and dry, Forsxyr wrapped a robe around Loki’s shoulders, and led him back through the corridor, which was lit by large, flat stones that glowed brightly, set into the ceiling, which Loki noticed were covered in painted frescos. They stopped halfway down, where there were two doors opposite each other. Fosxyr opened the one on the right and they walked in.

It was the wardrobe and dressing room. The enormous windows were at the far end, as with the bathing room, the bottom third of the window was frosted glass. Even at the end of the day the room was flooded with a bright light.

Loki looked on with a frown as Fosxyr walked calmly through over a hundred different choices. He selected a grey long robe, grey-green middle garment and an over garment of light silver and even lighter green embroidery.

Wraenyr will also help you dress.” Fosxyr said as he helped Loki pull each of the garments on. The long robe had to be belted at the waist with a wide band of material. The middle garment had a decorative belt, as it would be seen. The belt also had a line of buttons around it, which Fosxyr used to attach the over garment so that it wouldn’t slip or move out of place. He fetched some slippers and helped Loki step into them.

“Almost finished.” He said as he led Loki back and through the other door.

Loki stopped and stared at the room in front of him. As with the dressing room, there was a large window at the far end, although this room was not as long. On each wall either side of him were cabinets full of jewellery.

“Everything on the left side belongs to the Crown Jewel collection and is traditionally worn by the Queen.” Fosxyr said. “The ones on the right are gifts from the King, and yours personally.”

The right side of the room was quite a bit barer than the left, but there were still a few exquisite pieces on display. Fosxyr walked over to them and selected a brace for Loki’s neck. It was inset with emeralds and had clearly been made by skilled hands.

Loki reflected on the nobles he’d seen at the feast the night before. They had all worn a large amount of jewellery, some more tasteful than others. Asgard on the other hand, tended toward tamer fashions, with less inlays and more etched images.

It did make a kind of sense. Asgard had so much gold it literally covered its walls with it. On Vanaheim gold was rarer and therefore used for creating beautiful pieces, interspersed with coloured jewels.

Loki did not protest as Fosxyr fastened the brace around his neck. At least it was masculine. Most of the crown jewellery had clearly been made with a woman in mind. Fosxyr added two matching rings to complete the outfit. Loki flexed his fingers uncomfortably; he was not used to wearing rings.
“Now I shall show you the rest of your chambers Your Grace.” Fosxyr said and led Loki back to the bedroom.

There were doors on either side of the bed that led to a balcony. The windows began higher up and, even with the sun on the other side of the palace, managed to provide enough light to see easily.

On the right side of the bed as Loki faced it was another door. Fosxyr showed Loki through into what was clearly meant to be a study. The incredibly tall ceilings with windows to match continued to be the main feature.

“They’re a bit much, don’t you think?” Loki asked Fosxyr as he was shown another, smaller room that was for ‘prayer, meditation and reflection’.

“For these rooms yes, but they serve their purpose in other ways.” Fosxyr said. They headed back.

Opposite the bed was the door, Fosxyr led Loki through and into the room beyond.

It was massive, furnished with chairs and couches, with a fireplace the height of a man at the far end and bookshelves lining the walls. In this room the windows made sense, light flooded in from Loki’s right and reached the very back of the room.

“This is your living and dining area.” Fosxyr said.

Loki noted the table sitting in one quarter of the room. He scanned the nearest bookshelf.

“My books are here.” He said, recognising them.

“Yes, you’ve almost filled up the shelves already. We shall have to commission some more if you want to expand your collection.” Fosxyr said. “There and there are the best places, although those chairs will have to go.”

“I think I’ll survive.” Loki said. There was enough seating for thirty as it was.

There was another man standing by the fireplace, as still as a statue. It took Loki a minute to realise that he was alive.

“Who is that?” He asked as Fosxyr walked easily through the room.

“Femtchyr. He is one of your two chamber servants.”

“Hello.” Loki greeted him as they got closer. Femtchyr bowed low to him in response.

“And Wraenyr is the other one?” Loki asked.

“No, he’s the bathing servant. Femtchyr, fetch Canrryen.” Fosxyr said.

Femtchyr bowed again and turned to the wall. Loki watched in surprise as he open a section of it and disappeared.

“The servant’s corridors run everywhere.” Fosxyr explained. “They do not walk the halls of the nobles unless they are specifically told to.”

“What is to stop an assassin using the corridors to get close to their target?” Loki asked.

“The servants. There are hundreds of them, up to a thousand if the palace is busy. They are also the Palace Guards and will defend you from anything.” Fosxyr said as Femtchyr returned. He was
followed by another man.

“This is Canrryen.” Fosxyr said. He and Femtchyr take care of your things, bring you food and wine, answer your door and clean your chambers. Wraenyr takes care of your bath and bedroom.”

“I am pleased to meet you.” Loki said politely. They both bowed. Loki found his eyes wandering to the servant’s door. “May I see?” He asked.

Judging by their faces, Loki was not the first to ask. They stood aside and let him peer in.

The servant’s corridor was wide and well lit. It lacked windows, but as it was clearly for walking through rather than staying in, this was not a burden. Loki squinted as he caught sight of something further down.

“Is that a room?” He asked.

“Yes.” Fosxyr answered him. “If you wish for privacy, they will go to the room just there and wait until you call them. It has chairs and a table, even a few beds for the night servants, so that they might rest when not needed.”

Loki stepped back into the room.

“It seems well thought out.” He said at last.

Fosxyr made a hand movement and the two servants vanished into the corridor.

“If you wish to call them, you must pull on one of the cords around the room. They will hear a bell and come.” He said as they walked back to the windows and toward the next doorway.

They walked through into another, equally grand room. It was just as large and the furniture was slightly more grandiose.

“Your public meeting room, where you will entertain any visitor.” Fosxyr explained. “The room before was private. You may invite people inside but only your closest friends and companions. This room is for anyone who requests an audience. You may entertain as many as will come if you choose to do so. The last queen held more than a few parties in here.”

Loki nodded. His bedroom in Asgard was a third of the size and had one outer chamber where he ate his breakfast. To compare the two you would think the Vanir to be the rulers.

“It’s all so big.” He said, scanning the back wall for the servant’s door.

Fosxyr smiled his wide smile as he guessed what Loki was trying to do.

“It’s on the left of the fireplace.” He hinted.

Loki walked closer and ran his hands along the panelling. “I still can’t see it.” He confessed.

Fosxyr reached past him and pressed in the corner of one panel in particular. The whole panel swung back to reveal the corridor.

“After a while you get used to spotting them.” He said, clicking the door back into place.

Then he led Loki to the final room. Not quite as large, but still impressively massive, this room was the reception room. Anyone who wished to see the King’s Consort would have to wait here until Loki decided that he would meet with them. It was well stocked with drinks and comfortable seats.
There were a number of card decks and playing boards on the side shelving.

“How long do people have to wait?” Loki asked.

“As long as you want them to. Although high nobles probably shouldn’t be antagonised by making them wait all day, but anyone who has come to ask a favour should expect to spend a few hours in here. That’s one way of telling that they are serious.” Fosxyr said. “It is a comfortable room.”

“It looks it, but even still, to keep them waiting that long sounds harsh.” Loki said.

“You will not have many people at first.” Fosxyr said. “But once you are settled they will come, asking for favours, charity, or a word with the King. You will come to appreciate this little room.”

“Hardly little.” Loki said as they made their way to the outer door.

“I think it must be a little magical, for you see it seems large, but the longer you spend time in it, the smaller it seems to get.” Fosxyr said and grinned hugely. Then he became more serious. “It is time for you to go to dinner with the King and his sons. Are you ready?”

Loki felt a chill go down his spine at the words.

“I have to be.” He confessed, the closest he would come to admitting his true feelings.

Fosxyr gave him an understanding smile. “You will like Camtan and Musleen. They are good humoured like their mother was. Dorgen is my age, and less receptive to your presence, but he will come around in time.”

He led Loki through the Palace corridors and to another grand door on the same level as his chambers.

“The King’s Chambers.” He said and knocked on the door.

Chapter End Notes

A sketch of Loki’s new chambers can be found here:

http://icemaidenstory.livejournal.com/692.html
Chapter Summary

Happy Families

The door was opened by a servant, who bowed low and stepped back to let them inside. It was a reception room, the mirror image of Loki’s. The servant slipped through his private door at the far end and vanished.

“He’ll tell the King that you are here, then lead you inside.” Fosxyr said. “I will wait here for you and walk you back to your chambers when dinner has finished.”

Loki remembered what he’d said about the reception rooms becoming smaller as you waited. He reflected that Fosxyr must have done a lot of waiting in his time.

“You won’t get bored?” He asked.

Fosxyr grinned at him.

“Servants don’t get bored Your Grace, they don’t know how. Besides, I hear there may be a game going in the room behind us. Perhaps I shall find out?”

“Perhaps.” Loki said, a smile creeping onto his face. It was still there when the far door opened and King Dimcken himself stepped out.

“Loki.” He breathed, eyes sweeping over the image before him. “You look lovely in those clothes. They suit you far better than those pant-things from Asgard.”

“Thank you Your Majesty.” Loki said, trying to calm the frantic beating of his heart that had begun at the sight of the King.

Dimcken grinned widely and wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist. The next moment Loki was subjected to a firm kiss on the mouth. He forced himself to stay still and endure it.

“Lovely.” Dimcken whispered against Loki’s mouth. Then he pulled back and used his arm to guide Loki into the rooms beyond. Loki resisted the urge to look back pleadingly at Fosxyr. There was nothing the servant could do after all. Loki just had to endure it.

Princes Dorgen, Musleen and Camtan were all present in the King’s inner chamber. They rose in greeting as Loki was walked in.

“My sons.” Dimcken said, giving Loki’s hip a little rub as his hand drifted lower to stroke lightly across Loki’s upper thigh.

It was obvious which one was Dorgen. He was older by a long way, almost middle aged, with grey in his hair and a haughty expression. His eyes flickered to his father’s hand and Loki’s too-calm expression.

“My great pleasure to meet you, Mother.” He said, sounding as though he was chewing on gravel.
Loki tried to smile and knew he was failing.

“And I you, Prince Dorgen.” He said.

“Just call him Dorgen, you are family now.” King Dimcken said. He finally released his grip on Loki so that they could sit down. Loki did so carefully and with a slight wince, he was still very tender, although the healer had been right and there did not seem to be permanent damage. Loki saw Camtan look uncomfortable. King Dimcken actually looked faintly pleased. The moment they were seated his hand slipped back onto Loki’s thigh.

Prince Dorgen looked outraged at his father’s suggestion but said nothing.

“I think. That is, I feel perhaps that Pri- I mean, Dorgen, and your other sons of course, perhaps it would be best if they called me Loki. I know that I am your consort, but ‘mother’ does not seem very appropriate.” Loki said, hoping that he wasn’t stomping on a grand tradition of some kind.

“He is young enough to be my son, possibly even my grandson, if I had been the type to begin my family early.” Prince Dorgen said, not even trying to hide his dislike. “I too feel that ‘mother’ is entirely inappropriate.”

“I think calling you Loki is a good idea.” King Dimcken said, to Loki’s relief. “Although as their new mother I expect that you will prevent them from misbehaving.”

Loki looked alarmed, and Musleen and Camtan both started laughing at his expression. Dorgen looked disgusted.

“Don’t worry Loki, Father is teasing you. We are all grown men who are in charge of ourselves.” Camtan said as the servant placed a large tray of breads, spreads and cheeses in the centre of the table.

Loki felt relief rush through him. He couldn’t imagine trying to tell Dorgen to behave himself. He managed a grimace that tried hard to be a smile as King Dimcken finally let go of his thigh and started to serve himself from the platter. He gestured for Loki to do the same.

“Has Fosxyr been taking good care of you?” He asked as Loki chose a piece of bread and some cheese.

The Princes were not eating. Loki looked confused for a moment before remembering and making a similar gesture to invite them to the tray. Dorgen chose, then Musleen, then Camtan, neatly demonstrating the age order of the Princes.

“Yes he’s been wonderful.” Loki said. Dimcken beamed.

“He’s one of my most trusted servants; he took good care of these two after their mother died.” He said, gesturing to Musleen and Camtan.

“He’s the best tutor you could hope for.” Camtan said with a smile. “Is he to stay with Loki for a while?”

“Yes, until he is well acquainted with his duties. King Odin told me that your main studies are completed, but that you were still learning seidr, is that right?” King Dimcken asked Loki.

“Yes, I still had tutors for the more advanced seidr.” Loki confirmed.

“Who were they?” Camtan asked, leaning forwards.
“Groa for most things, Eir for the healing magics.” Loki said.

“Both Aesir, the Vanir are much better versed in Seidr, I will arrange for you to complete your studies with proper tutors.” King Dimcken said.

“Thank you Your Majesty.” Loki said, although inside he felt outraged on behalf of Groa and Eir, who were both brilliant.

“Call me husband.” King Dimcken said. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said obediently. He felt vaguely sick at the words, but he had no choice.

It occurred to him then just how ridiculous this was. That very morning King Dimcken had raped him while his children, among others, listened through the curtain. Now they were all sitting down to dinner together making polite conversation. It was enough to make him want to scream.

But then he was a participant in this farce, unwilling perhaps, but still a participant. No Trouble, No Mischief. That was to be his mantra, and if that meant that he sat and made polite conversation at the dinner table instead of stabbing Dimcken’s eyes out with a fork, then so be it.

He bit his lip instead and had a drink of wine.

After the bread they were served roasted boar and vegetables, as well as a strange thick sauce that the others all clearly loved. Loki tried it carefully. It wasn’t bad, although it tasted strange to his Aesir-raised tongue.

“Where is Sofftia this evening?” King Dimcken asked Camtan.

“She is unwell, the baby is making things difficult for her.” Camtan replied.

“A shame, I like her. Have you called the healers?”

“Yes Father, they say it is normal and that she must wait it out. They did give her a potion to help her eat.” Camtan replied.

“My wife is well.” Dorgen said suddenly, in a bitter tone. King Dimcken scowled.

“Pity.” He muttered and cut his boar with unnecessary force.

Loki kept his eyes on his plate.

After the main meal the servants brought out a cream-based dessert. It was sweet and light. Loki realised that Dimcken was watching him carefully as he ate.

“Do you like it?” He asked.

“Yes Your Maj- I mean, Husband. It has a lovely flavour.” Loki replied.

“It’s my favourite.” Dimcken said, looking pleased.

His hand wandered back onto Loki’s thigh. Loki had a sudden rush of fear that the King would expect them to have sex that night. Surely not? Surely he would know how sore Loki was? He wouldn’t be so cruel, would he?

Oblivious to Loki’s train of thought, King Dimcken gave his thigh a squeeze. Loki realised that the
saving grace of the Vanir skirts was that it was impossible for King Dimcken to get his hand along Loki’s inner thigh. A small grace, but one he would happily take.

Dorgen was glaring at him again.

“How do you like your chambers?” He asked Loki bluntly.

“They’re very big.” Loki said without thinking. “And exquisite.” He added hurriedly. “I have never seen anything so fine.”

King Dimcken grinned broadly. “We know what luxury is supposed to feel like.” He said. His hand was rubbing up and down Loki’s leg. Even though it was under the table his arm movement made it obvious what he was doing. Loki could feel his face start to burn as two of the Princes tried to find something else to look at. Dorgen just stared at him with open hostility.

“I guess Asgard is not as fine as I have heard.” He said.

Loki heard the challenge and fought not to rise to it. Insulting Vanheim in defence of Asgard would definitely come under the heading of ‘causing trouble’. He could not afford to do so.

“Our two cultures are quite different, for all that we share a common heritage.” He said instead. “I am pleased to learn more about yours.”

King Dimcken was scowling at his son, but brightened when Loki spoke.

“You know Dorgen, you could go and stay in Asgard for a little while to learn their ways as Loki learns ours. You could take that wife of yours.” He said. “If we’re lucky she’ll fall off the Bifrost on the way there.”

“No thank you Father. I am quite content to remain in Vanaheim.” Dorgen said through gritted teeth.

“I’m sure.” King Dimcken said.

To Loki’s relief, King Dimcken did not tell him to stay after dinner. He spent a few eternities being kissed by him while letting the King’s hands wander freely, but in the end King Dimcken pulled away and let Loki go to get some rest.

“I will see you tomorrow.” He said, in between the last few kisses. “I will see you at lunch, and again at dinner.”

“Yes Husband.” Loki mumbled, his voice obscured by the King’s mouth.

Finally however he was dismissed. Fosxyr was waiting for him as promised and escorted him back to his chambers.

Once inside, he helped Loki dress for bed and sent Femtchyr to the kitchens for a warm drink.

“How was your first dinner?” He asked as he smoothed the covers down.

“Over.” Loki answered shortly; he was in no mood to talk.

Fosxyr did not press the issue, correctly guessing that three hours of sleep was not enough to combat the amount of distress caused by the last day and a half. He fussed and fluttered about until Loki had finished his drink, then he dampened down the lights and left him to sleep.

Loki lay in the darkness and tried to find something positive to think about. Lunch and dinner, but
not in-between? Perhaps the King’s days were full and Loki would see very little of him. Certainly Odin and Frigga did not spend the bulk of their days together, although they tried to make time for one another often. Maybe if Loki had enough time to himself then the times he did spend with the King would be easier to manage.

He sat up in the enormous bed. There was something he wanted.

Carefully, he pulled back the covers and crept out of bed. He made his way into the next room and to one of the shelves where he’d seen the box earlier. As quietly as he could he opened the box and took out Thor’s knife. Loki sat and just held it for a while, slowly rubbing his fingers over the handle for the comfort it brought. Then, just as quietly, he put it back safe and secure and went back to bed.
Chapter Summary

What Does a King's Consort Actually do all Day?

Loki was woken early by Fosxyr, who told him that breakfast was in the next room. He allowed himself to be wrapped up in a robe and escorted to the table where Femtchyr was waiting by a covered tray.

Breakfast was porridge, bread and jams, with cut fruit. Loki ate slowly, acutely aware that both Femtchyr and Fosxyr were still in the room. Eventually it got too much for him.

“Can I have some privacy please?” He asked, trying and failing to keep the edge from his voice.

He wasn’t really angry at them. He was angry at his whole situation. He was furious with Odin for causing it, and Dimcken for enjoying it.

Old people, Loki decided, should be culled to prevent such stupid lapses in judgement.

Still burning with unexpressed anger, he finished his breakfast and made his way to the bathing room. Wraenyr was waiting by the hot bath, which was steaming. Loki scowled at him and pulled his own clothes off with more than necessary force.

“Leave.” He snapped, and Wraenyr fled.

Loki splashed into the bath, spilling water onto the floor and telling himself that he didn’t care. He looked at the mess for a moment, then scooped some water out of the bath at let it fall on the floor, making the spill larger.

He sat in the heated water for a long time, scowling at the stupid frosted windows. Stupid bath, stupid chambers, too big for anyone, stupid furniture, stupid servants, stupid King, stupid Vanaheim, stupid…

Loki’s head fell to his chest as he started to sob. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be in Thor’s arms, to feel the warmth that they brought, to hear that everything would be alright.

He pulled his legs up against his chest and sat curled into a tight ball, trying to will himself home.

Possibly as a survival strategy, he’d almost deliberately not thought beyond the wedding. He’d come to marry King Dimcken, now that he’d done it he wanted to go home where he belonged. Instead he was still here, still the King’s Consort, still far from Thor. He would have to let himself be kissed and touched every day. Once healed, he would have to let the King have sex with him whenever he wanted. Loki’s life had narrowed from Prince of one realm to personal whore of another.

There was the softest of clicks as the door opened behind him.

“Get out.” Loki sobbed.

“I’m sorry Your Grace, but you know I’m supposed to stay with you.” Fosxyr said in a gentle voice.
Loki whirled, splashing water everywhere, and threw the first thing his hand landed on at the servant.

Liquid soap splashed down onto the floor at Fosxyr’s feet. He carefully stepped around it as Loki searched for something else to throw.

“Your Grace.”

“Shut up! Just SHUT UP! Leave me alone! I want to be alone!” Loki screamed.

He couldn’t do this, not for three centuries, he’d barely survived a single day.

Fosxyr didn’t say anything else, but he didn’t leave either. He watched as Loki folded back into himself and sobbed into his arms. After a moment, when he was sure that Loki wouldn’t throw anything more, Fosxyr stepped forwards and gently stroked Loki’s hair.

Loki didn’t try to push him away, just sobbed harder for a long time. Finally, after the water had grown tepid, he finally gulped and stuttered his way to stopping.

“Frankly I’m surprised it took you so long.” Fosxyr said. “They must breed them tough in Asgard.”

Loki let out a cross between a laugh and a cough. He clung to the edge of the bath and let Fosxyr keep stroking his hair.

“I’m in trouble now, aren’t I?” He managed to say. “King Dimcken will hear about this.”

“No, no he won’t. I told you before that you are not the first arranged marriage in the world, well, you’re not even the first one in this chamber. The Queen before you was much more destructive when she was roused.”

Loki sat up carefully.

“What happened to her?” He asked.

Fosxyr looked uncomfortable.

“She was a pretty young thing,” he said. “But not very wise. She had an affair, which the King *did* find out about. As you can imagine he was not pleased.”

“He wouldn’t be.” Loki said. His voice was raspy from crying.

“She was executed for treason. They took her out to the forest and left her tied up and soaked in blood for the wolves to eat alive. There was only blood left when they went back the next morning.”

Loki stared at him in horror. “That’s…” He began.

“The King’s judgement.” Fosxyr said sternly. “Which all must heed. Are you ready to come out now?”

Loki nodded and rose. Fosxyr’s expression was still warning him to keep his thoughts about the King’s judgement private.

“What happened to her lover?” He asked carefully.

“He was never caught.” Fosxyr said. “To this day they don’t know who he is.” He was still looking at Loki carefully. Clearly nobody argued with the King.
“I made a huge mess.” Loki said instead, looking at the soap and water he’d splashed onto the floor.

“Wraenyr will clean it, it’s his job. Although privately, I think he might be grateful if you took out the living room next time, he doesn’t have to set foot in there.” Fosxyr said in a more normal tone. His face looked relieved that Loki had decided not to press the issue.

Loki managed a small smile and followed Fosxyr to the wardrobe.

“King Dimcken said he would see me at lunch.” Loki said as Fosxyr pulled the long robe over his head. “What am I supposed to do before then?”

“What would you like to do?” Fosxyr asked him. “Walking in the gardens is quite popular, reading, craftwork, if you like to do craftwork. You could take up painting.”

“Can I have a tour of the Palace?” Loki asked.

Fosxyr smiled.

“Of course Your Grace. Would you like me to take you, or would you like to see if one of the Princes is free?”

“I don’t want to bother them.” Loki said. “You can show me.”

“As you wish.” Fosxyr said as he held up two middle garments. “Which one do you like best?”

“The green one.” Loki said.

Fosxyr smiled widely at the joke, they were both green.

“The one on your right.” Loki said.

“Excellent choice Your Grace.” Fosxyr said.

The Palace was huge. Wide sweeping corridors led to more wide sweeping corridors. The walls and ceilings were painted in a multitude of colours and images. Fosxyr led Loki through the more common ones for the King’s Consort. The way to the King’s chambers, although that earned him a cold look, the way to the throne room, the feasting hall, the largest garden, the front gate.

“Where are the stables?” Loki asked. “Am I allowed to ride?”

“Of course Your Grace, although if I may be a little bold – “

“When aren’t you?” Loki interjected.

“ – a few riding lessons may be beneficial. You seemed a little unbalanced during the tour.” Fosxyr finished, grinned hugely at him.

“I am not used to riding sideways.” Loki said. “I am quite a strong rider in breeches.”

“That as it may be, you have no breeches here; I can order the Stable Master to find you a good instructor?”

“I would like that.” Loki said, inwardly forcing down his desire to hike up his skirts, sit astride a stallion and show these people what real riding was supposed to look like.
Granted real riding probably wouldn’t look *quite* like that, but close enough.

He had been selfish earlier. He had given in to his desire to lash out and it was only through the understanding of the servants that he was not right now being disciplined by the King, and then banished by Odin.

No Trouble, No Mischief.

He had to do better.

“Mother-Loki!” called out a loud, cheerful voice.

Loki turned and found Prince Camtan was running towards him.

“Prince Camtan.” He greeted.

“Just Camtan, remember?”

“Just Loki, remember?” Loki replied.

Camtan grinned in response.

“I’m glad to see you out walking. What are you up to?”

“Fosxyr was giving me a tour of the Palace.” Loki said.

“Brilliant, I shall take over. Come along.” Camtan said and hooked his arm through Loki’s.

Loki glanced at Fosxyr nervously but the servant was smiling.

“I will go and speak to the Stable Master now, Your Grace.” He said and walked away as Camtan pulled Loki in the other direction.

“What have you seen already?” Camtan asked as he led Loki at a fair pace through the corridors.

“The Throne Room, the Feasting Hall – “ Loki began.

“All boring stuff then, have you seen the weapons vault?”

“No, not yet.” Loki said and found his pace increasing as Camtan led him down one set of corridors, through a guarded door, down another set that led to another guarded door and finally into a large room filled with –

Ordinary weapons. Metal ones with sharp edges. Loki realised he was actually little surprised, and disappointed. But of course Vanaheim wouldn’t have the same level of weaponry in its vaults that Asgard would have. That’s because Asgard had it.

“Come through here.” Camtan said and led Loki to a doorway at the far end. “This is Father’s sword, he wielded it in battle against the invading forces, the ones that Asgard came and saved us from.”

Loki examined the sword. It didn’t look that well used.

“He must have been a fine warrior.” He said.

Camtan hesitated for just a moment before saying “the finest.”
They shared a slight moment of understanding before both looked away. Loki didn’t even know if he could trust Camtan yet, he hoped so, but now was not the time to make observations about the Prince’s father. It might never be the time.

“Here is Prince Norbleen’s weapons and armour. He was my older brother, but he died before I was born.” Camtan said, showing Loki the suit that lay further along. “In the same war.”

“The King must have been devastated.” Loki said.

“He was. Prince Norbleen was a great man and a great warrior. Everyone said he was going to make a fine King.” Camtan said.

“I’m sure Dorgen will too.” Loki said.

Camtan’s expression became serious.

“Father doesn’t think so, that’s why he still holds the throne, if it were Prince Norbleen he would have stepped aside centuries ago.”

Loki raised his eyebrows and turned to check the door, but they were alone.

“Relax, the guards can’t hear, and even if they did, we’re family talking about family. It’s true too.”

Suddenly Loki hated Prince Norbleen for dying. If he hadn’t then Loki wouldn’t be here. But just as quickly he dismissed the feeling. Prince Norbleen almost certainly wouldn’t have chosen to die for his own reasons, let alone Loki’s.

Loki studied Camtan carefully. It was clear to him that there was quite an age gap between the two younger Princes and Dorgen.

“Are you and Dorgen full brothers?” He asked.

“No, his mother was Father’s second Queen, Prince Norbleen’s mother was the first one, and mine and Musleen’s mother was the third. And you’re the fourth!” He finished merrily.

Loki frowned, did that mean Camtan’s mother had been the one killed for treason? Or was that why Dorgen was so ill-favoured?

He didn’t feel he knew Camtan well enough to ask yet.

“I see.” He said instead.

“Are you going to throw parties like mother did?” Camtan asked, he leaned in conspiratorially. “The answer to that question is ‘yes’.” He whispered loudly.

Loki grinned in spite of himself. “I’ve no doubt you will help me with organising the little things, like the guest list, food, music and wine?” He asked as he made his way further around the room.

“I may have a few suggestions. It’s been ages since the Queen’s Chambers were merry.” Camtan said.

Loki nodded. “Is it normally the responsibility of the Queen to throw parties?” He asked.

“Normally yes. Just small ones, thirty to forty people or so. The King often uses them to converse with nobles away from the eyes of those not invited.” Camtan said, a little more softly.
Loki nodded in understanding. This was politics, no doubt he would have been introduced to the task by Fosxyr soon enough anyway.

“But that doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t have a good time, and not every party is for the King, it wouldn’t be a good cover if he was at every one.” Camtan said. “Oh, this here is the shield of my Uncle, who died five and a half centuries ago. He was the General of the King’s army in his day.”

Loki examined the shield carefully. It was full of dents. A real General’s shield.

“You must always invite the King of course, and myself and Musleen, you can leave off Dorgen about half the time, and never invite his wife.” Camtan was saying behind him. Loki turned with a frown.

“Why doesn’t the King like her?” He asked.

“She’s ugly.” Camtan said bluntly. “My father likes beautiful things, beautiful homes, clothes, people” he looked pointedly at Loki “he feels that they have more merit. Sadly, Dorgen had the misfortune to fall in love with a kind, sensible, loving, generous woman with a face like a smashed brick. Father hates her. He didn’t approve of the marriage but as she is from the house of a very high noble family, he couldn’t forbid it without causing a major rift. He won’t have her anywhere near him if he can help it though.”

Loki couldn’t believe it.

“Actually,” Camtan continued, “now that I think about it, she must know your mother.”

“What?” Loki asked.

“She married Dorgen, and her best friend, the Lady Frigga, married King Odin. I’m sure I’m right. I guess you should invite her after all, a few times when the King is not present. He’ll forgive you if it’s for family, well, mostly. Father won’t want to upset the King of Asgard by forcing his son to snub his wife’s best friend.”

Loki just stared at him. He knew that Frigga wrote to her old friends here, no one had ever mentioned that one of them was the Crown Prince’s wife.

“Are you alright?” Camtan asked, peering at him.

“Yes.” Loki said carefully. He wondered if Frigga had written about him these last few months.

“Good, now, when do you want dancing lessons?”

“Dancing lessons?”

“Father likes to watch us young people dance, he enjoys it. He wasn’t jesting when he asked me to teach you, so when would you like to learn?”

Loki thought about it. No Trouble, No Mischief.

“As soon as possible.” He said.

“I’m free tomorrow morning? I’ll come by your chambers with a musician.” Camtan said with a smile. “In the meantime, it’s nearly lunchtime, I’ll escort you back.”

“I’m supposed to have lunch with the King.” Loki said as they started walking.
Camtan pulled a face.

“He’ll probably want to take you up to the high tower for a picnic. He loves doing that. He can survey the whole city from up there. I hope you are fit enough for the climb.”

“Is he?” Loki asked.

“Oh yes. He goes often. When you are walking in the gardens, be careful about how you act, he may be watching.”

Those words sent a chill down Loki’s spine. He hadn’t done anything that would anger the King, Fosxyr wouldn’t let him, but even so he found it disturbing.

Of course in theory Heimdall was always watching anyway, but he only reported on threats to Asgard, if he was taking any extra pleasure from his job then Loki didn’t know about it.

“Thanks for the advice.” He said as they headed back upwards.

Camtan escorted him to the King’s Chamber door, where Fosxyr was waiting patiently.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Camtan said with a smile and headed away.

As Fosxyr knocked on the door, Loki took a deep breath and steeled himself for more time with the King.
Hi All,

I'm really sorry for the delay. I got sick over the weekend and it has taken me this long to get better. Mum and Dad even moved me into their spare room so that they could keep an eye on me, as they did not like me being so sick when all alone.

This is the next chapter that I already had ready to go, and contains some more non cons. It may take me a few days to get back to writing more after this, but I will get there. I feel a lot better now.

Loki was ushered through the door by the King's servant, and shown to a seat in the reception room. There were about twenty people all sitting and waiting for their turn to see the King. The servant vanished into the next room to inform the King that Loki was here while a second one brought him a glass of wine.

Loki murmured his thanks and took a very small sip as his eyes took in the room.

He was the centre of attention. The nobles waiting there had been sitting in various groups, no doubt Fosxyr could tell Loki quite a bit about the various factions represented.

The sound of yelling from the other room made Loki jump slightly. The others all frowned and looked concerned. Clearly if the King was in a bad mood their requests were less likely to be favourable agreed to.

After a moment more one of the nobles stood and made his way over to where Loki sat. Loki almost stood as he approached, but Fosxyr's fingertips on his shoulder stopped him.

"Your Grace." The noble said, kneeling before Loki.

Loki extended his hand, palm down, as he remembered his lessons with the Master of Ceremonies. The noble placed his palm upwards against Loki's briefly as a sign of respect.

"Lord Eveilyr, Your Grace." He said as an introduction.

"Please sit." Loki said, gesturing to the chair on his right.

The noble sat and smiled at him. "You are our Aesir Queen" he said, "I have been to Asgard only once, but I found it to be a beautiful place. There was a waterfall out past the city to the east where light would sparkle upwards along its length."
"The Fey Falls." Loki said. "I visited them often as a child."

"I took my wife there, before she was my wife. Best decision I ever made, it was that day that we fell in love." He said.

Loki smiled at him. "I look forward to seeing more of Vanaheim, I am sure you have some beautiful places of your own."

"That we do, Your Grace, that we do. Perhaps you can persuade the King to take you on a day trip to the fens, they are a lovely spot, grassy and shady, with a wonderful view of the city from Dancer's Peak."

"It sounds lovely." Loki said as another noble, emboldened by the first, made his way over to them.

"Your Grace." He said, kneeling.

Once again Loki held his hand out and was introduced.

"Lord Kinndyr." He said.

"Please sit." Loki said. He was starting to feel uncertain about the way the others were looking at him, but there was nothing he could do. In time he would get to know all of them, and putting it off wasn't going to help any.

"The fens run alongside my lands, I would be honoured to entertain the King and yourself if you were to ride out for the day."

Lord Eveilyr looked annoyed at this offer, Loki got the feeling that he was sitting between two powerful men with opposing interests. And yet even this was not unusual. Fosxyr's fingers were still resting lightly on Loki's shoulder and he felt confident that the servant would stop him from becoming too friendly with anyone the King did not approve of.

"That is a generous offer, Lord Kinndyr." Loki said carefully. "I am sure his Majesty will consider it should he decide to show me the fens."

Both men looked as though they expected the response, although Kinndyr still looked vaguely disappointed. No doubt they were both hoping Loki's youth could be played upon to gain a little favour, but Loki already knew that his views, at least publically, must align with the King's. He took another very small sip of wine, enough to taste it on his lips but not enough to actually swallow.

The commotion from before started up again. The nobles waiting their turn started to look anxious.

King Dimcken strode into the room with a crash of doors. His face looked like thunder as two men scuttled behind him, pleading for him to come back and finish his papers.

"I am hungry!" The King snapped. "And I will do them after lunch!"

His face was dark as he scanned the room, but brightened as he caught sight of Loki.

"Loki." He breathed, his mouth turned upwards into a smile. "I have something to show you, follow me."

Loki jumped to his feet immediately. Fosxyr managed to lift the wine glass from his hand a second before the King's arms wrapped around him and a hard kiss was planted firmly on his lips.

Loki could feel the blush rise in his cheeks as he was subjected to a thoroughly public display. But
there was nothing he could do about it. He allowed the King to touch and kiss him and focussed
instead on how to maintain his composure once he was released.

Finally the King broke away and, slipping an arm around Loki's waist, began heading out of his
chambers.

The nobles were left sitting there; no doubt they would remain for hours before they even got a
chance to see the King again.

Loki was led through the corridors to the base of a large staircase. It seemed that Camtan had been
right and the King wanted lunch at the top.

"I hope you are a good climber." King Dimcken said against Loki's mouth. "If you need to stop and
rest, tell me."

Loki had no doubt what a rest would entail, and vowed to reach the top without one if it killed him.

They walked up slowly together. King Dimcken kept stopping anyway to point out features of the
Palace visible from the windows as they climbed. When they reached the top, the King took Loki's
hand and pulled him to the guard rail.

"From here you can see the whole city." He panted. Frankly, Loki was a little impressed that the
King made it all the way up at all. But it seemed despite his age King Dimcken was quite fit, which
Loki found disappointing.

"It's beautiful." He said, partly because it was expected and partly because it was true.

"The most beautiful city in the nine reams." King Dimcken said, nuzzling the back of Loki's neck.
His hands were resting on Loki's hips and he had moulded his body against Loki's. "Look over
there." He said, moving his nuzzling to Loki's ear. "That's the Tower of Magic."

"Where?" Loki asked, fighting to keep himself calm. From the way King Dimcken was slowly
starting to rut against him he was afraid that the King wasn't willing to wait for Loki to heal properly
before having sex again. Loki was still quite sore from two nights ago.

"There." The King said, reluctantly lifting a hand from Loki's hip so that he could point. "It's the one
shimmering in the sunlight."

“Oh yes.” Loki said, he was pressed so far into the guard rail that it was digging in. "It's stunning. I
would love to see the inside of it."

The King pulled back a little then, enough to turn Loki around.

"You will, I have spoken to my head sorcerer this morning and he will arrange a tutoring program
for you at the Tower. You'll visit a few days every week." He said and plastered his face against
Loki's.

"Thank you." Loki mumbled in response, because it was expected. "Thank you Husband."

Dimcken kissed him for a long time. When he did finally pull away Loki was breathless and his
mouth was rubbed red.

"Time for lunch." Dimcken said.

Loki saw that a table had been set up on the far side of the tower. It had a variety of foods for them
both. He felt a twinge of sympathy for the servants who had to carry everything up there.

King Dimcken seated himself and started to eat. Loki sat down carefully opposite and waited until the King gestured for him to start as well.

"What is that?" Loki asked as they ate, pointing to a large park in the distance. It had to be enormous to be seen so clearly from their height and distance.

"The Market Garden." King Dimcken said. "Every month for three days the famers and craftsmen come to peddle their wares. The rest of the time it is a public garden for all who wish to visit. It is quite spectacular."

"It sounds amazing." Loki said.

"Does Asgard have anything similar?" King Dimcken asked.

"Nowhere near as grand." Loki answered.

This was actually a lie. Asgard had massive markets, seasonal, periodical, and ongoing, but the first rule of speaking to King Dimcken was to never let him know anything he was proud of was second best. This was a rule Loki had learnt very quickly.

"You look quite spectacular." King Dimcken said suddenly. "You look, very beautiful. I like the way the sunlight shines on your hair."

"Thank you Husband." Loki replied automatically. The fear was growing in him again.

King Dimcken rose and pulled Loki to him again. After several long minutes of kissing, he reached down and grabbed a handful of Loki’s skirts.

Loki felt himself start to panic. He wasn't healed. He was far too sore. This would be difficult for him at the best of times but right now he didn't think he could keep calm. No Trouble, No Mischief. But surely he couldn't be expected to do this so soon?!

Clearly King Dimcken had other ideas. He pushed Loki's skirt up until he could get his hands on Loki's buttocks. He squeezed and fondled the mounds of flesh as he moaned into Loki's mouth.

Loki whimpered in fear, which made King Dimcken pull back slightly to look at him warningly. Protesting was not what the King wanted to hear.

Loki swallowed nervously and tried to stay calm enough to speak.

"I'm sorry Your Majesty, please, the healer told me not to for a week." He stuttered out. "You were rather, uh, large for a first time. You left me rather sore."

'Please work.' He thought desperately. 'Please work.'

King Dimcken seemed mollified by Loki's excuse, especially when the blame was placed squarely on the size of his penis.

"I suppose you are quite young and tight." He conceded. "We'll just have to do something else."

With that he turned Loki around and bent him over the table. Loki gasped in surprise and tried to find purchase on the table top.

"What are you doing?!" He asked frantically.
"Something else," King Dimcken said, Loki watched as bony fingers wrapped around the container of olive oil by his head and lifted it away.

"You really are a sweet one." King Dimcken said as the oil splashed between Loki's buttocks. "I'm going to have such fun teaching you about the joys of sex." He put the container down and began rubbing the oil against Loki's anus.

Loki was frozen in shock. He knew about this, of course he knew, men would lie with men after all, but he hadn't expected the King of Vanheim to indulge in such acts. He was wrong, horribly horrible wrong and there was no way out.

The King’s fingers began pressing inside and Loki shut his eyes in response. He tried to shut out what was happening but he couldn't, it was far too raw.

“Relax my darling beauty. Breathe into your stomach.” The King purred as he pressed a finger inside.

Loki forced himself to obey, the feeling was distressing, and he couldn’t stop the tears from spilling down his cheeks. King Dimcken worked a second finger inside of him. The King appeared to be in a hurry, and Loki tried hard to relax to ease the way as much as possible.

“That’s it, just relax.” King Dimcken said, working his fingers back and forth, trying to open Loki up. His hand withdrew and Loki pressed his face hard into the table top, trying to hide his face from the King’s gaze. A thick presence pressed against Loki’s opening and he let out a sob of fear.

The King pushed his way inside inch by inch. Loki struggled not to fight it. His body knew it was being invaded but he had no choice but to obey. He cried out with each push as the King forced his way inside.

“Wonderful.” King Dimcken gasped. “You feel so wonderful, my beautiful wife.”

He started trying to thrust in earnest. Loki bit his lip and forced himself to just keep breathing. It would be over soon, he just had to survive the next few minutes. Somehow it would all be alright if he just managed a few more minutes.

The King was grunting in time with his thrusts, hands gripping Loki’s hips tightly as he heaved back and forth. Loki kept his eyes shut and his breathing deep. His whole being was focussed on the end. It had to end soon, it had to.

With a grunt of effort King Dimcken spent himself. He collapsed on top of Loki a second later, still moaning in pleasure. Loki lay still and tried not to think about the heavy presence pressing down on his back and panting into his ear.

“Wonderful.” Breathed the King.

Afterwards King Dimcken sat in his chair, still panting lightly with exertion. He sipped on his wine as he regarded Loki with a satisfied smirk.

Loki sat awkwardly in the other chair. He was a mess, his whole underside hurt now as a result of the King. He wasn't even sure that he could walk without limping, and he had five hundred steps to get down. His bottom was covered in oil, which was causing his clothing to stick to him, his face was red from kissing and crying, and his hair was a shambles.
But the one thing that really bothered him was that this was another thing he could not give to Thor.

He hadn't considered it before, but as the King had thrust inside of him, Loki had had the sudden thought that this could have been a gift for Thor, something that was just for him and no one else. But that was not to be. Loki would have to find something else to save for his true love.

King Dimcken rose and made his way to the edge.

"Come and look at this." He said, beckoning.

Loki rose and walked forwards. He *was* limping slightly, and couldn't quite hide it. King Dimcken smirked at the sight. Loki found himself desperately hoping it was the thought of his large member and not the pain itself that was making the King so satisfied.

"That forest in the distance is the gateway to the hunting grounds. I usually take a hunting party several times during the summer months. Can you shoot with a bow?"

"Yes." Loki said. A pat on his bottom reminded him. "Yes Husband."

"You can join us on the hunt itself then; those who aren't strong shooters stay in the camp we set up in a little valley by a waterfall."

"That sounds wonderful." Loki said. He was struggling to sound enthusiastic though.

King Dimcken seemed to realise it, and thankfully didn't force him to speak further. They made their way back down the tower steps together. Loki was trying not to wince too obviously as they reached the door.

The servants were waiting for them, as were a few of the King's advisors, who looked relieved to see them. Several of them were holding papers.

"Must you follow me everywhere?" King Dimcken growled, "I am returning to my chambers now, and I won't be signing anything in the corridors."

They backed away hurriedly as the King turned to Loki.

"I'll see you at dinner." He said, planting another hard kiss on Loki's mouth.

"Yes Husband." Loki whispered as he was released.

King Dimcken walked off down the corridors, leaving Loki standing there with Fosxyr.

"I need a bath." Loki said, allowing his shoulders to slump.

Fosxyr didn't argue, he led the way back to Loki's chambers and started the water running while Wraenyr fluttered around collecting towels and soap.

Loki stripped off his clothing. He didn't care if they saw, the servants here were like moving furniture, expected to see everything and speak of nothing. Right now Loki didn't feel like arguing.

He climbed into the hot water and pulled his knees up against himself.

Fosxyr silently handed him a cloth. There was no way that he would have missed the oily residue on Loki's buttocks, or the careful way Loki was moving.

Loki took the cloth and began wiping away the oil from his skin. He felt dirty and used.
Once again the cold thought that this was his life for the next three centuries came sliding into his mind. He couldn't do this. It was too much. He tried to think about Thor but all he could think was how soiled he now was. How could Thor even stand to look at him? What would he think of Loki, knowing that he hadn't fought it?

He couldn't fight it. Thor would understand. He loved Loki, he swore he'd wait. Loki would find something left to offer Thor when he got back. Thor would understand.

Loki really, really hoped so.
Fourteen Steps

Chapter Summary

A Suspicious Man and his Kindly Wife

When the oil was washed away and Loki was dried and dressed again, he sat by himself in his living room and held Thor's knife in his hands. It brought him comfort, although judging by the concerned look Fosxyr gave him when he re-entered the room, the servant was thinking different thoughts.

"Your Grace?" He asked tentatively. "You have a visitor."

Loki's head shot up in alarm.

"Not the King." Fosxyr said quickly. "It's Prince Dorgen and his wife, the Princess Mulmyr."

Loki carefully put the knife away. Fosxyr looked relieved.

"My Father gave me those knives." Loki lied, he didn't want anyone to suspect why he cared so much for them, or rather, one in particular. "I was thinking of home."

Fosxyr smiled gently. "I'm sure that your family will write to you soon." He said.

"Yes, Mother promised." Loki said. "And no doubt Father will write through her." He added. He did not want anyone suspecting how strained his current relationship with his father was given that he had just spent half an hour holding a knife that Odin had supposedly given him.

He remembered why Fosxyr had disturbed him. "Send them in."

"Perhaps in the Meeting Room rather than your inner chamber?" Fosxyr suggested.

Loki remembered that King Dimcken was not fond of his daughter in law.

"Yes, show them into there." He said and put the box back on the shelf.

Fosxyr disappeared, and Loki followed him through the first set of doors to the Reception Room to wait.

They were shown in a moment later and came to bow before Loki. Dorgen looked annoyed, so much so Loki wondered why he had come, but his unasked question was answered a moment later. The Princess Mulmyr was clearly the driving force behind this visit, Loki caught her warning look to her husband a second before a polite, court approved expression graced her features.

"Your Grace." She said.

"Please, call me Loki." Loki said, holding out his hand for her to greet him. "Dorgen does."

Prince Dorgen looked as though he wanted to snort in derision, but he stayed silent instead as Loki gestured for them both to sit.

Now that Loki could see Princess Mulmyr properly, he understood what Camtan had been saying.
She looked rather like a man who had been carefully done up in women's clothes and makeup. Her face and body were both larger than normal for most Vanir women, and her nose was large and hooked, putting people in mind of some kind of hunting bird like an eagle. Her eyes were a little too small for her face and her lips were too heavy for her jaw.

All in all it was an unfortunate face, doubly so in a court that placed a high value on beauty.

"We've come to pay our respects to you as our new Queen." Princess Mulmyr said.

"Thank you." Loki said. This was normal, the Master of Ceremonies had told him that all of the high noble families would send a representative to greet him after he was wed. Technically Prince Dorgen already counted, but his wife clearly felt that he had not carried out the task to her satisfaction.

To Loki's eyes they seemed as different as two people could be.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" Loki asked.

Femtchyr came silently closer to hear the answer.

"A glass of wine." Dorgen said in an annoyed tone. His wife shot him a warning look before turning back to Loki. "For me as well, thank you. Are you going to have something Loki?"

Loki hesitated. The Vanir drank wine all day, it was a wonder they were not permanently drunk, although the alcohol content of their wines seemed to be quite a bit lower than the Aesir ones. Despite this he was sick of them already.

"A glass of water." He said to Femtchyr, who bowed and headed for the drinks shelves at the back of the room.

"You don't like wine?" Princess Mulmyr asked politely.

"I enjoy it, the Vanir wines are delicious." Loki said quickly, "I am just not used to it yet."

He knew as soon as he'd spoken that she could tell he was lying. There was a shrewdness to her gaze that reminded him of Frigga.

"I understand that you are a friend of my Mother's?" He asked her.

She smiled at his question.

"Queen Frigga and I were childhood playmates, she has written to me quite often over the years after her wedding. I suppose I know rather a lot about you."

Dorgen frowned at her apparent familiarity but Loki actually found it comforting.

"By any chance did Mother ask you to keep an eye on me?" He asked.

Her eyes twinkled. "Maybe."

Femtchyr brought the drinks. Loki looked up at him from where he sat.

"Femtchyr, can you bring us something small to eat? What is most common?" He asked, turning to Mulmyr.

"The open-pies are quite nice, although if you want something sweet the baby-cakes are Dorgen's favourite." She said.
Loki looked back at Femtchyr. "Some of each please."

"Yes Your Grace." He said and vanished into the servant's corridor.

Princess Mulmyr was a good conversationalist. She chatted merrily about Vanaheim and drew Loki into telling her about Asgard and the people there, particularly the ones they both knew. Most of Frigga's Ladies in Waiting were from Vanaheim originally. They had been young unwed maidens when they left, most of them younger sisters, and most had found themselves an Aesir husband over the years. There was only one who hadn't, the Lady Visxena had remained unwed despite a number of discrete attempts by the Aesir manhood, and was a great friend to Frigga.

Loki told Mulmyr all about his life growing up in Asgard under his mother's watchful eye. His and Thor's every attempt at mischief had been thwarted in their younger years, and it was only in the later ones that they managed to get away with anything.

"I shall tell Frigga about that one." Mulmyr said with a delighted smile when Loki had finished describing one of their few victories.

"No!" He said, struggling to contain his laughter. "Thor is still there, he'll be in twice the trouble!"

She laughed, ignoring Dorgen who sat stiffly behind her on the couch. His mood did not lift the whole time they were there.

"It's dinner time." He said at last.

Loki sobered immediately.

Mulmyr sensed his mood and gave him a tight smile.

"You two had better be getting along then." She said.

"You should join us." Dorgen said.

"Believe me, Husband, I am content to eat alone." She replied, the first hint she'd given all afternoon that she was aware of the King's dislike. "Don't cause trouble." She said to him.

Dorgen looked angry but didn't argue. Loki rose and walked with them to the door.

"It was a pleasure to meet you." He said and meant it.

"And you, Loki." She said. "You may call on me at any time, for anything, if you need to."

Loki smiled at her. She reminded him a great deal of Frigga. She was calm, composed and every inch a Queen. When the time came she would be good for Vanaheim.

In the meantime, Loki had a dinner to get through.

King Dimcken looked exhausted. Loki's first clue to the King's condition was that he was shown in by a servant instead of fetched by the King himself.

Musleen was already there, and he sat watching his father with a slightly concerned look on his face.
The King grinned broadly when he caught sight of Loki, although his smile dimmed slightly at the sight of his eldest son.

"Loki my darling, you have quite worn me out." He declared. "Our little exercise at the top of the tower was far too vigorous for an old man like me."

Dorgen looked disgusted as Loki blushed furiously at the King's lack of discretion.

Despite his claim, King Dimcken did not look as though he was unhappy with the arrangement, nor did he state that they shouldn't do it again. Loki frantically tried to think of an appropriate response.

The King held out a hand and pulled Loki into his lap as Dorgen sat down on the other side of the table.

Loki couldn't hide the slight wince as he landed. King Dimcken immediately laid his hand flat against Loki's buttocks, his palm was resting just over the anus, and leaned in close.

"How do you feel?" He murmured against Loki's lips.

"Sore." Loki answered honestly, and quietly.

He felt King Dimcken smile against his mouth. "I want to see."

Loki had a sudden terrifying vision of King Dimcken bending him over the dinner table in front of his own sons, but thankfully the King did not do so. He ushered Loki onto his own seat as Camtan was shown into the room, followed by a pregnant woman.

She was quite pretty, with golden hair and blue eyes. She curtsied to the King and to Loki.

"My wife, Sofftia." Camtan said. Loki smiled and rested his hand above hers in the approved manner.

They sat at the table and the servant placed the food on the table.

King Dimcken obviously approved of Princess Sofftia, he asked her about how her pregnancy was progressing and whether she had spoken to the healers about her feeling ill.

"The healers visited me, yes Your Majesty. But they say I must wait for it to pass." She said as they ate their main course. "I am doing everything they advise."

"Good, good. You must take care of yourself. My grandchild is in there." King Dimcken said.

"My children are well." Dorgen dropped into the conversation.

King Dimcken ignored him.

"And you Musleen, any fair maidens take you eye?" King Dimcken said, patting Loki's leg lightly under the table. There wasn't the energy of the night before though, and Loki got the distinct impression that while the King may *wish* for more, he wasn't actually able to achieve it. His age was a blessing in more ways than one.

"No one father, I'm afraid I cannot seem to fall in love. Of course I am only young yet." Musleen said easily.

King Dimcken was less impressed. "I would see you married, Musleen. I want to know that you are happy."
"Happy with a pretty bride." Dorgen interjected.

The King scowled. "Of course, he should have something fair to look at; you don't and look how bitter you are all the time." He snapped.

Dorgen glared but kept his silence.

Loki sat uneasily and pretended that he hadn't really heard them. Camtan and Sofftia did likewise.

"I am tired." King Dimcken said suddenly. "You should go."

The meal was only half over, but the Princes and Princess obediently laid down their utensils and rose to leave.

Loki did likewise but was stopped by the King's hand.

"You stay Loki, eat some more." He said.

Loki obediently picked up his fork and placed another mouthful in his mouth as the others took their leave.

"Take care of the baby." King Dimcken said to Sofftia, his voice was still gruff but the sentiment appeared genuine.

As soon as they were gone the King turned to Loki.

"I want to see you." He said. "In my bedroom, I want to see you naked."

Loki put his fork down and walked slowly to the King's bedroom. Dimcken was right behind; he rested his hands on Loki's shoulders as they reached the door.

Once inside he tugged impatiently on Loki's robe.

"Show me. Now." He said.

Loki steeled himself and pulled the clothes from his body. He realised that it was the first time he'd been truly naked with the King.

King Dimcken held up a hand and made a circle motion. Fighting to keep the disgust from his face, Loki obediently turned around on the spot.

“Beautiful.” King Dimcken said. “Bend over against the bed.”

Loki felt the fear rising as he walked to the end of the bed and carefully bent himself over.

“Spread your legs.” King Dimcken said. Loki eased his legs open. The King pressed his foot on the inside of Loki's ankle, forcing him open even more. “Good.” King Dimcken said from behind him.

Loki fought not to jump in fear as he felt the King’s fingers pull his buttocks open. One thin digit touched lightly against the side of his anus, and Loki pressed his face into the blankets to keep from screaming.

“Bend over more.” King Dimcken said.

Loki couldn’t get his head any lower, so he lifted himself up on his toes. King Dimcken made a noise of approval.
Loki felt the thin fingers touch him on either side of his vaginal lips, carefully pulling them both back so that the King could observe his handiwork.

“Oh yes you are very tender.” King Dimcken said. He sounded pleased with himself.

The fingers withdrew and Loki breathed a silent sigh of relief.

“Get up.” King Dimcken said.

Loki rose and stood silently by the bed. The King sat down on it and sighed.

“If I were a few centuries younger I’d show you what else can be done, but right now I am tired. Help me change.”

Loki obediently walked over to him and helped him undress. When the King was naked, Loki scanned the room for a nightshirt, but couldn’t see any.

“Where are your nightshirts Husband?” He asked.

“Somewhere through there.” King Dimcken said, waving his hand in the direction of his own bathroom corridor. Loki opened the door to find the King’s bathing room servant standing silently by the wardrobe door with a nightshirt in his arms. Loki took it from him and tried not to feel embarrassed about being naked as he went back to the King. He held the nightshirt up so that King Dimcken could work his arms into it, and then helped the King into bed.

“Come and lie here with me.” King Dimcken ordered.

Loki obeyed, lying on top of the King’s covers on the bed. King Dimcken was examining Loki’s body with lustful, but exhausted eyes. He reached out and tried to touch Loki’s penis, but it was just out of reach. Swallowing his disgust, Loki shuffled forwards and allowed the King to curl his fingers around Loki’s length.

“Sit on my lap.” King Dimcken said. He didn’t let go as Loki rose and settled himself astride the King. “Good, up a bit.” King Dimcken directed. Loki rose a little into the air as the King slowly pressed Loki’s penis downward and underneath his body. “Your balls are smaller than normal, do they work?” King Dimcken asked.

“Yes Husband, normally.” Loki answered, trying not to fight the intimate touching.

“Can you get your penis inside yourself?” King Dimcken asked, pressing the end of it back towards Loki’s vagina entrance.

Loki struggled to keep the incredulous look off his face. He’d never even thought to try such a thing! That was perverted behaviour at the highest level for intersexed beings.

“I don’t know Husband.” He answered truthfully, desperately trying to keep the disgust out of his voice. He had been tempted to say no but from the way King Dimcken was pressing the end of it back he’d soon be caught out if it turned out to be possible.

The tip could just rest against his entrance. King Dimcken seem satisfied. “I’ll bet if you were swollen you could get an inch in there.” He said. “Not enough to keep it inside, but it would be worth a look one day.”

Loki felt sick. He didn’t think there was any chance ever of him becoming aroused in the King’s presence. The mere thought of it made him want to vomit.
King Dimcken smiled. “I’m tired, kiss me goodnight and then you may go. I will see you again tomorrow.”

“Yes Husband.” Loki said and forced himself to lean forwards and kiss the King. That done, he climbed off the bed and pulled his clothes back on. King Dimcken watched him from where he lay. Then Loki bowed to him and left.

Fosxyr was waiting in the outer chamber. He led Loki back, although by now Loki could find his way almost without difficulty.

Loki walked straight through the chambers and down the corridor to the bathing room. The bath was already filled and steaming, Wraenyr stood nearby with soaps and washcloths.

“Thank you.” Loki said to him as he pulled his clothing off to have his third bath of the day. He felt dirty again. Everywhere King Dimcken had touched him felt as though it was covered with inky, yet at the same time invisible, marks. Loki sank into the water and began to scrub.

Fosxyr made him get out after twenty minutes. “You are clean, even if you don’t feel like it. Don’t give in to the feeling or you’ll never survive.” He said sternly.

Loki wondered how many other Queens he’d watched have this exact same reaction.

Clean and dressed in his nightclothes and robe, Loki sat in his living quarters and tried to read.

“Let me order you some food.” Fosxyr said. “I know his Majesty called dinner to an abrupt end.”

“I’m not hungry.” Loki said.

“Please Your Grace, you must take care of yourself.” Fosxyr said.

“Why? So I can be a pretty plaything for that – “

“Go carefully Your Grace.” Fosxyr said waringly.

“I’m not hungry.” Loki said again.

“Have you forgotten your own plans here? You are supposed to endear the people to Asgard, you cannot do that if you’re starving.” Fosxyr said.

No Trouble, No Mischief.

“Alright.” Loki relented. “I will have something small.”

“Thank you Your Grace.” Fosxyr said and headed for the kitchens.

Loki sat and resisted the urge to go and hold Thor’s knife again. He couldn’t afford to be seen with it too often in case someone became suspicious. He was doing this for Thor. He would make the Vanir people adore him and then he would go home and be with his true love. He had to survive this.

When Fosxyr returned Loki made sure to eat all of his supper. Then he sat and read one of his magic books until he felt sleepy enough to go to bed.
Camtan turned up bright and early the next day to teach Loki Vanir dancing. Loki wasn’t in the mood, but his mantra of ‘No Trouble, No Mischief’ forced him to rise and force a smile onto his face.

Camtan took him through the simpler dances. Loki was a quick study and picked up the moves easily. Each jump and step sent a stab of pain across Loki’s underside, but no trace of it showed on his face. Camtan chatted away cheerfully about the various members of the court that Loki would meet. He seemed to delight in telling Loki all about their foibles and intrigues. Loki listened carefully while giving all the right reactions to this casual gossip. He needed to start making allies, both to endear himself to the people and to protect him from those who wanted to cause him harm.

Fosxyr brought them refreshments for when they finished. They sat on the couches and talked more about the Lords and Ladies.

“What do you about Lord Eveilyr and Lord Kinndyr?” Loki asked. “They both introduced themselves to me yesterday.”

“They hate each other.” Camtan said easily. “Their lands lie alongside one another and every generation they aren’t marrying each other they’re fighting.”

“I see.” Loki said.

“They’ll both try to get you on their side, don’t favour either one of them, but play them both as best you can. Father visits both once a year at different times, they try to outdo each other in everything so you’ll receive some fantastic gifts.”

“Which I accept?”

“Definitely.”

“And if they ask for a favour?”

“They probably won’t, but tell them you must do as the King commands.”

“Right.”

“Do you like fishing, Mother-Loki?”

Loki thought back to Thor and the fishing boat, and his first kiss.

“Not really.” He said. “Not from a boat, the shore is alright.”

He didn’t want anything sullying that memory, even someone as cheerfully innocent as Camtan couldn’t stop the King from noticing Loki’s actions, and perverting them should he choose to do so.
“Shore fishing? Do you get a bit sick in the boats? So does Musleen, he always waits on the shore. He’s a good shot with a bow though, do you shoot?”

“Yes, I enjoy it.”

“From horseback?”

“I can if I ride astride, but…”

“I tried riding astride once. It felt weird and I kept worrying that I’d squash my manhood.” Camtan said.

“There’s a trick to it” Loki said, smiling. “Once you know it, no more worries, well, mostly. Fosxyr said he’d speak to the Stable Master and arrange lessons for me to ride side-on.”

He turned to where Fosxyr was standing, up until that moment apparently oblivious to their conversation. The servant smiled at him.

“The week after next, Your Grace. As soon as we know when you will be required to visit the Tower of Magic for lessons, we must work around that.”

Loki smiled at him and turned back to Camtan.

“It looks like my days are going to be quite full.” He said. “We might not have time for fishing.”

“There’s always time for fishing, and hunting, and sport. I hereby claim one afternoon a week of your company. We will have fun together I promise.” Camtan said with a grin.

Loki returned it. It was nice to have someone who might be a friend.

Just then, Canrryen slipped through the servant’s door and approached them.

“Your Grace, Your Grace,” he said, acknowledging them both. “The Chief Sorcerer is here to greet the King’s Consort.”

Loki found he was looking at Fosxyr for guidance.

“In the public meeting room, Your Grace.” Fosxyr said.

Loki nodded and turned to Canrryen. “Show him to the meeting room, I’ll be there shortly.”

“Yes Your Grace.” Canrryen said, bowing.

Loki turned to Camtan as Canrryen walked away. “Will you come with me, or would you prefer to stay here?”

“I’ll come, I haven’t seen my cousin in over a year.” Camtan said, rising. “He’s always at the Tower of Magic, doing paperwork.”

“Is he very powerful?” Loki asked.

“Not really, he’s got a bit, but he mostly keeps the place running. The really powerful mages are all too busy with their work.” Camtan said.

Loki nodded in understanding and walked through to the meeting room. He hoped that Dimcken had not assumed his power was small due to his masculinity.
The Chief Sorcerer was a middle aged man with a pot belly and a short, white beard. He rose as Loki entered the room and bowed to him.

Loki held his hand out in the required manner and greeted him.

“Welcome, um…”

“Just call him Horrseen, we all do.” Camtan said, slapping his cousin on the shoulder.

Horrseen looked pleased.

“Thank you Your Grace. I have come at the King’s request to arrange seidr lessons for you.” He said to Loki.

“I am eager to continue my education.” Loki said, wondering how he should ensure that Horrseen did not underestimate his abilities.

“I have brought the Crystal, after that I can arrange the best teachers for your potential.” He said.

Loki looked puzzled. “Crystal?”

“All mages in Vanaheim are tested with the crystal annually. It shows how strong they are, and if they have a particular area of natural talent. It is far better than just letting them potter around with everything in the hope that they will find something they’re good at.” Horrseen said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a very small crystal. It was barely pendant sized.

“I must ask Your Grace to try and destroy it.” He said. Loki looked shocked, but Horrseen was insistent. “The most powerful mages in Vanaheim cannot destroy this when working together. Try your best Your Grace.”

Loki concentrated and poured his power into the crystal. It seemed to be a lot bigger magically than it was physically. Before his eyes the crystal started to glow brightly. The light it put out was blinding. Just when Loki thought he had nothing left to give, the light changed from bright white to dark green.

“Illusions.” Horrseen said cheerfully. “You have a gift for illusion magic, and there was definitely a strong shape-shifting ability in there too. Have you ever tried it?”

“No.” Loki said. “Groa said I was almost ready though.”

“Then I’ll give you to Sheiftyr, she’s the best illusionist and transmutatist we have. You need someone strong too; you’ve got a lot of power.”

Loki felt a sense of relief that his time would not be wasted. “Thank you Horrseen.” He said.

“Sheiftyr is free for teaching two days a week. I’ll double-check how many students she has, but it shouldn’t be a problem, have you ever worked in a classroom environment before?”

“No, I’ve always had tutors, unless you count being in the same room as Thor.” Loki said.

“Hopefully you will adapt quite well, there is benefit to learning surrounded by others. If not, well, we’ll have to see what can be done.” Horrseen said.

Loki got the feeling that Horrseen didn’t really want the hassle of arranging private lessons, and resolved to do well in the ‘classroom’. Besides, being surrounded by others might allow him to make
Loki nodded as Camtan chuckled. Horrseen bowed again and left them.

“Budget?” Loki asked.

“Father gave them a limited amount to spend on teaching and studies, before that they were draining the treasury.” Camtan said. “I support magic, we are quite good at it as a race, but they were completely out of control, chasing every shadow instead of planning out their experiments. Now they rely on funds from the noble families and wealthy merchants to teach their children. It’s actually better this way. We have more mages, as they must teach to earn enough to follow their private studies. The less powerful mages then go on to work in hospitals, or on farms, if they have nature magic, or just in the city working charms and things, helping their families with their businesses.”

Loki frowned. “But what of those with natural talent who cannot afford the education?” He asked.

Camtan shrugged. “They miss out. The world is not perfect, and if the King funded all education we’d wind up back where we started. Horrseen’s good at bookkeeping. The other mages let him get on with it, except when he tells them to stop spending, then they grumble, but there’s nothing they can do.”

“I wasn’t talking about all education, just the ones who can’t afford it.” Loki said.

“Which will be everyone, as soon as you start. Even the noble families will come and tell you how their crops are bad, their people won’t pay their taxes, please please please help us by paying for our children to learn magic.” Camtan said. “It’s not worth it.”

Loki disagreed, but kept his thoughts private. He wasn’t here to destroy the Vanir way of doing things.

“Will the Palace pay for my education?” He asked.

“Probably not, royalty get everything for free.” Camtan said.

“Will the King pay if I ask him to?” Loki asked. “Adding an extra student to an already tight budget will be a burden, and I am getting an education, they should receive funds for me.”

“Ask Father and see, if he’s in a good mood he’ll probably do it. He can be quite generous when he’s happy.” Camtan said. “But don’t ask more than once.” He said, suddenly serious. “He won’t change his mind.”

Loki nodded. “Thanks for the advice, I will wait and ask when he’s happy.”

Loki found his opportunity five days later. King Dimcken had decided that now that the week was up Loki could have no further objections and so had made it clear to Loki earlier that day that he
expected them to spend the night together after dinner.

Loki was almost sick with fear. But it was bound to happen eventually, and there was nothing he could do about it. He bathed and dressed like a man about to be hanged, and then slowly made his way to the King’s Chambers for dinner.

The conversation was normal, two of the three Princes chatted away merrily, the third glared at him from across the table. Loki wanted to scream at Dorgen, to shout and ask whether he really believed Loki was the one with the power here, but he held his tongue. He forced a smile onto his face at King Dimcken’s jokes and made himself follow the conversation and contribute.

Afterwards, the King made him strip by the bed, stroking long thin fingers lovingly down Loki’s arms as he mouthed kisses against Loki’s neck.

“You are utterly beautiful.” He whispered in Loki’s ear.

Loki didn’t think he could speak. His throat felt thick with fear and disgust. Somehow he managed to thank Dimcken for the compliment, which was received with delight and more kisses.

It was less painful than the first time. Dimcken slid into him quickly, and began thrusting almost immediately. Loki couldn’t keep from crying out, but he managed to make it sound sort of like pleasure. The King’s mouth tasted like wine and his hands kept playing with Loki’s penis. King Dimcken finished after only a few minutes, and rolled off Loki’s body with a contented sigh. Loki looked down at himself, he had healed fairly well, although there was still a little blood that was smeared between his legs. King Dimcken saw it and called for a servant to bring some water and a washcloth. Loki sat carefully beside the King and tried to stay calm.

“You are an absolute delight my sweet one.” King Dimcken said. He was panting from his efforts.

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said automatically. He knew that the King would be expecting a compliment in turn. He looked down at the blood again. “You have stretched me quite wide.”

That brought a smile to the King’s face, as Loki suspected it would.

“You are so very tight, it may take a few nights to grow used to me.” King Dimcken said as the servant arrived. The King took the cloth before Loki could and began to wipe the blood away. Loki forced himself to hold still and plastered a grateful look onto his face.

“Thank you for allowing me the time to heal Husband.” He said. “You are very generous.”

Loki wondered if there would come a day when he told a lie so big the Norns themselves would appear and punish him. If so, that day was apparently not today.

“We have many years together.” Dimcken said. “Although I admit though I am eager to get started, you are a beauty.” His wipes with the cloth became more focussed and intimate, pushing up against Loki’s vagina. “I want you in every way.”

Loki couldn’t quite hide the fear that flashed across his eyes at that statement. He hoped desperately that the King would think he was nervous rather than horrified.

King Dimcken placed a kiss on Loki’s inner thigh, followed by a heavy lick and a brush of teeth. Loki realised he was trembling and fought to stop it. He could feel the King’s hair tickling his legs, and the warmth of the King’s head radiating out against his skin. He wanted to vomit.

“I want to please you Husband.” He said, forcing the words out.
Loki wondered if one day Thor would lie his head in Loki’s lap, and if on that day Loki would be able to enjoy it, or if he would be trapped thinking of the King.

King Dimcken seemed about as pleased as he could possibly be, so Loki decided to risk asking about the Tower of Magic and his lessons.

“Your nephew came to visit me last week. I am to start my seidr tutoring next week.” He said.

The King looked up with a smile.

“I told you I would arrange it.” He said.

Loki forced a smile back. “I am grateful Husband, thank you. I... I was wondering, are they to receive funds for my tutoring? For ingredients, and equipment, and things like that? I had to buy my own on Asgard.”

King Dimcken looked amused. “Asgard does not place a high value on seidr, does it? When it makes a Prince buy his own equipment.”

Loki looked down in fake modesty.

“I suppose not.” He said. That was actually true, for all that the women of Asgard were encourage to make use of seidr if they had it, Loki had never been encouraged. His masculine shape and wish to learn the art of weaponry had made many believe that he should not follow the art of seidr.

“They will manage.” King Dimcken said dismissively.

Loki remembered Camtan’s warning, but he couldn’t help but press on a little.

“I just don't want to disadvantage someone else because I’m there.” He said. “I – “

“Pay them yourself from your allowance if it means that much to you.” King Dimcken snapped.

Loki stared at him.

“I have an allowance?” He asked carefully.

Dimcken frowned, his good mood gone. “Fosxyr should have told you. Of course my wife should have an allowance, and a fine one too. I am sure I organised it as a part of the wedding preparations.”

He broke off, uncertainty clouding his features.

Loki thought fast. “There was so much to do, for everyone. I forgot to pack my favourite book! I will have to ask mother to send it, I left it by the side of my bed I’m sure of it. It’s so easy for details to get lost in the shuffle.”

The King brightened. “Yes, yes it is. You must ask your mother to send it, of course, and I will organise your allowance. You must have an allowance. How else are you to buy pretty things to wear?”

Loki wondered if the King had ever given any thought to what his spouses had used their money for, or maybe the previous three Queens really had just bought a lot of clothes.

“Thank you Husband, you are very kind.” He said instead, wondering how long it would take him to run out of bland compliments, hopefully not quickly, he didn’t want to have to get creative.

King Dimcken was lying back with his eyes closed. His breathing was deepening.
“I want the best for you.” He said, momentarily reminding Loki of a father before he realised Dimcken meant the best possessions, not the best outcome. “My sweet beauty.”

A moment later he was asleep, and Loki allowed himself a single moment to pull a face before schooling his features back to calm and pleasant.

A servant entered the room and gently took the bowl and cloth. Loki looked from him to the King.

“May I have a drink of tea please?” Loki said softly. “I’m not very tired yet.”

“Would you like to remain here Your Grace or go to the living area?” The servant asked politely.

Loki glanced again at the King.

“Won’t he mind?”

“He will not wake, Your Grace, His Majesty is a deep sleeper after….” The servant stopped and to Loki's astonishment, blushed.

Loki nodded slowly. “Then perhaps it will be best if I get up for a while and let him rest.” He said, letting the servant recover from his moment of candour.

He had to hold still and let the servant wrap a robe around him, but then he was out of the room, and able to relax a little. He sat in one of the huge chairs in the King’s living quarters and drank tea while he read a book he’d found on the history of Vanaheim.

“Can I…? I mean, do you think I might be allowed to bring a few of my texts here to read sometimes?” Loki asked the servant carefully.

“I can fetch one for you now if Your Grace desires?” The servant replied.

“Not now, this book is fascinating, but maybe another time.” Loki said.

“Yes Your Grace.” The servant replied.

Loki read for hours until he felt sleepy enough, then he crept silently back to the King’s bed.

King Dimcken didn’t stir once.
"Your Grace, a letter for you has arrived from Asgard." Fosxyr said, entering the room where Loki sat eating breakfast.

It was nine days since King Dimcken had promised an allowance for Loki and four days since he had received it. It was more than generous, and Loki was determined to pay for his seidr lessons that morning when he arrived for his first one.

Loki's eyes lit up and he reached for the scroll in Fosxyr's hands.

"It's from Mother." He said with a smile. Fosxyr stood by silently as Loki scanned the page. "She's been tending the garden with her ladies, and the lambing season has begun in the north and Thor-" Loki broke off. Fosxyr raised an eyebrow in query. "Thor has gone away travelling with his friends." Loki finished, unable to keep the sadness from his voice. "He left not long after I did, and is seeking the Emerald of the Last Seer."

"I thought that was a myth." Fosxyr said. "In fact, a common phrase here on Vanaheim is “I’m off to seek the Emerald” which means that they are just going on holiday, oh."

"Yes. Thor is off adventuring." Loki said, his voice dull. "He'll be having a wonderful time."

Fosxyr moved behind Loki and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "You have your duty, Your Grace, when it is over I'm sure you will have many great adventures of your own."

Loki couldn't swallow his sadness and was absurdly grateful for sibling rivalry everywhere. Let Fosxyr think he was jealous of Thor's freedom, it was better than anyone realising the truth.

"I will be the most famed adventurer ever." He said instead.

"They will sing of your greatness for all time." Fosxyr agreed.

The rest of the letter was filled with trivialities about the court. Loki read it twice, absorbing every word, before he finally put the letter away so that he could re-read all over again later.

After breakfast Loki made his way to the large front gate where the carriage was waiting to take him to the Tower of Magic. He climbed inside and Fosxyr handed him a purse of money and closed the door after him.

"Good luck Your Grace." He said cheerfully.

"Thank you." Loki said as the carriage started rolling.

The journey took fifteen minutes, during which time Loki tried to remain calm. He'd never been in a classroom full of others before and he was uncertain of how he was supposed to act. He sat on the enormous seat in the carriage and vowed to learn to ride side-on as soon as possible.
There was a crowd outside the Tower when he arrived. Loki took a deep breath to steel his nerves and schooled his features into a calm expression a split second before the door was opened by the footman.

Several members of the crowd cheered him as he stepped down. They were made up of the lower classes. Loki smiled at them and waved a little as he was escorted into the Tower.

Loki had only ever seen the tower from a distance, up close it was, was, the word enormous didn't seem big enough somehow, it was at least three enormouses big. The ground floor stretched away in every direction. Loki looked around himself in bewilderment. He had no idea where he was supposed to go, and Fosxyr wasn't here. He had begun to rely on the servant's calm presence.

"Your Grace." A voice called out. Loki turned and saw Horseen heading toward him. "Your Grace." He said again as he drew close. "Your class is this way, please follow me."

Loki smiled at him and tried to memorise the route as he was led down one corridor, up another, past an indoor garden, through a lunch eating area and up several different flights of stairs.

"Here we are." Horseen said. "I will return at the end of the lesson to escort you to the gate. If there is anything else you need the Tower servants are at your disposal."

"Thank you." Loki said. "I would like to talk later if that’s alright? I wish to pay for my lessons."

“Oh Your Grace, that would be most welcome I will not lie. Perhaps when your classes are done you can come to my office and we might discuss it.” Horseen said, beaming. His expression turned cautious. “His Majesty has approved this expense?” He asked softly.

“Yes, it is to come out of my allowance.” Loki said.

Horrseen looked relieved. “Very well, Your grace, I will come and see you later.”

“Thank you.” Loki said and entered the room.

There was a small crowd of people already gathered. They looked up as Loki entered. Recognition came over their faces and one by one they bowed to him.

"Oh, no, please rise." Loki said. They did so and watched him warily. Loki realised suddenly that it was important to him that they like him. He wanted friends outside of the Palace, people he could talk to and laugh with who weren't related to the King.

"I'm Loki." He said.

After a second spent exchanging glances, one of them came forwards. She was blond, with a shapely figure and pert lips.

"I'm Shiarpyr. My father imports fine silks and my mother makes embroidered luxury pieces."

Loki smiled at her. He'd never felt so nervous meeting people before. Then he realised that he'd always been introduced either as Prince Loki of Asgard, or as Thor's younger brother.

"I'm pleased to meet you Shiarpyr." He said. "I've come to join your class and study illusions and transmutation."

The rest of the group were still regarding him carefully, but they seemed a little more relaxed now that the ice had been broken.
There was a noise by the door.

"Your Grace. I was told you would be joining us." Sheiftyr said as she came into the room.

She was an older woman with long white hair tied back into a tall ponytail and icy blue eyes. Her mouth was stern and Loki got the feeling that she would not be accepting any nonsense.

She raised an eyebrow at him, which is all the warning he got before her magic lashed out and tried to kill him.

Loki barely had time to throw up a shield. He crouched behind it, pushing all his energy into maintaining it as her magic fought to find a way through.

A second later it receded, leaving him half crouched in the centre of the room.

"She didn't knock you out!" One of the girls said at the back of the group.

Sheiftyr's mouth twitched minutely. "It seems you have a great deal of power, Your Grace. It is good to know that you will not be wasting everyone's time."

Loki swallowed nervously. It had been a test, a very... demanding test.

"I'm here to learn." He said, thankful that his voice didn't tremble, no one had ever hit him that hard magically before.

"Groa said you were strong, 'hit him as hard as you can' were her exact words," Sheiftyr continued. "Oh yes, she and I know one another." She said, catching Loki's expression. "We studied the elven shifters together, many years ago. I received her letter last week, approximately one hour before I was told you would be in my class. It seems your Heimdall has been watching you closely, I can't imagine why."

Her expression clearly said she *could* think of a few reasons why Loki might be one to watch. He had a feeling that he wouldn't get much past her.

"I hope you realise that when you are in this classroom you are a student, not the King's Consort, and I expect you to act accordingly." She said.

Loki did not have to look behind him to know that the other students were shocked at her audacity. But he liked it, it reminded him of home.

"Yes Mistress." He said, trying not to smile.

"Take your seats." She said.

The others scrambled to get into their chairs. Loki waited until they were finished and sat in one of two empty chairs remaining.

"That's Colalia's seat." Said a girl with pick ribbons in her hair. "The other one is empty."

Loki obediently shifted to the other seat. Another time perhaps he would argue and see how far he could goad her into losing her temper, she was just the right type to get very offended at the drop of a hat. The trickster in his veins cried out in desperation, but he stamped it down.

No Trouble, No Mischief. And especially not if he wanted to endear Asgard to Vanaheim.

The group of girls were divided into three main expressions. Some of them looked pleased that he
had been 'put in his place', others looked scandalised that he'd been spoken to so candidly, and a third group looked annoyed that his presence was so disruptive. He turned quickly to the front and tried to look eager to learn.

Sheiftyr was watching him carefully. Loki got the strange feeling that she was a little disappointed in him.

"Well now, if we are all ready." She said dryly. "You should have all done the homework, so I want you to come up one at a time and cast your illusion spell over this candlestick. You can choose any animal, and I will judge you on how lifelike and realistic it is."

Loki sat still and watched as one by one the girls walked to the front and cast their spells.

He could tell who the weaker members of the class were by the size of the creature they chose. The smaller it was, the less power and skill they needed to maintain a realistic outer shell. He saw cats, mice, a spider and several birds. Sheiftyr would give them a grade out of ten, although there appeared to be no pattern to her grading. One girl's mouse was fuzzy around the edges, but she still received a nine, Shiarpia's cat was so lifelike that it appeared to breathe, but that only earned her an eight. Finally, Sheiftyr turned to him.

"Groa told me that you've been taught this type of spell." She said. "Come up and show me."

Loki nodded. He walked up to the front while trying to think of a good animal to cast. He settled on a mouse, there was no sense in showing off the second he walked in the door, although he still made it the best mouse so far, it breathed realistically, its fur looked real enough to pluck each strand individually, and its little whiskers twitched as it sat there.

"Five." Sheiftyr said bluntly.

Loki was shocked. A FIVE?!

No Trouble. No Mischief. He made himself sit back down and tried hard to keep the sour look from his face.

Sheiftyr was watching him thoughtfully, but she said nothing and continued with the lesson.

She covered the theory behind casting illusion spells into objects, why it was handy to have rocks and crystals that could hold such spell long after the caster was gone, and set them on performing a number of exercises that would help strengthen their skill at casting detail.

Loki was working on one of the exercises, making a shimmering pattern appear and remain steady on his table-top, when a loud bell startled him.

"Lunchtime. Go and eat, come back refreshed." Sheiftyr said bluntly.

The others all rose and headed for the door, Loki stood slowly and hung back nervously.

"Do you want to come with us?" Shiarpia asked. "We're just going to the lunchroom."

Loki smiled and followed the small group of girls out of the door.

"This is Rohundia, Thainia, and Daenceia." Shiarpia said, waving at each of the girls in turn. Loki nodded in greeting.

"I'm please to meet you." He said.
They wandered down the corridors until they reached the lunchroom. The girls dispersed as if by magic, and Loki found himself suddenly alone.

"Oh come on." Shiarpia said by his elbow. "You have to buy food, unless you brought some?"

"No, no I didn't." Loki said, and followed her around the room to look at the food stalls. He bought a bread roll filled with pork and sliced potatoes. Shiarpia bought a salad, and together they found a table.

The other girls joined them soon after, each of them had bought something different.

Loki took a huge bite of his roll just as Rohundia asked. "So what's the King like?"

Loki almost choked on his roll, but managed to swallow the mouthful and keep his expression calm.

"He's very generous, and he makes time to see his sons every day." He said.

A compliment, followed by a piece of trivia that told no one anything. He couldn't afford to be too careful. He had only just met them after all.

"He's very ugly isn't he?" Shiarpia said bluntly. Thainia gasped at her audacity.

"She doesn't mean that Your Grace. Really, she's a cow sometimes, but harmless."

Shiarpia rolled her eyes. "There isn't a man alive of that age who isn't ugly, it's nature’s way of telling us not to bother." She said.

Loki took another bite of his roll and didn't answer. He couldn't insult the King, not even in the privacy of his Chambers, and certainly not in a public lunchroom.

"He is a great King and an equally great Husband." He lied instead, his voice a little cold. Shiarpia narrowed her eyes at him and Loki felt that he was about to lose a possible friend. But he couldn't let her insult the King, the information might get back to Dimcken and Loki would be in a lot of trouble.

"Why did Sheiftyr give me a five for my mouse?" He asked instead.

"She doesn't grade on how well you do, but on how well you *should* be doing." Rohundia said, relief clouding her voice. "If she thinks you can do better, she will grade you down."

"She must think you have great potential to mark you so low, your mouse was excellent." Daenceia said. "Can you do something bigger?"

Loki ducked his head. "Yes, but I didn't want to...um."

"Show off." Shiarpia said. "You have more power than most but you didn't want to show it all off on the first day. I understand that, but Sheiftyr won't. She'll mark you down until she sees some sweat of effort on your brow."

"I'll do better next time." Loki said. He'd never gotten a bad mark before. He'd never gotten *any* mark before, Groa just told him when he could do better.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

The girls started talking about other things, for which Loki was grateful. He didn't want to discuss the King *or* his less than stellar beginning in the classroom.

"Your Grace!" A voice called out.
All at once Loki found himself the centre of attention as every head in the lunchroom turned to face him.

It was Horrseen. He weaved his way through the crowd and to Loki's side.

"I am so sorry to have missed you Your Grace. I was going to offer you my private dining room." He said, anxiously eyeing the girls sitting around the table.

"Oh, no thank you Horrseen, I would rather eat here with my classmates." Loki said. "I appreciate the offer I assure you but this is fine."

Horrseen looked sceptical, but relented.

"As long as you're sure Your Grace, I don't want you to become lost in the crowd."

That was exactly what Loki wanted, but he didn't say so. Instead he assured Horrseen that he was quite well and happy to be just like everyone else.

"We'll take good care of His Grace." Shiarpia said. Horrseen gave her a long stare.

"Aren't you the one who painted the inside of my office pink three years ago?" He asked suspiciously.

Shiarpia looked at him with wide, innocent eyes.

"I took my punishment and learnt a valuable lesson Sir. I've not done anything since" Horrseen nodded reluctantly and walked away.

"That you know about." Shiarpia added in a low voice. The other girls giggled. Loki bit his lip. Norns help him, he liked her. She was a trouble maker and he liked her.

The topic of conversation switched to a group of musicians.

"I love them. They are so talented. They play music you can really dance to." Daenceia said. "And the singer they have is very cute."

"I love the slow songs, the ballads are amazing." Rohundia said with a slight sigh.

"I like the drummer." Shiarpia said. "He's studying architecture in his spare time."

"Where did you hear that?" Thainia asked. The other girls crowded in to hear.

"My Uncle knows his father. They are both servants in the Palace. He told me." Shiarpia said. The girls squealed in excitement. Loki found their mood infectious.

"Who is this group you all like so much?" He asked.

"They call themselves The Thunder Boys." Rohundia said with a little sigh. "They are amazing."

"There's five of them, and they are all so handsome, and they play instruments and the singer does these dances when he performs! I love them." Thainia exclaimed.
Loki grinned. "Maybe I could hear them sometime." He said.

"Are you free next week at night? They are playing at the Rolled Oat." Rohundia asked.

Loki felt a sadness come over him.

"I dine with the King, I don't think I'll be able to make it out afterwards." He said carefully.

"Shame." Shiarpia said. "If you change your mind, the Rolled Oat is on the left of the second main street. It's hard to miss."

Loki forced a smile onto his face. "I'll try." He said, knowing that he wouldn't be allowed to.

"Let me take Loki out to see the sights of Vanaheim." Camtan asked the King at the dinner table. "I'll take good care of him, and the Rolled Oat is hardly a disreputable tavern, the nobles let their daughters in there unaccompanied."

King Dimcken wasn't happy with the idea, but he wasn't saying no either.

"I'll stay by his side the whole time. Remember when Musleen and I used to come staggering home? We won't let that happen, I promise. But Loki knows nothing of Vanaheim, and he'll waste away surrounded by old nobles every day. He should go where the youth are, they'll love him." Camtan finished with flare.

"Very well." King Dimcken said. Loki realised he was grinning in delight. "But you must take care of him, and I want him home by one, no later."

"I promise Father, I promise." Camtan said.

Dimcken saw Loki's expression and smiled broadly. "If I were as young as you I'd be out to the dancing too." He said.

"Thank you Husband." Loki said, and he meant it.

Loki had been lucky to enlist Camtan's help. He had met the Prince upon his arrival back and the Palace and had told him all about his first day, the moment he got to the Rolled Oat and The Thunder Boys, Camtan grinned at him and said:

"You should go, I've seen them play and they're great."

"I don't think the King will allow it." Loki said.

"You just don't know how to ask him yet." Camtan had said confidently.

And he had been right.
Seventeen Steps

Chapter Summary

Riding Lessons

Loki stood at the edge of the stable yard and regarded the horse uncertainly. It was an old, placid thing, and it stared back at him blankly.

"He's a calm one, Your Grace, just right for a novice." The stable master said. His name was Polnyen, and he was a middle aged man with an impressive girth and an even more impressive moustache.

"I was taught to ride astride." Loki said. He didn't know why it was important for him to have that acknowledged, but it was. "I just need to practice riding side-on."

"You can ride astride? My son is trying to learn that, he's wanting to go into the army Your Grace. I've seen the boys riding around practising, how do you keep your balance?"

Loki fought to keep the smile from his face. The thought that side-on riding would be considered the easier of the two was amusing to him.

"Perhaps I could show you?" He asked hopefully. "If your son is about he can watch my technique."

Polnyen cocked his head to the side and regarded Loki carefully.

"I can't see the harm, but on a calm horse, I don't want you to be injured now."

Loki nodded in agreement, although he knew he was a far better rider than anyone thought. He'd even broken-in a few horses in Asgard, working hard to stay on as they kicked and bucked beneath him. Frigga had been terrified, and Thor had been thrown more than once, but Loki had the temperament for it.

Under Polnyen's instruction, Loki learnt how to mount properly side-on, and sat awkwardly in the saddle.

"This feels strange." He said. "My back is twisted."

"Shuffle across a little more, like that, there you go. You should feel a little more centred now." Polnyen said, adjusting Loki's grip for him.

Loki still felt awkward, but his back was less twisted. He couldn't believe this was how they all rode here.

Polnyen walked the horse carefully around the yard as Loki held on to the reins. He tried to keep his balance without having to grip the saddle.

"Good. Very good. You've got a natural balance that will help a lot." He said. Loki realised he was smiling with the praise.
After half an hour Loki could sit quite well with his head up as the quiet horse made patient circle after patient circle of the small riding ground. Polnyen unhooked the lead and stepped away from the horse. "See how you go leading him." He said.

Loki carefully guided the horse with the reins, watching the ground as it walked slowly around.

After a few minutes he looked up and saw King Dimcken standing at the fence with Fosxyr, they were both watching him as they talked quietly. Loki felt a chill of fear go down his spine and he wobbled in the saddle.

Instantly, Polnyen was at his side, steadying him. Loki gave him a smile of thanks and resettled himself.

He managed to look up again as he passed them. With a great amount of effort he forced an uneasy smile onto his face. King Dimcken beamed at him, Fosxyr's smile was naturally wider, but more restrained. Behind the King, he raised a hand and mimed waving.

Loki carefully raised a hand and waved at the King. Dimcken looked delighted and waved back.

Loki continued to guide the horse around, carefully walking it around a few large obstacles in the middle of the yard. He was just starting to feel more confident, when a sudden loud noise startled him.

Wide eyed, Loki started to fall backwards from the saddle. Polnyen was at his side in an instant, catching him. The horse never moved, it was old and gave the distinct impression that it had seen just about everything there was to see and no loud bang was going to be enough to make it do *anything*.

The noise had been made by a load of wood being dumped in the yard beyond.

King Dimcken looked furious and made his way over there. His face had turned bright red. Loki sat nervously in the saddle and watched. Fosxyr joined him and Polnyen, standing on the other side of the horse as they watched the King approach the men.

"I'm fine." Loki hissed. "It was just a noise, I'm fine."

"We know, but His Majesty feels protective of you. He will punish them for making you fall." Fosxyr said.

"No, it's fine." Loki said, trying to dismount.

"Your Grace I strongly recommend that you stay *right here*. Fosxyr said quickly and with emphasis.

Loki frowned, but reluctantly stayed put as the King started shouting at the men. They lined up with their heads down and their arms behind their backs.

King Dimcken shouted for a few minutes at the men before turning and stalking back to the yard.

"Now you must go to him." Fosxyr said. "Go and thank him."

Loki was on the verge of protesting when he saw Fosxyr's gaze, there was something more important than his merely being disturbed at stake here.

He dismounted awkwardly and walked over to the King. Dimcken pulled him into a rough embrace
and kissed him hard from the other side of the fence.

"Are you alright?" He asked, rubbing his hands down Loki's length. Unlike the other times, Loki got the distinct feeling that Dimcken was actually checking for injuries.

"I'm fine, Polnyen caught me before I so much as slipped." Loki said. "I should have been paying more attention to my surroundings, then I wouldn't have gotten so startled, the horse knew there was nothing to fear, he held perfectly still."

King Dimcken smiled slightly in relief. "Yes. He's a good horse, you need a nice steady beast for when we ride out to go hunting."

Loki forced himself to stay quiet. He was practically a master horseman! But not here. Not as long as Dimcken controlled his movements.

"Are you sure you're alright?" King DImcken said again, he was still checking for injuries. Loki found it disturbing that he could be so worried about Loki sustaining a physical injury here, but so uncaring when he was the cause of them in his bed.

"I'm well Husband I promise." He said. "I should like to ride again" a flash of inspiration hit him "would you like to walk beside me? That way I will be safe on both sides."

King Dimcken looked pleased with the suggestion, and they walked back to the horse together. Loki mounted again, struggling slightly as he settled himself in the unfamiliar position. Polnyen took the lead and they made a few more circuits of the yard before Loki took the reins for himself again.

King Dimcken watched him like a hawk the whole time. Loki tried to draw out his riding as long as possible so that the King would stay on his feet and, hopefully, wear himself out.

When lunchtime came Loki reluctantly dismounted and thanked Polnyen for his time.

"I will see you in two days," Loki said.

"Yes Your Grace, you have done very well, you'll be riding like an expert in no time." Polnyen said with a bow to the royal couple.

King Dimcken did not look happy as they made their way inside.

"It is no trouble for you to take a carriage." He said as they walked down the wide corridors.

Loki found his heart rate increasing in sudden fear again. Why did Dimcken not want him to ride? He'd been enjoying himself by the finish, even though the sideways way of sitting was strange and inefficient.

"I enjoyed learning to ride," He said nervously. "I can see more from a horse."

"We have open carriages." King Dimcken replied with a warning tone. Loki bit his lip and lowered his gaze to the floor. He was going to be forced not to ride, the disappointment was crushing.

He looked up again and realised with a start that the King was watching him.

"I don't want you to get hurt." King Dimcken said, regarding his expression. "But if it means that much to you, you can ride. *Under supervision*."

The smile on Loki's face was almost genuine.
"Thank you Husband." He said. "I will be very careful."

"Laldyia said that too." The King said, his tone was a little sad.

"Laldyia?" Loki asked.

"My first Queen. She died falling from a horse when Norbleen was a child, Norbleen was our only son, and fell in the great war many years before you were born." King Dimcken said, "She was a great beauty, and an exceptional woman. I don't want to see you fall." His arm gripped tighter around Loki's waist as he spoke.

"I will be very careful Husband, I promise.” Loki said.

They made their way through to the King's Chambers for lunch.

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“I heard that Prince Thor was travelling.” King Dimcken said as they sat and ate lunch together on top of the palace tower. Loki had been trying to stay calm since he’d first started climbing, and the sight of the table all set up had made his knees tremble just slightly.

“Yes, he has gone to seek the Emerald.” Loki said.

“And you are upset.” King Dimcken said. It was not a question.

“No Husband.” Loki started to say, but stopped when he saw Dimcken’s knowing expression.

“You are young Loki, it is only natural for you to crave adventure.” He said.

Loki bit back the obvious question, which was if it was so natural, why was he sent to stay here? Instead he looked down.

“I was a little upset.” He confessed.

“The summer season will be here soon. I will take you on progress through the mountain estates. It’s been an age since I went up there, and you can explore, go skiing, and hiking.” King Dimcken said. His tone made it clear that this was a gift.

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said, forcing a smile. It seemed to take less effort, which was worrying. He feared that despite his hatred of the King and his situation, Loki was growing accustomed to it, enough that faking a smile was not so difficult.

The King was pleased with his response, and grinned happily. “We can’t all be adventurers Loki, but we can still travel. I will even let Musleen and Camtan take you through the Crying Cave! That is quite a treat.

“I am grateful Husband.” Loki said. “I have read a little about it. It must be magnificent to see in person.”

“It is, although it has been many a year since I could make the passage through the rocks.” Dimcken said. He paused then spoke again. “The first of the hunting trips is coming up as well. I have arranged it for when the Tower students are on their break, so you won’t miss out on your lessons.”
“That is most considerate Husband, I am grateful.” Loki said again.

Dimcken looked around him at the view, then back at Loki.

“Have you finished eating? Good. Come here sweet one and let me kiss you.”

Loki reluctantly rose and moved closer to the King, who pulled him down onto his lap. They kissed for a few minutes, which felt far longer, before King Dimcken pushed his hand up under Loki’s skirts.

Loki fought to stay calm. He didn’t want to do it again! Not his anus, please not his anus!

King Dimcken reached Loki’s vagina and pushed a thin finger inside.

“You feel wonderful.” He murmured against Loki’s lips. Loki made a noise of acknowledgement in response and tried to hold still as the finger wriggled and poked inside of him.

After a few minutes, it became obvious to Loki that King Dimcken was not getting hard, in fact he seemed to have trouble more often than not in the last few weeks. After his first level of enthusiasm, his age had caught up with him. A fact that seemed to frustrate him as his fingers began moving more forcefully. Finally Loki could not help himself and let out a yelp. He quickly shut his mouth and glanced nervously at the King.

“I’m sorry Husband.” He stuttered. “I - “

“You’re a good boy.” King Dimcken said and kissed Loki again. “You are very tight and tender, aren’t you?”

Loki nodded in the King's lap, the finger had slowed but was still poking upwards. King Dimcken sighed as he added a second one, making Loki gasp.

King Dimcken wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist and shifted him so that he faced outward on the King’s lap. The next twenty minutes were torture as the King kept thrusting and wriggling his fingers, whispering the whole time about what a good boy Loki was, what a good wife.

Loki was fighting tears by the time the King grew tired. Thankfully, he managed to keep them from spilling, and the King mistook his shuddering breaths for the pants of one who had been thoroughly pleasured.

Once again Loki felt as though he’d been touched by a strange inky substance, everywhere the King had touched him felt contaminated. Even after Fosxyr made him get out of the bath he still felt dirty, and the thought of Thor far away and on an adventure with his friends brought him nothing but pain.
Loki was in his living area doing homework. He'd never had to write an essay on the history of illusion casting, and he was having trouble.

He'd *read* plenty on the subject, and been told even more by Groa, but summarising this into one page with citation notes was proving difficult. He kept having to stop and find *exactly* where he'd read that fact or try to find information that he knew to be true *somewhere* among the many texts surrounding him.

"Your Grace, you have a visitor. It is a Lord Fallconyr." Fosxyr said, entering the room.

Loki frowned. "I'm supposed to have this done by tomorrow." He complained. He stopped when he saw Fosxyr's gentle look of disapproval. "Who is he to the King?" He asked.

"A very old and loyal subject, and a good friend to His Majesty, he has come to pay his respects." Fosxyr said. "He won't keep you long, he is quite old and fairly weak. It is a wonder he has come here at all instead of sending his sons, he is doing you a great honour, and your handling of this is important."

Loki felt a shiver of nerves go through him. "What do I say to him?" He asked.

"Be polite, offer him food and wine, ask him about his lands and children." Fosxyr said as he straightened Loki's robes and tucked a strand of hair back into place. "You'll be fine, you've done brilliantly these past few weeks."

After an initial few days to settle into his chambers, Loki had been visited by a string of nobles from many different families. So far he had successfully managed not to upset anyone, but each time he felt the same fear. His mantra of No Trouble, No Mischief was weighing heavily on him.

He followed Fosxyr into the next room and seated himself as the servant went to fetch Lord Fallconyr.

The Lord was indeed old, and walked with the help of a cane, but his face was prideful and strong. Loki straightened slightly in his chair, the man reminded him of his etiquette tutor back on Asgard.

"Your Grace." He said, kneeling painfully before Loki. Loki held his hand out and resisted the urge to help the old man up.

"Lord Fallconyr, please be seated." He said, and watched with slightly worried eyes as the old man raised himself unsteadily to his feet and shuffled to the nearby chair.

"I have come to greet you on behalf of my family." He said. His voice was gravely and slightly breathless. "My mother was from Asgard, and I used to travel there quite frequently when I was younger. It was a beautiful place."
Loki smiled politely. "It still is. I'm afraid I haven't been in Vanaheim long enough to see your own wonders, but I look forward to doing so."

Lord Fallconyr smiled. "I hope you are suitably impressed, we have tried hard to make this realm a beautiful place." He said.

"Would you like some wine? Or some other refreshments?" Loki asked. "I am partial to Vanaheim tea myself."

"I would take a glass of wine Your Grace thank you. I'm glad you like our tea, most of it is grown on my lands."

Loki blinked in surprise and almost turned to Fosxyr to complain that he hadn't been told, but he checked himself at the last minute.

"I did not know, well, you grow a wonderful brew." He said.

Lord Fallconyr was watching him closely, Loki felt pinned under his gaze, but then the Lord relaxed and smiled kindly.

"What's a baby like you doing here?" He said softly, almost too softly for Loki to hear it. For a second Loki wondered what he should say to that, but instead he chose to ignore it.

"I understand you have sons? Do any of them serve here at Court?" He asked as Femtchyr brought the tray of wine and tea.

"Ten boys Your Grace, and two of them are here. They are at your service if you ever require anything." Lord Fallconyr said proudly.

"Ten sons?" Loki exclaimed before he could help it. "No daughters?" He added.

"Three Your Grace, pretty as can be too, although it is my right as a parent to say so, and fifty seven grandchildren so far."

"You are very blessed to have so many children." Loki said.

"It wasn't such an effort." Lord Fallconyr said. "Not when there were two of us birthing them all."

Loki blinked, before realisation came over him.

"You're...?"

"As is my wife, although he hates that description. I am the higher ranking of the two so I get to play husband." Lord Fallconyr said with a twinkle in his eye.

Loki felt a warm feeling flush through him. Intersexed people were rare enough to be considered unusual, and his upbringing had involved learning from books rather than people.

"I hope we can be friends Your Grace. I like to think I am a friend of the King's and I would like to consider myself a friend of yours as well." Lord Fallconyr continued.

"I would like that." Loki said.

****
Loki received a six out of ten for his essay. Sheiftyr had a nasty habit of marking the homework in class while they practised their exercises and calling out the result, it was humiliating, one of the lowest grades in the class, and Loki tried hard not to let the disappointment show on his face. He had really been trying, as Shiarpia had bluntly told him he had to if he wanted to impress Sheiftyr, but still, a six. He felt as though he'd been kicked in the gut.

"The trouble is, she's been tipped off. She knows you're smart, so she has no sympathy for you. She's the kind of person who'll set you a big paper on the eve of a grand ball or festival and then mark you down because you didn't finish it." Shiarpia said as she poked at her salad during the lunch break.

"But I *was* trying!" Loki protested. "I read the books until my eyes hurt! And I cited everything! *Everything*!" He sighed and grabbed the other half of his roll. "I don't know what I did wrong." He said.

"Maybe I can help you with the next one." Shiarpia said. "I always get top marks for my essays."

Loki smiled at her. "Isn't that cheating?" He asked. "She'll know."

"It's not cheating, cheating is when you write something for someone else, help is when you point out where they could be doing better." Shiarpia said, frowning in confusion. "Do people not help one another in Asgard?"

"Not when you have been set a task to do alone." Loki said, also frowning. "You have to prove yourself by rising to the challenge."

"That's stupid." Shiarpia said bluntly. "I'll help you with the next one."

Loki sat silently for the rest of lunch. The idea that accepting help wasn't a sign of weakness was a new idea that jarred with his known view of how things should be. But no one else at the table seemed to have a problem with it.

He walked back to class in a thoughtful mood.

Sheiftyr regarded him carefully throughout the afternoon, but did not say anything. Instead, she set them all homework to create a new shadow while concealing their real one. To be demonstrated at the next class.

Loki found his enthusiasm wasn't very high. He wanted to do well with his magic. He wanted to be a great spell-caster and sorcerer. He was halfway there already! Or so he'd thought. Now he just felt hammered down, and not really good enough. He was familiar with the feeling from his weapons training. He'd never been able to master the heavy axes, or wield a sword as brilliantly as Thor or Fandral. But at least with that he'd found his own way with knives and spears, here there was no other way.

He walked back into his Chambers in a dejected mood. He slumped down onto one of the couches and hung his head in his hands.

"Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked tentatively.

"Leave me alone." Loki muttered.

"Can I bring you anything first?" Fosxyr asked.
"No." Loki said, snapping a little. He watched Fosxyr's retreating back and felt a twinge of guilt.

"Fosxyr?"

"Yes Your Grace."

"I'm sorry, I'm just not having a good day today, but it's not your fault."

"Would you like to tell me about it?" Fosxyr asked.

"I didn't get a good mark in class on my essay. But I tried so *hard*! I couldn't have done better!" Loki said suddenly. "And I have to hide my shadow and create another one by next class."

"Is that difficult?" Fosxyr asked gently.

"No!" Loki cried. "I know how to do it! But I know how to cast illusion animals onto objects as well and that only earned me a five! I don't know how to get better! But magic is what I'm good at! It's supposed to be my escape!" He clamped his mouth shut suddenly, knowing he'd said far too much.

Fosxyr carefully laid a hand on Loki's shoulder. "Do you remember what it felt like to learn the basics?" He asked gently, deliberately letting Loki's confession slide.

"I loved it." Loki said. "Even when it was hard I loved it. But that's not the problem. I like a challenge, I *want* a challenge. I don't want to be marked low for something I know I can do easily."

"So ask for something harder." Fosxyr suggested. "Ask for a challenge."

Loki frowned. "She'll say no, not if I can't get a high mark in what we're already doing." He said.

"Ask anyway, those who don't ask, rarely get." Fosxyr advised. At least she'll know something is wrong, that you are frustrated."

Loki slouched on the couch in an un-royal-like manner.

"I don't think she cares what I'm feeling." He said. "I don't think anyone does."

"More people than you realise Your Grace." Fosxyr said softly. "Just keep moving forwards, eventually you will be free." - Loki looked up at him in shock - "To practise any magic you want." Fosxyr continued, his expression perfectly blank.

"I should practise my homework." Loki said, but there was no enthusiasm in his voice.

"Shall I bring you anything?" Fosxyr asked.

"Some tea?" Loki asked. "I need its famed soothing properties."

"As you wish Your Grace." Fosxyr said and went to make it.

Loki sat for a moment before he quickly rose and grabbed Thor's knife from its box. He ran his fingers over the hilt and tried to calm his breathing.

He could do this. He could survive this. Every day was one less to get through. He would be back with Thor soon.

He put the knife back and started casting his spell as Fosxyr returned, holding a pot of hot water. The
servant prepared the tea at the serving counter as Loki made his shadow jump and dart about, waving its hands wildly as though trying to attract Fosxyr's attention.

The servant turned and looked down. Loki quickly made the shadow stand perfectly still. Fosxyr frowned uncertainly and began carrying the teapot over to where Loki stood. Behind him, Fosxyr's shadow began to walk with an exaggerated creeping motion, until it reached Loki's, at which point both shadows appeared to start brawling.

"That's unnerving." Fosxyr said, watching them. "Promise me that is all you Your Grace’s doing."

"I promise." Loki said, waving a hand and ending the spell. Both shadows vanished, to be replaced by the real ones that were lying in another direction entirely.

"You are certainly very good at that spell." Fosxyr said, setting the tray down and preparing a cup.

"We'll find out in three days." Loki said. In front of him, his shadow had started inching closer to Fosxyr's, its hands curled up into fists and its intent clear.

"Must they brawl Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked, looking down. Both shadows immediately tried to look innocent, with their hands behind their backs and their heads turned upwards, scanning the area around them.

"Perhaps not." Loki said. "They can work together to take out Femtchyr."

Fosxyr smiled in spite of himself and handed Loki the cup.

"He'll be thrilled Your Grace." He deadpanned.
Chapter Summary

Acting Like a Child is Good for an Adult

"I hope you all practised your homework." Sheiftyr said as she walking into the room. The group of students quickly sat down at their desks. "Because I want you to cast your spells now, and hold them while I talk about the link between illusion and transmutation. I can see magic, so I will be watching to see how long you last and how convincing you are."

Loki cast his spell easily as the others did the same, some using more effort than others.

Sheiftyr began discussing the underlying theory linking the two disciplines and he leaned forward slightly in his seat.

Shiarpia's shadow was drifting over to his. Out of the corner of his eye Loki could see her shadow reaching up to make hand signs behind his head.

He couldn't help it. The trickster in his leap free in one blissful moment, and his shadow turned, held its hands up in outrage, and then pulled out a sword and attacked her.

Shiarpia saw what he'd done and retaliated, pulling out a shadow sword of her own and defending. For a moment it was just the two of them, cutting and thrusting at one another with their shadows, making exaggerated arm motions whenever the other scored a direct hit.

"Having fun?" Said a voice right by Loki's ear.

His shadow froze in place. Loki turned and found himself the focus of Sheiftyr's piercing stare.

But she didn't look angry. Stern, but not angry.

"Yes?" He said, knowing that in his heart of hearts, he needed this.

The class tittered with amusement. Loki could have sworn Sheiftyr's mouth twitched.

"The front of the room is this way, Loki, I would appreciate it if you and your accomplice would pay attention."

"Yes Mistress." Loki said as Shiarpia mumbled the same.

They both turned back to the front.

"Seven out of ten, Colalia." Sheiftyr called out as she made her way back to the front of the room. Colalia's shadow spell had ended as she'd gotten distracted. She scowled at Loki and Shiarpia. Shiarpia stuck her tongue out, Loki ignored her.

He held his shadow for the whole morning, outlasting everyone, although Rohundia almost made it the same length of time.

"Very good Loki. Nine." Sheiftyr said as he rose to go to lunch.
"Nine?!" Loki challenged, still flying high on his minor rebellion from earlier. "That shadow was perfect!"

"Your hair is longer than that, you need to take better note of your appearance." Sheiftyr said. Her tone was stern but her eyes were twinkling.

Loki felt his blood rise, but not in anger, he felt... happy. He was arguing, fighting back, and it felt *good*.

On the floor his shadow changed, its hair grew ridiculously long and shadow-Loki gathered it up and started playing jump-rope with it.

"Better?" Loki asked, his mouth curling upwards.

"Go to lunch Loki, your empty stomach is making you silly." She said but he knew she was pleased. He went, walking proudly past the group of girls who stared at him in open shock and awe.

Shiarpia raised an eyebrow at him and smirked.

"I knew there was a reason why I liked you, let's go and eat Loks."

"Loks?" Loki repeated.

"Yeah, you've earned it." Shiarpia said calmly as they made their way through the corridors. "I'll kick your butt the next time we have shadow wars, but you know that already don't you?"

"Not a chance." Loki insisted. "I'm a much better shadow fighter than you. I was going easy on you the whole time."

"Out of fear."

"Out of pity."

"Nah, I saw the look in your eyes, that was fear. I see it a lot."

"I believe you." Loki joked. "You could terrorise a small town."

"I could terrorise a whole city, aim high or don't bother." She answered with a grin.

That afternoon when Fosxyr asked Loki how his magic lessons were going, Loki just grinned.
The noise was incredible. The room was packed with people. Camtan and Musleen both kept a tight grip on Loki’s arms as they waded through the crowd of screaming girls and found a space by the bar.

"So. Many. Women." Camtan shouted. "*This* is where you wanted to go tonight?"


He scanned the crowd of faces, hoping to see someone familiar.

Up on stage, the musicians walked out to their instruments. The screaming became almost physical as the girls in the crowd rushed up to the stage.

Loki felt a tug on his sleeve and turned around. It was Shiarpia, Rohundia, Thainia and Daenceia were behind her.

"You made it!" She shouted over the noise.

"Yes!" Loki answered. "I hope they're worth it!" He added, fighting the jostling of the crowd.

Shiarpia looked scandalised. "They're the best!!" She screamed.

The musicians began to play a lively tune. The drum beat was louder and faster than Loki was normally used to, but he found that he liked it.

Up near the stage the girls were jumping up and down with glee, practically crushing each other as they fought to get close to the musicians.

Camtan pushed a drink into Loki’s and Musleen’s hands and offered one to the girls. They all did a double take as they realised that two princes of the realm were sitting at the bar. Loki grinned at them.

"I'm married to the King and these fools are the ones who impress you?" He shouted.

Camtan heard him and laughed as Rohundia and Thainia blushed, Daenceia grinned and Shiarpia pulled a face.

"You're normal Loks, anyone can see that!" Shiarpia shouted. "They’re *Princes*!"

Loki rolled his eyes, Camtan patted him on the back and pouted in an exaggerated manner.

"Don't worry Loki!" He shouted. "Not everyone can be as charming as me!"

The corner of Musleen’s mouth turned upward as Loki laughed and took a swallow of his drink. The music was good, the guitar player was getting sounds out of his instrument that Loki had never heard
before. The room was warm, but the atmosphere was amazing. He felt happy here, and relaxed completely as the night went on.

Four songs into the evening and Shiarpia asked him to join them in dancing. Loki shook his head.

"I'm still learning!" He shouted.

"You don't have to learn these!" She screamed back. "Just move to the music!"

Camtan gave him a playful push towards the floor and Loki allowed himself to be led the rest of the way.

As a group, they jumped and moved to the music for an hour before the musicians called a break.

"We'll be back later." The lead singer said.

The crowd screamed them off the stage before two hundred girls all turned in search of a drink.

"We should move." Musleen said, half pushing Loki to the other end of the hall.

"What's the matter?" Loki asked.

"We promised to take care of you, getting crushed in the crowd is not part of the plan," He said, but his eyes were scanning the room.

"Camtan?" Loki asked questioningly, looking around for the other Prince.

"Let's go." Musleen said suddenly. "Now."

Loki barely managed a goodbye to the surprised girls before he was outside.

"What's going on?" Loki asked as Camtan frowned questioningly.

"Two men at the back looking suspicious." Musleen said abruptly. "Rebels."

Loki turned to look but he was already halfway down the street.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"Very." Musleen replied. He nodded to their two guards who had joined them the moment they left the hall. "Keep them safe."

Then he turned and headed back toward the Rolled Oat.

"Camtan?" Loki asked in confusion, but the other Prince kept walking toward the carriage. The guards would not let Loki turn back. They practically shoved him into the carriage and stood on the outside of each door as they were driven back to the Palace.

Fosxyr was waiting in the front room when he arrived.

"How was your evening Your Grace?" He asked.

"Good, very good." Loki said, distracted. "Until Musleen saw some rebels, at least, he thought they were rebels, he made Camtan and me leave, but went back himself."

"I've no doubt he'll be fine." Fosxyr said calmly. "He's dealt with rebels before, and has a habit of shutting them down before they can strike."
Loki slumped into a chair. "The King won't let me go out again if he thinks there is danger." He said.

"Then don't tell him." Fosxyr said. "Prince Camtan won't, if Musleen feels the risk is too great he will tell the King but if not, then *you* just had a great time and would love to do it again."

Loki looked puzzled. "The guards know why we left." He said.

"Yes, Musleen's guards know why you left. He is their leader and he will decide whether the danger was real and worth reporting." Fosxyr repeated.

Loki glanced at the clock. "I only had an hour left anyway." He said. "The musicians were amazing, they played new songs that really jumped, and I danced without steps."

"Danced without steps? What is the world coming to?" Fosxyr asked with a twinkle in his eye.

They were really popular with the girls." Loki added.

"But not with you?" Fosxyr asked.

Loki thought he heard a slight edge to his voice.

"I liked their music." He said. "I didn't even get to see them the crowd was so thick, but they wouldn't interest me anyway."

"Not your type?" Fosxyr asked.

Loki looked up with a frown.

"Why are you asking me this?" He asked.

"I was told to take care of you Your Grace, that includes preventing... slip ups." Fosxyr said, his face utterly serious.

"I'm not interested in them." Loki said. "Not like that, they made good music, I promise that's all."

"I'm glad to hear it." Fosxyr said in a more normal tone. "Hopefully you can go out and hear them again."

As Loki lay in bed that night, he reflected on how difficult it must have been for Fosxyr to serve the last Queen, it had to have been her, the two previous ones would have been too far back for Fosxyr to be their servant, and the tone that came into his voice when he was thinking of her did not come from a history book. Had he known about her affair before she was discovered? Had he helped conceal it? If he had Loki doubted that he would even be alive, but there was an edge to his gaze when he thought that Loki might be tempted. He must have cared for her a great deal.

Perhaps it was impossible to watch someone suffer through the King's attentions and *not* care. He obviously didn't want Loki going down the same road.

Well, he was safe on that front, Loki's heart was far away and not about to be tempted by some musicians, not even ones who played such amazing songs.

With the sound of one of those songs still echoing in his ears, Loki fell asleep.
Loki stood in the Palace yard with Camtan and Fosxyr and watched the scene before him. He’d been told that every three years the old members of the Vanahim Alpec Flock were brought in to be sheared one last time before being slaughtered. They would be served the next day in a Grand Feast that marked the beginning of summer.

They were ugly things, and the smell was unpleasant, but watching them being herded by the Alpecmen was quite a sight.

“The old ones have the strongest flavour.” Camtan said. “Which they need, because they hardly taste of anything in their younger years. But the old ones are delicious.”

Loki watched the latest arrivals being herded in. They were bleating loudly, complaining about being removed from their fields.

“There are a lot of them.” He commented.

“There needs to be, the Grand Feast is enormous. There’ll be dancing for hours on end, so you can show off what a great teacher I am.” Camtan continued.

Loki shot him a smile before turning back to the scene. The wood falling that had so startled him a few weeks back had been built into a rough stockyard for holding and guiding the animals. The whole yard was alive with the bleats of the Alpecs and the yells of the men.

In amongst the loud noises, Loki thought he heard discord. He frowned and turned his head back and forth trying to locate the source.

It was a bleat, but far higher than the others. Loki scanned the ground and realised that there was a baby in the herd.

It was tiny compared to the older Alpecs. It had to be almost newly born, and it struggled on unsteady legs. Loki leaned down to look at it as it passed close by to him. The poor little thing was clearly lost, it was also exhausted, it must have walked far too far for its tender age. It bleated again and Loki winced. It was looking for its mother.

In front of his eyes, an older Alpec stepped down hard without looking and broke the baby’s leg.

It let out a squeal of pain as Loki darted forwards between the wooded barrier posts and scooped it up out of the way.

“Loki!” Camtan cried out in alarm and pulled him back away from the fence. “Are you insane?” He hissed. “Don’t do that! You could have been seriously hurt!”

Fosxyr was looking him over with alarm in his eyes, but Loki knew he was fine. The little Alpec however was not. It was crying in pain, its leg was on a terrible angle and it shuddered with the
shock of it.

Loki tried desperately to remember how to knit bones, but he’d barely begun that part of his seidr when he was sent to Vanaheim.

“I’ll take it Your Grace.” Said a voice.

Loki looked up and saw the Palace butcher, standing there in his white apron, it would not stay white for long today.

“He’s hurt.” Loki said, knowing he was stating the obvious.

“I’ll take him inside and make it quick. He’ll be gone before he knows it.” The Butcher said.

Loki held the little Alpec tighter. “Can’t you heal him and send him back to the fields?” He asked.

“Even if we could find his mother in a herd of seven thousand, she won’t take him after being apart for so long. He’ll be better off in the pot Your Grace.” The Butcher said.

Loki could see the logic in the man’s statement, but inside he felt a deep sadness. The poor little thing, just a baby lost far from his home without the slightest chance of survival.

Loki wasn’t sure why but he desperately wanted the little baby Alpec to thrive.

“Loki, what have you got there?” King Dimcken asked, walking over with Lord Fallconyr shuffling behind him.

“It got separated from its mother.” Loki said. He still hadn’t let it go.

“Oh my sweet wife, if you want a pet I will get you a nice cat, or a sleek hound, not this ugly thing.” Dimcken said, his tone was teasing, he clearly didn’t expect Loki to want to keep it.

“I thought it looked rather cute.” Loki said.

Dimcken pulled an indulgent face. “Right now yes, but if you want to know what it will turn into, look behind you, they are ugly when they’re grown.”

Loki stubbornly held onto the baby, which had stopped crying and was now just panting in pain. He wanted to heal it, to save it.

“You look good with a baby in your arms.” King Dimcken said in a thoughtful tone.

Loki felt his heart freeze in his chest.

“Give it to the butcher Loki, I will give you a better pet.” Dimcken said.

It was a direct order and Loki could not refuse. He turned and gave the baby Alpec to the butcher as gently as he could.

“You promise it will be quick?” He asked.

“I will be as fast as a man can, Your Grace.” The butcher promised and carried the broken baby away.

King Dimcken wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist and pulled him in close.
“I think a pretty kitten for you to play with would be wonderful.” He said cheerfully. “I will find the finest one just for you.”

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said, trying not to see where the baby Alpec had been taken.

Lord Falconyr was watching them both with an expression of iron, but he said nothing as they went back to watching the herding.

The ceremony leading up to the Grand Feast was a simple one, every year the King and his Consort opened the Judgement Courts, symbolically granting the judges the power to punish criminals on behalf of the royal family. After a day spent listening carefully to the judges as they worked, the King and his Consort would return to the Palace and hold the feast, and the new summer and new year would begin.

Loki was standing in his dressing room, half naked, and trying to be positive about the ridiculously over-embroidered layers he was expected to wear.

He had thought his day-clothes were fancy. They were not. At all.

"I am going to look foolish." He said.

"Not at all Your Grace, you will look wonderful. There will be a huge crowd trying to catch a glimpse of you, these robes will help them to see from that kind of distance."

Loki pulled a face but allowed himself to be dressed without further protest.

"You'll need a cloak for your shoulders." Fosxyr said, heading to the far end of the room. Loki followed him slowly, running his eye over the seemingly endless number of robes hanging there waiting for him.

He reflected that it would be quite some time before he had to purchase any 'pretty clothes'. For the next few years at least, his allowance would be more than he could ever need.

"Fosxyr?"

"Yes Your Grace?"

"Can I invest my allowance in trade?"

"It's been done before Your Grace." Fosxyr said, pulling out a cloak and holding it up critically. "The King's mother was rumoured to be quite a clever woman in the fabrics market."

Loki nodded thoughtfully. "I don't know anything about fabrics, but the price of heterwart is ridiculous. It is less than a third of that in Asgard. I could send someone to buy it there and bring it here to sell, marked up a little of course, but not as much as it is right now."

"Where does Asgard get it?" Fosxyr asked, pulling out another cloak. Loki frowned as he spotted something familiar.

"My clothes." He said. "The ones I was wearing from Asgard."

"Well we had to put them somewhere Your Grace, we can't just throw out your things without your permission." Fosxyr said with a smile.
Loki reached out and touched the familiar fabric. "It's only been a few months, but the leather is going hard." He said, disappointment clouding his voice.

"How can it be stopped?" Fosxyr asked. "Do you treat it as you do shoes?"

"We use a different leather rub, but essentially yes, you just have to keep it supple." Loki said.

Fosxyr pinned the cloak around his shoulders.

"Perhaps when you send the trader to Asgard he can get some leather-rub too." He said.

"Alfheim." Loki corrected. "They make the leather-rub, they also grow the heterwart, Asgard imports it."

"Perhaps you should speak to a supplier in Alfheim then, rather than go through Asgard." Fosxyr suggested.

Loki nodded. "I'd like to, um, how do I find one when I have to stay in Vanaheim?"

"Send a representative to invite some of the growers to a meeting here. Wait until they have arrived before telling them it will be at the Palace, and that you are the one who wishes to invest in their produce." Fosxyr said as they made their way out of the room.

"You seem to know a lot about trade." Loki said as they walked into the jewellery room.

"My brother imports fine silks and his wife embroiders them." Fosxyr said, picking out a glittering crown.

Loki stopped in his tracks.

"You have a niece named Shiarpia don't you." He said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes Your Grace." Fosxyr said, sounding surprised. "She's about your age - oh. You've met her, haven't you?" He sounded apprehensive.

"She's in my class at the Tower." Loki said.

"I'm sorry for anything she may have done." Fosxyr said immediately.

Loki looked at him in puzzlement. "We're friends, I like her." He said.

"She can be a bit of a handful." Fosxyr said cautiously, settling the crown on Loki's head. "As much as it pains me to say it, she may not be a good friend to make."

Loki shook his head stubbornly. "I like her." He said again. "She offered to help me with my essays."

Fosxyr looked surprised. "It seems that away from her family she is showing a bit of maturity, I do hope this trend will continue." He said.

"You're being rather hard on her." Loki said. He didn't like hearing Fosxyr put down his own family.

"I love her, as do we all, but you are the King's Consort. I want you to have friends Your Grace but they must be beyond reproach. As much as I adore my niece, Shiarpia would never survive in this court, she is too honest and says what she's thinking more often than not. I want you to be safe." He answered, sliding gold and diamond cuffs onto Loki's wrists.
"I understand." Loki said. "But I'm still going to be friends with her. I trust her." And he did. There were no false motives in Shiarpia, she did not have the personality to be sly or two-faced. If she hated you she would tell you, loudly.

Fosxyr led him back to the bathing room where Wraenyr had set up a chair and a table with -
"Makeup!" Loki exclaimed. "No, please, I don't wear it!"

"You do at these functions. Everybody does." Fosxyr said. "Didn't you see the powder on His Majesty at your wedding?"

"No." Loki confessed, reluctantly sitting down. "I didn't."

"It's to help you be seen by the crowd. A little powder and paint never hurt anyone. Wraenyr will use as little as possible, I promise."

Loki sat still and allowed his skin to be powdered and his cheeks to be dusted with colour. Wraenyr carefully outlined his eyes and darkened his eyelashes. It wasn't much, but Loki felt weird and uncomfortable.

"I won't have to do this too often will I?" He asked.

"A few times a year Your Grace. There are few public ceremonies." Fosxyr replied.

Loki nodded. "Alright, I'll stop complaining." He said.

Fosxyr and Wraenyr exchanged knowing smiles briefly before turning serious again.

"Very good Your grace." Fosxyr said.

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They made their way to the front gate where King Dimcken had just arrived.

"Loki." He said, looking Loki over with interest. "You look perfect. Utterly perfect."

"Thank you Husband." Loki said. "You look very regal."

King Dimcken smiled broadly. "My best robes, they were made by the best seamstress in Vanaheim, sadly she no longer works, too old."

Loki nodded seriously. "Then I hope she is getting some well-earned rest." He said.

King Dimcken grinned at him. He was in a fine mood. He wrapped his arm around Loki as they travelled together in an open-top carriage to the Public Court Rooms.

Loki smiled at the crowd and waved back at them as they tried to get a good look at him.

King Dimcken helped him out of the carriage, although in Loki's personal opinion it should have been the other way around, and they walked together into the Public Court building.

The Judges were waiting in a line to greet them. Prince Musleen was standing with them. Up close Loki could see that he was also wearing a small amount of make-up.

"Father, Loki." He greeted them seriously. "The Main Room is ready."
"Come along Loki, we must observe the Judgements for today as a sign of our approval." King Dimcken said.

Fosxyr had already told him that much, but Loki smiled pleasantly anyway and kept quiet. King Dimcken liked to be the one to tell him things, and Loki wasn’t about to object.

They walked at a ceremonial pace to the two throne-like chairs at the head of the Court Room, behind the Judge's seats. The room was crowded with people, many of them cheered as King Dimcken and Loki took their seats.

Loki sat straight and tall, resting his arms in his lap. King Dimcken had his arms on the armrests and scanned the crowd with a pleased air.

The Judges came in and bowed to them both, before sitting in response to King Dimcken’s wave.

Musleen had taken a seat to the side of his father, he had a pile of papers and was shuffling through them.

"The Court calls the case of Wriongyr and Riaghten." Called out a guard.

Loki sat all day with a bland look of serenity on his face. King Dimcken had Musleen whispering facts about each case into his ear, Loki had nothing, so he listened to the men as they spoke and made his own judgements about them from that.

He was right about all of them, at least, his decision and the judges’ were the same. Then he amused himself thinking up better and more ingenious punishments for those found guilty. He privately sentenced one man to learn the entire history of Vanaheim by rote as punishment for defacing one of their oldest statues. He sentenced another one to kneel in the presence of women for a hundred years after he beat his wife and daughters, and encouraged his son to do the same.

It was a long day, but when the courts finally closed Loki was confident that he hadn’t done anything that would embarrass the King.

They rode home together before parting to get ready for the feast.
Finery was a necessity of being royal, but sometimes it could go too far, Loki decided.

He was wearing enough lace and embroidery to last him a lifetime. He looked like a cake.

Fosxyr had covered him in jewels too. A sparkling crown for his head, matching wrist cuffs, a belt studded with dozens of tiny diamonds and a collar to match.

"This looks horrible." Loki hissed quietly as Fosxyr straightened and fussed.

"No Your Grace, it is traditional." Fosxyr said.

Loki refrained from pulling a face. He had a feast to get though.

"Now there is another thing that is traditional." Fosxyr said. "Gift giving. You will receive a gift from the King and his sons and their wives, you will give each of them a gift in turn."

Loki looked at him in panic, why had no one mentioned this to him earlier?!

"I have already purchased each of them a gift from you Your Grace, you have hardly had time in the last two months." Fosxyr continued. "When the time comes, I will hand them to you, and you will give them to each person." Fosxyr continued. "Do not worry Your Grace, the gift giving happens at sunrise, as the first day of summer begins. It will happen at the high table but it is almost private, no speeches need be made and most will be exchanging among their own families."

Loki allowed a small amount of relief to creep through him as he followed Fosxyr down the corridors and to the little room just outside of the feast hall.

King Dimcken wasn't there yet, but Camtan and Sofftia were, as were Dorgen and Mulmyr.

Loki was surprised to see her, but he supposed that her absence from official functions would be a bit suspicious.

They were all very sparkly, although Loki outdid them easily.

"You look lovely Loki." Mulmyr said with a smile. Loki returned it.

"So do you." He said.

Dorgen scowled. Loki wondered if he'd ever smiled in his life.

Just then the King entered, Musleen trailing behind him. He walked up to Loki and pulled him into a close hug.

"You look wonderful." He said, he was in a good mood, beaming at everyone, even the sight of Mulmyr didn't make his smile dim more than slightly.
He and Loki stood together side by side and King Dimcken gestured for the door to be opened.

The heavy doors were swung back, King Dimcken held his arm out for Loki to take and together they walked into the hall.

The crowd was huge, not quite as huge as Asgard's great hall when it was filled, but huge none the less. Loki walked straight-backed and tall, with a calm smile in his face. The past two months had forced him to present a veneer of serenity regardless of his feelings, and right now what he desperately wanted was to wrench his hand away from Dimcken. He did not, however, and allowed himself to be led to his seat.

The crowd was watching them all closely, Loki could see the factions in the court, partly from Fosxyr's whispering in his ear when they came to greet him and partly from the way they were eyeing each other suspiciously from their various tables.

King Dimcken stood and held up his wine glass.

"My friends, fellow Vanir" he glanced lovingly at Loki "those from far away. I welcome you all to the Summer Feast! The Alpecs have been slaughtered, the harvests are high and plentiful! We have everything to celebrate! And so I command you! Enjoy yourselves!"

There was a cheer from the assembled crowd that shook the glass in the windows. The mood was infectious and Loki couldn't help but grin at the excitement in the hall.

King Dimcken drank from his glass, and then turned to Loki. Loki quickly picked up his own glass and took a swallow.

Almost as one entity, the crowd did the same, downing their first drink of the night.

A tray of each type of food was placed in front of Loki and Dimcken as the King sat down. Dimcken instantly began to eat, grinning with enjoyment.

Loki speared a piece of something with his fork. The Aesir did not have alpecs, and he did not recognise the food on his plate. He placed it in his mouth and chewed.

The flavour was gentle, and quite pleasant. He swallowed and went to spear another.

On his plate was a tiny bowl, just big enough for a spoonful. It was filled with alpec stew.

Loki avoided looking at it as he ate each piece, he ignored it as he drank the water and the wines, he avoided it until at last there was nothing left to eat.

The baby alpec would have been put in the stew. Loki knew, intellectually, that every lamb he'd ever eaten had been a baby cut down, eggs were chickens not yet hatched and roast piglet was one of his favourite meals. But *that* baby didn't deserve it. All it ever did was get lost. He hesitated before slowly picking up the spoon.

He couldn't do it. He *couldn't*.

"Your Grace, I have been told to tell you that the small lump in the bowl is potato." Fosxyr whispered into his ear. Loki's eyes flickered toward the servant suspiciously, but then he carefully reached down and scooped the mouthful onto his spoon.

It was potato. It still took an effort to swallow, after all, the juices would still contain flavour from the alpec meat, but he was touched that they would make the effort.
The tray was removed and Fosxyr looked at him expectantly.

"I don't know all the names." Loki said. "But may I have more of the salad with the green leaves, some of the steak in that sweet sauce and a scoop of the spicy red one?"

"Of course Your Majesty." Fosxyr said with a smile. "I must remember to teach you their names, I have been most remiss."

"Not at all, there are far more important things you've had to teach me first." Loki protested.

Fosxyr smiled at him and vanished. Loki turned to find King Dimcken watching him.

"You haven't drunk any of the white wine." The King said softly.

Loki's eyes widened and he hastily picked it up and drank.

"I'm sorry Husband." He said.

Dimcken smiled indulgently. "It's of no matter." He said. "If it were not Camtan's favourite I would let it sit all night."

On the other side of the King and several places down, Camtan leaned into view and held his glass up in thanks. He was grinning.

Loki returned his smile with a mock guilty look and scanned the rest of the drinks to make sure he'd tried them all.

He had, he looked up at the crowd as Fosxyr returned with his food and realised that his accidental mistake had been noticed. More than a few nobles were hiding smiles. For a second he felt panic, No Trouble, No Mischief! But then he realised that even those who were waiting on the wine did not seem particularly upset. In fact he got the distinct impression that they found his error charming, a product of youthful nativity.

Well he could play with that well enough, they were supposed to love him after all. He finished his meal in time for the first entertainment performance.

The acrobats were back, tumbling and twirling through the air. Loki leaned forwards and made his eyes a little wider in apparent awe. Their daring feats of strength and agility made him gasp in delight, and their final balancing act made him clap his hands together in wonder.

At one point he thought he might be overdoing it, but the crowd appeared to be fooled. Fosxyr wasn't, neither was Dorgen or Mulmyr, who shot him a knowing smile, but everyone else only saw a young Consort charmed by the wonders of the Court.

That number included the King. He beamed at Loki's reactions, clearly delighted that his Consort was entertained.

"Do you like them?" He asked.

"They're so talented." Loki replied. "I cannot imagine how they do it."

That was a lie from the depths of his soul. Loki's weapons training meant that he could have joined them without more than month of training to learn the routines. The physical side of it would not be difficult.

But King Dimcken was pleased, and the court was charmed.
"Take *that* Odin' Loki thought behind his mask.

After the Acrobats came a magician, who made butterflies appear out of air and imagines appear out of coloured smoke.

"Perhaps one day your studies will allow you to create such wonders." King Dimcken said to Loki.

Loki refrained from saying that he could already create images far better than this, and that the man had gone into entertainment precisely because he wasn't good enough for more advanced work.

He was very entertaining though. He told a story in a deep booming voice as he created the images to go with it. Everyone clapped in delight when it was over.

The dessert tray was placed in front of Loki and he picked up his fork and attacked a small square of cake. It tasted of mint, but somehow ever colder than the normal kind, and he couldn't help but react with surprise.

"Have you never tasted Vanahem Mint before?" King Dimcken asked him.

"No Husband." Loki answered. "It is very nice, especially with the cream."

"It is quite a rare treat here, but well worth the price." King Dimcken said, eating his own square.

Loki tried another and another. He made sure this time to drink every drink as well, nervously glancing up at the crowd as he drank the last one. He caught a few smiles from the nobles and looked down quickly in apparent embarrassment. Inside he felt like a puppet-master, pulling all the right strings to make them react the way he wanted.

When the tray was finished and Fosxyr appeared at his shoulder, Loki asked for the mint-cake, which clearly made the King happy. He liked it whenever Loki seemed to prefer Vanahem foods and customs.

After desert came the dancing. No sooner had the music started than Camtan was at Loki's side with a grin on his face and his arm outstretched.

"Come Mother-Loki, you must dance." He said cheerfully.

Loki knew enough to glance questioningly at the King, who waved him off happily.

"Go and dance, enjoy yourself my darling." He said.

Loki followed Camtan to the floor and they lined up for the first dance.

Loki danced for over an hour, they were playing all the traditional songs that Camtan had insisted he learn the steps to. All in all he thought he had done quite well, and remembered to look back at the King for approval between songs. He didn't want to anger the King by ignoring him for too long, but King Dimcken was in a fine mood, drinking heavily and clapping along to the music as he watched his Consort and his son dance below.

After an hour the musicians took a break and a singer began to sing slow ballads. Loki returned to his seat with a flushed face and thin sheen of sweat on his brow.

King Dimcken looked as though he'd like to drag him off and ravage him right then, but he smiled instead and held his arms out to pull Loki into a hug.

"Camtan told me you were quick to learn, I should have listened more closely." He said, planting a
kiss on Loki's lips.

"It's a lot of fun." Loki said. "I've never tried these dances before, they are faster than those in Asgard."

"We like to be merry." King Dimcken said, releasing Loki and sitting back down. Loki sat beside him and picked up his water glass.

"I must take after my mother" he said "I like to be merry too."

This declaration made the King beam like a sunrise. He wanted a happy wife.

After two months, Loki had discovered a number of key things about keeping King Dimcken happy.

1. Always look pretty. Perfect clothes were a must, jewels and cleanliness were essential. The King did not like mud or filth and even less when on those close to him. Sweat was alright if it was clean, and messy clothes were okay if the King was the one doing the messing, otherwise, perfection was key.

2. Be happy. The King spent all day listening to people complaining and asking for things. He did not want to face more of the same among his family. A cheerful countenance was essential, a smile must be always ready.

3. Be impressed. King Dimcken loved to show off the wealth of Vanaheim. Wide eyes and a stunned expression were good ways to keep him happy. He especially loved it when something of his outdid anything found in Asgard. In this at least Loki was lucky. The King had made many visits to Asgard for diplomatic reasons, but had never seen outside the Palace. If Loki said that Vanaheim's forests were more lush, or its streams more clear, then the King did not know any differently.

For two months Loki had lived by these rules, and as a result, King Dimcken was more enamoured with him than ever.

Loki had also made an effort to be seen whenever he could. He would go out to the main garden to read under a tree as the palace inhabitants looked on. He was gracious and spoke well to everyone who crossed his path, he complimented old nobles and listened attentively to new ones. He never had a cross word or a sly remark to say about anyone.

It was killing him. At night he would lie in bed and mentally say everything he really thought at imaginary versions of the court. The only person he didn't do that for was the King, because if he started he would never stop.

For now he sat and smiled as he listened to the singer, aware that the smile on his face was fake, but that it looked real and natural. In just two months, he had learned a whole new kind of lying, and he was good at it.

The singer finished after an hour, and the musicians came back for more dancing. Camtan stepped up to take Loki to the dance floor again.

"The wine's been flowing, you'll have a few people ask you to dance soon." He said as they moved down the line of people. "Say yes to all of them, it's diplomatic, don't allow yourself to dance more than once with anyone."

"I won't" Loki promised, although he wasn't sure how well he would be able to refuse without giving offense.
When the song ended, Loki found himself approached by three noblewomen and two men.

"Your Majesty, I would be honoured if you would consent to dance with me." The nearest one asked, just as the others managed to arrive.

"Perhaps you would do *me* the honour of dancing with me afterwards." Another said.

Loki looked from one to the other, Camtan was nearby listening but he did not interfere.

"I would love to dance with you both." He said.

The woman smiled, the man stepped back, secure in his place. The others started to crowd around as the music started.

Loki quickly held his arm out and led the noblewoman to the correct place on the floor. He searched his memory frantically for a name.

"Lady Louveen?" He said.

Her face lit up in delight. "You remember me Your Grace!"

Loki allowed a look of relief to cross his face.

Tone naive, voice earnest, be charming.

"I was worried I might not, I have met so many people so quickly, I am afraid of giving offense." He confessed.

"Oh don't worry, no one will expect you to remember everyone." She giggled.

Loki smiled at her innocently.

"I'm sure I'll learn everyone's name and titles soon." He said.

They skipped and hopped their way through the dance. Lady Louveen was chatty and giggly, after only a few minutes Loki knew she was a shallow woman with her head in the air and her eyes on whoever could reward her greatest. He kept his friendly smile the whole time as inside he hoped desperately that she was not a close member of the King's inner circle. He hadn't seen much of her, so he had high hopes she was not.

His next dance was with Lord Skaillyr, who was as sharp as a tack and asked double edged questions designed to trip lesser men up. Loki managed to get through to the end of the dance without giving anything away, and the Lord looked disappointed as he stepped back to allow another noble to take the next dance.

After half an hour of careful diplomacy while trying to remember all the right steps, Loki was growing exhausted.

The next song it was Mulmyr who asked him to dance. She appeared out of nowhere and held her hand out with a smile. At the high table, The King's face darkened but he gestured for Loki to go ahead.

The dance was the step-in-time, Loki moved easily through the simple steps, grateful for a chance to relax.

"You're doing wonderfully Loki." Mulmyr said. While she would never be beautiful, she was
perfectly dressed and looked radiant as they danced.

"I'm enjoying myself." Loki replied.

Once again he knew he hadn't gotten the lie past her. He *was* enjoying the dancing, but she'd seen from across the room that he was tiring of the politics.

"Just relax dear, I want nothing but a dance partner." She said.

They didn't speak again until the dance finished, but it was an easy silence, and it gave Loki a chance to regroup.

"Thank you for the dance." He said when the music finished.

"My pleasure dear, enjoy the rest of your night." She said and glided serenely away.

Dorgen was glaring at him. The King was glaring at Mulmyr. Loki stepped lightly away from the nobles trying to catch the next dance and went back to the King.

"Are you well Husband?" Loki asked, putting a little bit of innocent eyes into his expression.

Dimcken's expression softened. "I am quite well my sweet one, I enjoyed watching you dance."

Loki forced a smile and observed the dance floor, where the next dance had begun.

"I left at the right time." He mused. "I don't recognise this dance."

"Is Camtan still teaching you?"

"One morning a week." Loki said. "He's is very kind to give up his time to teach me."

"You move beautifully." King Dimcken said, sliding a hand onto Loki's knee.

Inside Loki felt the disgust rise within him, but his face showed no sign of it. How quickly he had learnt this new skill.

"I had some dancing lessons in Asgard, but they were far more rigid. I prefer these dances," He said.

The song only took a few minutes, but it seemed to take a lifetime with Dimcken's hand stroking his leg. Finally a new song began and Camtan appeared again.

"Mother-Loki you can't sit down now. Not after I spent so long teaching you the jump-the-roses." He said, grinning.

"Oh is this that one?" Loki said and stood. He paused and turned to look at the King.

Dimcken was smiling. "I love this song, go and dance." He said, smiling.

Loki headed back to the floor and spent the next two hours dancing with a succession of men and women, smiling pleasantly the whole time.

After the second round of dancing, it was time for present giving. The light of the sun was creeping through the windows. Loki was starting to feel worn out from the dancing.

There was no ceremony, apart from the King announcing that everyone was to enjoy themselves. The nobles all turned to one another and started exchanging gifts. Fosxyr appeared at Loki's shoulder
and handed him one.

"For the King." He whispered.

Loki obediently turned and held out his gift. King Dimcken handed him one in return.

Loki untied the ribbon that held it and opened the box.


He found his easy smile and tried to look delighted.

"They're beautiful." He said.

That part was not actually a lie. The workmanship was exquisite and the stones were all very valuable, and certainly if he'd been a fashion-obsessed queen then they would have been perfect. But he was Loki, and his ears weren't pierced.

Which meant they soon would be. He knew it like he knew one day he would be in Thor's arms where he belonged. He was going to have to pierce his ears.

"Thank you Husband." He said earnestly.

King Dimcken was looking delighted at his gift. Loki recognised it, it was a bottle of fine dark spirits from Asgard, expensive, and highly prized.

"Thank you my sweet wife, I adore this drink of your people, and it's so hard to get! I will enjoy it." He exclaimed.

Loki put a pleased look on his face and endured a hard, lingering kiss.

Fosxyr handed him another gift as he pulled away. "For Prince Dorgen and his wife." He whispered. The Prince, with Princess Mulmyr behind him, was already approaching.

"Loki." He said stiffly, handing over a box.

"Dorgen, Mulmyr." Loki replied, trying to keep his voice civil.

They exchanged gifts quickly.

Dorgen, or most likely Mulmr, had given him a pair of fine riding gloves. The smile on his face was genuine when he looked up.

Dorgen was looking disgruntled as he held Loki's gift in his hands, although given that that was his normal state it meant nothing. Mulmyr smiled warmly as she admired the beautiful set of bookends.

Loki saw Dorgen glance at Fosxyr as he mumbled his thank you. He knew Loki could not have picked them out.

Musleen gave him a book on magic. It wasn't the best one out there, but for a man with no magical background it was a thoughtful present. Loki gave him a stunningly sharp dagger, which earned another lightning glance at Fosxyr. The gifts had clearly been chosen with a lot of thought. Loki didn't mind in the slightest.
Camtan gave him a jewelled mirror, which was… nice? Loki thanked him warmly regardless, and gave him a box that turned out to contain a set of matching jewelled armbands for him and Princess Sofftia. Their thank you was a little more genuine.

At last though, it was the end of the feast. Fosxyr escorted Loki back to his chambers, after King Dimcken had kissed him goodnight *thoroughly* and lamented that he was too tired to do more.

Loki bathed, he felt exhausted but the inky feeling of Dimcken’s mouth wouldn’t let him rest until he’d at least tried to wash it off, then he pulled on a nightgown and crawled into bed.

“I have to get my ears pierced tomorrow.” He said sleepily as Fosxyr pulled the covers into place.

“I know, I saw. I’ll arrange it. Sleep well Your Grace.” He said and left Loki to his rest.

That night Loki dreamed of Thor in a cave. The thunder god was trapped with his friends by a huge scaly bird-like monster. They couldn’t escape as the bird was far too sharp eyed and kept striking at them whenever they got close. Thor was throwing lightning at it in an attempt to subdue it, but it was too agile. Loki reached out a hand and summoned a mist to hide them, before watching them make their escape.

In the morning when he woke, there was a lightning burn on the ceiling above his bed.
Chapter Summary

The Common Touch

Loki stared at the burn mark on the ceiling. It hadn't been there before, he was sure he would have noticed. He lay there quietly as his eyes travelled along the thin burn line that now streaked across the face of one of the nymphs. It cut right across the mouth, almost as though it was being silenced, keeping a secret.

The door opened to admit Fosxyr, and Loki hastily tore his eyes away from the ceiling. He didn't want to draw attention to it. He assumed that he must have done it in his sleep, although he'd never been able to throw fire or lightning before. He was sure it was lightning, he *wanted* it to be lightning.

"Good morning Your Grace." Fosxyr said. "Breakfast is ready."

Loki just stared at him. Suddenly, all at once, he just felt *tired*.

Tired of moving, tired of smiling, of making stupid conversation about stupid things. He was tired of pretending, tired of lying. There was no art to his lies here, no finesse, no intricate story to weave, just the same old constant one. Happy young Loki from Asgard, innocent, naive, sweet. 'Love me. Love me so I can go home.' He thought.

He let his head fall back onto the pillow as Fosxyr approached him cautiously.

"Your Grace, are you unwell?" He asked.

"Dead baby alpec." Loki answered in a dull voice. "Earrings. Side-on riding. Smile Loki smile." His voice was starting to grow hysterical. "Dance baby! Dance for your master! Dance for the King! Upright in the Hall and flat on your back in bed! Smile baby smile! Away from your family and far from home! GOOD FOR THE POT!! DANCE TIL IT KILLS YOU!!!" He was shrieking now, utterly lost in pain and fear and despair.

"Loki, shhh, Loki, you'll be alright, you'll survive, you'll get through this." Fosxyr soothed gently, wrapping his arms tightly around Loki and stroking his hair.

Loki sobbed into his arms for a long time, clinging hard to Fosxyr as he wept.

"I want to go home." He whispered through his tears.

"I know Loki, I know." Fosxyr said.

"I can't do this. I can't. Last night was so hard, and there's more today and tomorrow and forever." Loki gulped.

"Not forever Your Grace, I know you have a long struggle ahead of you, but you *can* do this. You are strong Your Grace. Very strong."
Loki raised his head and looked through tears at the servant. "I dreamed I was with my brother." He said. "We fought a battle together with our friends."

"You will do that again." Fosxyr promised. "You will have great adventures."

"I miss them." Loki said, knowing he was skating dangerously close to a confession and hating that even now, at his most vulnerable and miserable, he had to hide his love for Thor behind a veil of family bonds.

Although he felt he could trust Fosxyr more than most, he could *never* be too careful.

Fosxyr held him until he calmed down, stroking his back and just letting him cry. At last Loki pushed himself back up and looked at Fosxyr guiltily. "I'm sorry." He said, "I shouldn't have lost control like that."

"On the contrary Your Grace, this is the perfect place to lose control, you conducted yourself wonderfully at the feast.

"I have to have my ears pierced." Loki said, shoulders slumping back down.

"I know, Your Grace. If you do not, His Majesty will notice and order you to." Fosxyr said.

Loki nodded slowly. His tiredness was back, but it no longer had the power of anger behind it, he just felt exhausted.

"I will arrange it with Wraeny, he can do it." Fosxyr continued. "You can grow them back over when you are on your adventures."

"Yes," Loki said. "I will."

Fosxyr looked at him kindly. "Would you like me to bring you your breakfast here Your Grace? You can sleep afterwards, if you wish to."

"For how long?" Loki asked.

"Until you wake, Your Grace, His Majesty is spending today with his council, the *whole* day. They will be working on the plans for the summer harvest until well into the night."

"So soon after the feast?" Loki asked as Fosxyr tucked him back into bed.

"His Majesty likes to get it out of the way so as to enjoy the rest of summer. His councillors are aware of his preferences, they were prepared for a long day today. You are free to do what you like."

The tiredness that had been dragging against his bones suddenly seemed to lift, and he found himself feeling lighter and happier.

"Can I go out to the city?" He asked.

"To visit the market?" Fosxyr asked, surprised. "I didn't know you knew about that."

'I didn't." Loki said with a frown. "What market?"

"The Summer Market is the common people's version of the feast. It runs all day today, from morning until sunset. Some nobles go, although most are sleeping off the feast." Fosxyr said.
"Were you going to go?" Loki asked.

"I have my duties here." Fosxyr said, "It's been years since I last went to the Summer Market."

Loki sat up. "Can I go? The King won't mind?"

"Not if you go with the right people." Fosxyr said with a smile. "Shall I go and see if they're free?"

Prince Camtan strolled casually down one of the main streets of the market. He was smiling cheerfully and was in no hurry as Loki wandered from stall to stall, asking questions and making purchases. Musleen stayed closer to the King's Consort, and kept a far more watchful eye on the crowd around them.

Loki was having fun. Real fun, the kind that made him smile without meaning to. He bounced from stall to stall, admiring the goods and produce on display. He stopped and stared at the seidr stalls, gasped in delight when he found and bought some leather-rub from Asgard, and frowned at the price of heterwart.

They ate food from the stalls for lunch, things on sticks that were piping hot and sticky. Loki got some on the corner of his mouth and wiped it off hastily with a cloth as the crowd grinned at him.

Unlike at the feast, he did not feel as though he was being judged, or had to put on a display. The people who saw him did not need such things to be impressed. They were delighted to have the chance to get close to the King's Consort.

Most of the older ones watched him go with concern, such a young boy in the bed of such an old man made them worry for him. The mothers would press him to eat and the fathers would explain their professions in gruff, yet affectionate, voices.

The children were the ones who stood back. They were in awe of his fine clothes and dark hair. This was *Asgard's* prince. That mysterious place that held ultimate control. Loki was alluring in a dozen different ways, and one by one, the people fell in love with him.

Loki barely noticed. He was having a fine time, and happily moved from place to place, urging the two Princes to keep up.

At one point, Musleen spotted something that displeased him and he disappeared, only to return a few minutes later with his usual tight smile.

"False alarm." He said quietly, his tone light. But his guards were more alert from that point onward.

Loki made them eat dinner outside in a garden eatery, so that he could watch the entertainers as they passed by.

"Loki!" A voice rang out.

Loki turned and grinned as Rohundia and Daenceia waved at him and tried to make their way through the crowd.

They bowed when they got close enough but Loki waved them up and craned his head looking for more seats.
"I didn't know you were visiting the festival." Rohundia said. "We would have been on the lookout for you sooner. Shiarpia and Thainia are buying food."

"I was eager to see it since Fosxyr told me about it." Loki said.

"Uncle Fosxyr tells wonderful stories." Shiarpia said, appearing with her hands full of skewered meat. Thainia was behind her, holding a tray with drinks on it and looking unsteady in the jostling crowd.

"Try one." She said as the others fell on the food.

Loki took one, as did Camtan, Musleen declined, claiming he was too full. His eyes were alert as he watched Shiarpia and Loki interact.

Loki was chatting away happily, discussing the essay Sheiftyr had set them and trying to organise a time to sit with Shiarpia so that she could help him, when he noticed that Rohunda appeared to be studying Musleen closely. She caught him looking and blushed like a sunset.

Loki just grinned at her, which made her blush harder. Musleen hadn't noticed.

The expanded group made their way to the open area behind the stalls as darkness fell. They stood in their own little clearing provided by the guards as magicians lit up the sky with brightly coloured lights. They created images in the sky, as well as coloured explosions that made the crowd gasp in delight.

Beside Loki, Shiarpia raised her hand and sent her own spell into the sky. The school of fish that were swimming colourfully through the air were suddenly swallowed by a grumpy-looking whale.

Loki burst out laughing, unable to stop himself. Thankfully the rest of the crowd thought it was meant to be a humorous display and laughed just as loudly.

After the light show the Princes insisted that Loki head home. He didn't really want to, but the market was closing up anyway. He wished a good night to his friends and walked back to the palace feeling light and cheerful.

It was a respite, a day to forget what lay ahead of him, and he grabbed it with both hands.

He told Fosxyr all about it as he got ready for bed. The servant listened indulgently as he described all the things he'd seen and bought and tasted.

Fosxyr looked worried when he mentioned running into Shiarpia again, but Loki assured him that she'd been well behaved in front of the Princes.

"Good, good." Fosxyr said, he still sounded worried. "I will have to talk to her."

"About what? She was great." Loki protested as he settled himself in the bed.

"She is a commoner among royals, I just want her to be safe." Fosxyr said. His look of concern had not diminished.

Loki thought he was overreacting, Shiarpia was a mage of some ability, while she may not carry royal blood, in Asgard that was enough to promote you to the level of 'friends with nobles' even if she wasn't one herself.

But with Vanaheim having so many more mages, maybe this custom was not practised here. The
stubborn part of Loki refused to accept it. He would see her at class two days a week, he wasn’t going to ignore her because of some silly notion of status, otherwise he’d have no friends at all.
The next day the King decided that he was going to spend the day planning the first hunt of the season. The Tower's teaching schedule would go on break for six weeks over the summer and he wanted to take full advantage of Loki's availability.

Loki, meanwhile, was having another riding lesson. He could control the horse quite well now, although it was still the old calm one that never jumped at anything.

Poenyen was pleased enough with his progress that he would stand by the fence and watch rather than stay by the horse's side.

Loki led the horse through a series of obstacles without difficulty, he was smiling at his progress.

The temporary stockyards were still up. Out of the corner of his eye Loki saw some men leading horses out towards them.

They looked odd, and for a moment he wasn't sure why, but then it registered. They were wearing trousers.

Loki pulled his horse to a halt and watched as the men mounted astride, with varying degrees of difficulty, and then started leading the horses through the stockyard, using the wooden barriers like an obstacle course.

"Your Grace? Is there something wrong?" Poenyen called out.

"No, no, I am well." Loki replied.

He rode his horse closer to the fence so that they could talk better.

"I was watching the men practice their riding." He said. "They are riding astride."

"They hope to go into the army." Poenyen said. "They must learn to ride astride or they will not pass the entry exam."

Loki watched them for a few minutes.

"The one in the red is going to fall off." He said.
Two minutes later, Loki was proved correct as the man lost his balance and fell.

Poenyen winced. "That is my son." He said as the man rose and brushed himself off.

"He sits too stiffly in the saddle." Loki said. "He needs to loosen up and rise from the saddle when he jumps."

"Thank you Your Grace, I will tell him." Poenyen said.

Loki looked at them wistfully. "I wish I could ride like that again, just for a few minutes." He said.

"I'm sorry Your Grace, His Majesty almost stopped your lessons altogether, he would never forgive me if I let you ride in such an unconventional manner." Poenyen said.

Loki sighed and turned his horse away to walk around the yard once more.

He would survive. It was only a little thing to give up, compared to so many big things, and one day he would ride again.

Wraenyr was watching Loki carefully as he prepared the needle.

"You may close your eyes if you wish Your Grace, there is no shame to it." He said.

"I am fine." Loki answered. He had taken more than a few poundings in his time, he was not afraid of a little needle.

It came closer and he felt his heart rate increase.

Definitely not afraid.

Wraenyr carefully dabbed Loki's ear with a numbing lotion, then took the lobe in his fingers and lined up the needle.

"Ready Your Grace?" He asked.

"Yes," Loki said, although to his horror it sounded more like a whisper.

Wraenyr shoved the needle through Loki lobe, pushing it forwards until it passed through entirely.

Loki sat there and gritted his teeth. The numbing lotion only worked on the parts it could touch, so the flesh of his lobe was stinging.

He sat in silent disapproval as Wraenyr did the other one, carefully putting a small ring through both to hold the hole open.

"You must rotate them every few hours." He said. "If your lobes turn red or grow hot you must tell me at once so the healer can stop the infection from growing. But I cleaned everything well so there shouldn't be any problems."

"I'm sure it will be fine." Loki said. "How long will it be until I can wear the King's gift?"
"A few weeks at least, Your Grace." Wraenyr said.

Loki looked over at Fosxyr. "Will he notice in that time?" He asked.

"I doubt it, there are no major events where you would be expected to dress finely coming up. Once your ears are healed you can wear them to dinner with him, but he won't be expecting it." Fosxyr replied.

Loki nodded, his ears stung but it was manageable.

He rose and went to the living area to finish the first draft of his essay. He had six hours until dinner time, where once again he would dine with the King. Now that the festivities were over, King Dimcken had made it clear that he wanted Loki back in his bed.

Loki pushed the horrifying thought away and concentrated on his work. He was doing that more and more often, slipping from one... *person* to another. It was as though the King did not exist when he was not physically present, so Loki could relax and feel happy. When he existed in public, he was like Odin, a symbol of his people who Loki must not embarrass. When they were alone, he was a monster.

Right now though Loki was focussed on finding even more bloody citations for his essay. He knew this topic, he knew how the spell to cover an army's tracks came into being. He didn't know so many people had written books on the subject.

He scribbled even more references as the time ticked away, the piles of books shifted back and forth as he dug out the ones that he needed. Fosxyr brought him some tea and a piece of mint-cake mid-afternoon. The tea cooled to room temperature as Loki worked. He was determined to get a better grade with this essay.

By the time Fosxyr told him it was time to prepare for dinner, Loki was yawning. He rose and followed the servant to the bathing room and sank into the hot water.

"That feels good." He said. "My back is aching from riding side-on this morning."

"You should have said something earlier Your Grace." Fosxyr said, looking upset. "That is what the massage table is for; Wraenyr is well trained and would have soothed your muscles for you."

Loki looked over at the table, he'd forgotten about it. He'd had many a massage after training when growing up, but here in the palace, with his life of one comfort after another, he hadn't considered that he might still need it.

"Maybe tomorrow?" He asked. "If I still feel sore?"

"Of course Your Grace." Wraenyr said.

Loki washed the day's grime away and climbed out to dry off. He followed Fosxyr to the dressing room and stood waiting for him to choose tonight's robes.

As Fosxyr browsed, Loki looked down the length of the room to his Aesir clothes in the corner.

"I will get to that tomorrow." He said.

Fosxyr followed his gaze and shook his head. "Wraenyr will do it for you Your Grace." He said.

"I want to do it." Loki said. "It will give my hands something to do while I think about my seidr
lessons."

Fosxyr did not look happy, but did not contradict him.

Properly dressed and bejewelled, Loki walked slowly to the King's chambers.

The others were already there, King Dimcken's face lit up at the sight of him.

"Loki my darling, you look radiant." He said, rising to pull Loki into a tight hug.

He kissed Loki's lips for a few minutes while the others tried to look elsewhere. Finally he released Loki and allowed him to sit down.

Dinner was a quiet affair. The King was eager to hear about their visit to the market and Camtan was more than happy to tell the tale.

He left out the part where they met up with Loki's friends. Loki followed his example and didn't mention them either.

After the others had left, King Dimcken turned his eyes back to Loki.

"I want you now." He said, his voice low.

Loki rose and tried not to show his fear as he walked with the King into the bedroom.

King Dimcken kissed him hungrily, forcing his tongue inside Loki's mouth and moaning in pleasure as he ran his hands over Loki's body.

Loki just tried to endure it. It would be all over soon, just another night to get through. He concentrated on other things, his essay, the market, the leather-rub, anything, everything, as long as it wasn't the King.

King Dimcken pressed Loki back against the bed and pushed down on top of him.


He moved over, closer to the centre, pulling Loki's arms to make it clear where he wanted them to be. Loki obliged him, hoping that this nightmare would be over soon.

The King was hard, which he had not been for over a week, so Loki suppose it was overdue. He tried to keep himself calm as King Dimcken pulled his skirts up.

Loki obediently started to undo the buttons on his outer robe, but King Dimcken stopped him.

"No. I like you like this. I like you all wrapped up." He breathed. There was a light in his eyes that Loki had learnt to fear. Things were about to go very bad.

"Y-y-yes Husband." He stammered, unable to hide his fear.

King Dimcken grinned lustily. He grabbed Loki's skirts and pulled them upwards. With his belt still done up, the skirts stopped at his waist instead of going over his head.

Dimcken pulled the fabric higher, leaving Loki's lower half utterly exposed while his head disappeared beneath his skirts.
Loki let out a cry of fear as the King pulled his skirts closed above his head. He was trapped, the layers of fabric were pulled around him, trapping his arms and cutting out all light and fresh air. He desperately tried to stay calm as King Dimcken shifted into position and buried himself between Loki’s legs.

Loki fought and failed not to sob as the King thrust inside of him. He couldn't see, he could move, the air trapped with him was warm and growing warmer. The King’s other hand appeared to be everywhere, touching and rubbing all over Loki's legs and pressing up between his buttocks. His lack of sight made him sensitive, and he couldn't help but jump in response to the King's touches. Speared as he was, this only served to heighten the King's pleasure as Loki kicked and jerked. He could hear King Dimcken grunting and groaning through the fabric of his skirts, until at last the King's limited stamina gave way and he released himself with a cry.

King Dimcken loosened his grip on Loki’s skirts and pulled a handful down to allow him to breathe. Loki gulped in mouthful after mouthful of clean air, there were tears on his face and he was a mess.

"You look lovely like that." King Dimcken said, rubbing the tears from Loki's cheeks and kissing him firmly. "You look… ravaged."

Loki just looked at him, he couldn’t play a part here, not like this, the King knew that he’d been tortured and was enjoying the aftermath immensely. Loki did not want to do anything more, ever, but especially not now that the King was satisfied. He was terrified even a word would provoke the King to further action.

King Dimcken rolled back and sighed in contentment. A few minutes later he was snoring. Loki carefully rose and made his way back to the living room where the King's servant, Hieddenyr was waiting.

"Tea Your Grace." He offered. Loki smiled at him in thanks and took the cup.

Hieddenyr also fetched him one of his books to read. Loki settled himself by the fire and tried to relax.

Hieddenyr stayed by the bedroom door. He was not obviously listening to the snoring beyond, but Loki had no doubt that he would warn him if it seemed as though the King would wake.

After an hour of reading, Loki grew curious.

"Hieddenyr?"

"Yes Your Grace?" The servant asked, walking quietly across the huge room to reach Loki's side.

"How long have you served the King?" Loki asked.

"I have served at the palace for fifteen hundred years, I have served His Majesty personally for twelve hundred years." He replied.

"You must have known the last queen then." Loki said.

Hieddenyr's face twitched, he looked as though he was trying to hide a sneer.

"I was there then, yes Your Grace." He said.

Loki felt uneasy, but he pressed on.
"Did she come out here and sit by the fire afterwards?" He asked.

Hieddenyr looked angry. "No Your Grace, she would go into the meditation room and cry by the window." He said in a tone that, had he not been a servant talking to a superior, would have been described as 'snappy'.

Loki looked back at his book. "I'm sorry." He said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Hieddenyr looked shocked. "I apologise Your Grace, I was far too forward."

"No." Loki said. "You do not need to apologise, it must have been hard for all of you when... when it happened."

Hieddenyr looked at him seriously, then suddenly knelt so that their faces were level.

"Never do what she did Your Grace, it is not worth it, it was never worth it." He whispered, his eyes blazed with earnestness.

"I won't." Loki said. "I promise I won't."

Hieddenyr nodded once, then returned to his station by the door. Loki let him go.

Chapter End Notes

Hi Guys,

I have a very busy weekend full of obligations, so I don't think I'll be able to post anything more until Monday night, Tuesday at the latest. I hope this will keep you going.
Loki sat with Shiarpia in one of the study rooms in the Tower. She was reading his essay with a faint look of horror. Loki felt insulted.

"She gave you a six last time, she should have given you a four." Shiarpia said bluntly.

Loki looked outraged. "Everything in that essay is correct! Cited, quoted, factual - "

"It's not the content that's the problem." Shiarpia interrupted. "You're content is good, but, well, do you even know how to write an essay?"

Loki frowned at her in confusion. "What do you mean?" He asked.

"This is a saga, at least, it is in style. Essays have an introduction, which is *brief* between three to seven paragraphs depending on the size set, *not* a long running-on thing with no endings, and the facts should be presented in groups that work together to support one another. Then you end it with a conclusion that does not introduce anything new, by the time you get the end you should have said it all already."

"Oh." Loki said. "I didn't know that."

Shiarpia picked up a red quill. "I will help you." She said with a determined expression.

Twenty minutes later the scroll was covered in red notes, arrows showing where things should be moved, and comments stating that this section needs winding up or expanding. Loki looked at the page and felt demoralised.

"Don't worry, it's not your fault that Asgard is into sagas and we're into essays, you know now, and I'll help you until you get it right." Shiarpia said.

She leaned in closely and lowered her voice.

"Rohundia wanted me to ask you what Musleen likes to do when he's not escorting you around, but I wasn't supposed to tell you that she asked." She said with a grin.

Loki fought back his own. "I'm afraid that information is private." He said with mock seriousness. "Just like the fact that he likes lemon cream pies."

Shiarpia giggled as they walked to class.

"She's got quite the crush on him. I don't understand it, normally the women go for Camtan, he's the likable one."

Loki grinned. "They say love is blind, but it can also be deaf, dumb and stupid." He answered.

Sheiftyr was in a fine mood. They had started on basic transmutation at last, and she was enjoying
her favourite subject.

The early lessons were about changing smoke, which had fine ash in it, to steam, which had none. Loki was proving to be an apt pupil, on the practical side of things at least. He focussed and turned the smoke, not only into steam, but back into smoke again, except he made it cedar wood smoke, not the ash wood they had been using. Sheiftyr spotted the difference, and gave him a ten.

Lunchtime was full of laughter, with Loki feeling better in the light and airy lunchroom with his friends. Rohundia managed to twist the conversation to Prince Musleen again, and Loki and Shiarpia teased her about it to much amusement.

“I don’t see why I can’t have a crush.” She exclaimed. “Everyone loves the Thunder Boys! Why can’t I like a Prince?”

“Of course you can.” Shiarpia said, waving away all objection. “But it is our right as friends to tease you about it.”

Loki laughed and nibbled the remains of his roll. “I don’t like the Thunder Boys.” He said. “I’ve never even seen them, there were too many of you girls crowding the stage.”

“That is a tragedy that must be remedied as soon as possible.” Shiarpia said. “Everyone in the whole nine realms should know of the Thunder Boys and their magnificence.”


“Maybe not Jotunheim.” Shiarpia conceded. “But they can go to Midgard, those mortals will worship them like the gods they are.”

The table, as one, sighed heavily. Loki rolled his eyes. “I like their music, but they can’t be all that exceptional.” He said.

The girls looked scandalised. “Of course they are!” Shiarpia exclaimed. “They are the most beautiful boys in the whole nine realms, even better than the Princes.”

“One of the Princes.” Rohundia corrected quickly.

She turned to Loki. “Do you think he’d come out with you again?” She asked.

Loki pretended to think about it. “Maybe.” He said at last. “Maybe if there is something I should go out for?”

“There’s a new play opening at the theatre.” Rohundia said quickly, too quickly. She knew it too and blushed like a sunset. “It’s got a warriors and a dragon in it.” She said, trying to save face.

“Interesting.” Loki said. “And what do I get for delivering the Prince into your arms?”

Shock covered her features as the other girls laughed. Loki began to chuckle too. “Relax Rohundia, I am teasing you. But maybe I will see the play, it sounds good. If you happen to be there, well, that’s up to you.” He said. “Who am I to stand in the way of true love?”

Rohundia slapped his arm as she struggled not to smile. Daenceia leaned in conspiratorially.

“Speaking of true love. I heard a rumour that Prince Thor spent five passionate nights with a sorceress, to get the secret of the Emerald.”

Loki felt as though he’d been stabbed in the heart.
“That’s a stupid rumour.” Shiarpia said. “There is no Emerald, so he’s not going to get any secret.”

“The boys in the market place say that a blond Aesir warrior *did* spend five nights of passion with a sorceress, and he walked away with the secret of how to decode the map of the Emerald. They heard it from the traders who were in Asgard. They say Prince Thor refuses to come home until he has found it.” Daenceia insisted. Loki swallowed heavily, unfortunately, Shiarpia saw it.

“What’s the matter Loki?” She asked. The table turned to look at him.

“I used to go with him on his stupid quests.” Loki said. “Now he’s going to get killed without me, big dumb oaf that he is.” Shiarpia gave him a shrewd look, but the others accepted it without a second thought.

“He’ll be fine.” Thainia said. “He’s Thor, he can do anything.”

Then it was her turn to be teased, Loki joined in, forcing himself to act naturally as inside his heart screamed in pain.

“Stop it! If Rohundia can like one Prince, I can like another. Besides, I’ve only heard his description, he may be ugly in real life.”

Four pairs of eyes turned to Loki. He shrugged. “He’s fine if you like them super tall and dense as an oak tree.” He said.

“How tall?” Daenceia asked suddenly.

“Taller than me by an inch.” Loki said, picturing his lover in his mind.

“Then it can’t be him.” She said. “With the five nights of passion. They said the warrior was shorter than the sorceress, and that she was a beauty.”

Loki frowned. “How does that make him short, maybe she’s tall and beautiful?” He asked, although inside he was desperate for it all to be a mistake. Surely Thor would not abandon him after only two months?

“Vanir men like their women short, if she’s beautiful, she’s not tall.” Shiarpia said bluntly.

“But they said he was blond, and full of wild passion, that he claimed that no woman, or man for that matter, was ever unsatisfied by him, and that he would woo the secret from her.” Daenceia protested.

Loki started to laugh. Partly because it was funny, but mostly in relief.

“Fandral.” He said. “Fandral is blond, a warrior, shorter than Thor by quite a bit and he has said that about his prowess before. In fact he never stops.”

The girls looked disappointed, but Loki couldn’t help but grin.

“Cheer up ladies, you can start worshipping Fandral if you like.” He said, grinning.

Thainia threw a piece of lettuce at him.
Chapter Summary

The Duties of a Consort

At dinner one evening, King Dimcken announced that Loki should hold a party.
"I have a list of people you must invite." He said, pulling out of his pocket. "And another of those you must not invite." He pulled out a second, longer list.

"Yes Husband." Loki said, taking them both.

"Camtan will help you, he throws his own parties often." Dimcken continued. "Make it for eight days hence."

"Yes Husband." Loki said again.

Camtan gave him a grin. "Don't worry Mother-Loki, I will help you with everything. We'll choose the food, the wine, the musicians, should we have a theme? How about blue? Or green? Green is your colour, it should be green."

"Calm yourself my son, this is a Consort's party, not one of your loud things with your equally loud friends." King Dimcken said. "Make it tasteful and entertaining. Musicians are good, perhaps a singer or a magic act for part way through the night, nothing too fancy though, this is not a feast."

"We'll handle everything Father, don't you worry." Camtan said, his grin was so wide it was almost scary.

The following day, Camtan stayed after Loki's dancing lesson to help him with the party.
"You need to invite Rofosteryr and Pilkeen. Oh, and Maldyr."

"He's on the do-not-ask list." Loki said, scanning it.

"Oh, oh yes, there was that... unpleasantness a few years ago." Camtan said.

"Unpleasantness?" Loki asked.

"He got drunk at one of my parties and ran naked down the corridors. Father happened to be there and hasn't thought very highly of him since." Camtan said, trying not to grin. "He's the nephew of Lord Kinndyr, so Father couldn't punish him too severely, but he doesn't like him."

"What about Prince Dorgen?" Loki asked.

"No, if he wanted to come he would have said so at dinner, he won't come to one if Father's there, because that means that Mulmyr can't come."

"Alright." Loki said. "What about musicians?"
"Father's favourite group should be asked first. They can play something nice and soothing for him. Fosxyr?"

"Yes Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked.

"Can you ask them if they are free?"

"I'll go right now Your Grace." Fosxyr said and departed.

"You need bite sized food as well, things on platters." Camtan said. "Ask for the little meat pies and the crispy puffs, they're Father's favourites, but for the awesome people like us we can have *good* food like crumbed chicken in lettuce, and the little pork cubes in dipping sauce."

"Alright, alright!" Loki said, struggling not to laugh. "Calm down, I'll make sure you have all your favourites."

Camtan grinned at him. "I used to stay up to attend Mother's parties." He said. "Even though I was quite young. I would eat until I felt sick and try to sneak some of Mother's wine. She let me get away with it just once, and I almost spat it onto the floor. It was the Lowlands wine, the strongest flavoured one. It was a terrible introduction to the world of wine. I didn't touch it again for three centuries."

Loki smiled as Camtan reminisced. His voice was warm as he remembered his mother. Loki wanted to ask him how old he was when she died, but he couldn't think of the right way to say it. But as it turned out, that was not an issue.

"She was beautiful, my Mother. She made the whole room light up. I used to sit in my chair and watch her dance with the nobles. Father used to call her his common-touch queen."

"Why did he call her that?" Loki asked.

"She wasn't noble. They hated her for her because she caught Father's eye, and he divorced Dorgen's mother so he could marry her. That's why it was so easy to kill her at the end. She had no family to protect her, no one Father had to worry about upsetting. They just took her away and that was that." Camtan's normally cheery face had turned serious. "I woke up the morning after they took her away and she was gone forever." He added.

For a moment he was silent, then he seemed to shake himself out of his thoughts.

He smiled at Loki. "It's all over now. Nothing anyone can do about it." He said, his voice just a little too light.

Loki looked down. "What wine do you think we should have?" He asked.

"The Mountain white." Camtan said, relief evident in his voice. "And the Spring red and a nice sweet Rosefield."

Loki scribbled down the names as Fosxyr returned.

"The musicians would be honoured." He said.

"Wonderful." Camtan said. "This is going to be fun."

Loki took a deep breath. This was going to be hard.
"Does Your Grace have a spare moment?" Fosxyr asked Loki as he sat curled up by the fire. The party was due to start in two hours, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

Loki looked at Fosxyr questioningly.

"You will have to follow me." Fosxyr said.

Loki bit back a sigh. He felt as though a large weight was pushing down on him, and every small step he made just increased his burden.

"What do you have to show me?" He asked as he followed Fosxyr through his chambers and out into the corridor.

"Just follow me Your Grace." He said. "We're going to the kitchens."

Loki frowned, but followed the servant down the stairways until they reached a door, hidden in the wall.

"There aren't any noble's corridors to the kitchens, this is the closest servant's corridor." Fosxyr explained. Loki blinked in surprise but followed him further, until they were standing in the enormous palace kitchens.

The place was bustling with activity, there were at least fifty cooks working on various dishes, with their assistants chopping away at vegetables and preparing different meats.

Loki was familiar with the kitchens of Asgard, and knew that this was normal for a party, even a small one of fifty people or so. He still didn't know why he was down here.

Fosxyr led him through the crowd, every one of the kitchen staff managed to be so busy with their tasks that they didn't see him, or more likely *didn't see him*, a deliberate state in which the royal person somehow manages to become temporarily invisible while still not getting splashed or walked into.

Beyond the hot kitchen was a cold one, where salads and desserts were being prepared, and then they were through another door and into the massive herb garden beyond.

Loki was about to ask Fosxyr what it was they were doing here, when a sound caught his attention.

It was a bleat.

From behind the rosemary the head butcher strode calmly, a large haunch of meat across his shoulders. Behind him, running in short bursts to keep up, was the little baby alpec.

Its leg had been healed, although it still had a slight limp, but it followed the head butcher like it was on a lead; eyes gazing up at his back with utter devotion.

"You said it would go in the pot." Loki said before he could help himself.

The head butcher started in surprise, he hadn't seen them standing quietly on the side path.

"Your Grace!" He exclaimed, and bowed hurriedly.
Loki walked forwards and squatted down to regard the baby alpec. It was bigger, and healthier looking. It looked right at him and bleated, then tried to hide behind the butcher's legs.

Loki laughed, and straightened. "I thought it was in the stew." He said.

"Well, Your Grace, they're so tasteless when they're young." The Butcher said. "So I thought I'd better feed it up, let it get bigger, stronger, you know, tastier." His face betrayed him. His eyes were too kind. "Little thing deserved a chance really, walking all the way from the fields with the big ones, that takes a lot of strength." He said.

Loki blinked hurriedly, his eyes were stinging.

"Does he have a name?" He asked instead.

The butcher actually blushed. "I, um, that is, I sort of call him Loke-Loke." He admitted.

Loki smiled. "Good name, very good. Does he ever get into trouble, following you around like that?"

"All the time, Your Grace. Why, just last week he jumped up onto one of the benches in the kitchen and ran down the middle, there was flour and breadcrumbs everywhere, the head cook almost threw a fit!"

Loki started laughing as the little alpec bleated again. It was getting bolder, and was watching him from between the butcher's legs.

"One time, when his leg was still bandaged, I lost him among the crowd. I was looking everywhere for him in the big kitchen when suddenly I hear him bleat followed by the loudest scream you've ever heard in your life. And you'd never guess where he was Your Grace. He'd gone and lain down in one of the unused fireplaces, he was so covered in soot that he'd turned black, and when the servant girl went to light it, to her it seemed that the soot itself had come alive and bleated at her! Oh we were in trouble that day!"

"You don't seem too upset with the idea." Loki said.

The little alpec had crept out from behind the butcher's legs and was staring at him warily. It carefully took a step closer.

"Oh no Your Grace, There were plenty who saw the funny side of it all." The butcher said.

The little alpec took another step, then decided that this was a mistake and jumped backwards so fast its back legs stumbled and it landed on its rump. It got to its feet and ran away, only to stop when it got to a safe distance and so it could turn and bleat in defiance.

"He's quite a character." The butcher said fondly.

Loki realised he was smiling, a genuine smile of affection. "He is that." He agreed.

"Your Grace, it is my sad duty to tell you that we must go and make ready for the party now." Fosxyr said. "And I'm sure the kitchens will be wanting their meat."

The butcher shook his head. "This is for tomorrow my dear up-servant, tonight's meat is well roasted by now."

Fosxyr shrugged. "Your world is as much a mystery to me as mine is to you my down-servant
friend, I bow to your wisdom."

Loki turned back to the butcher. "Thank you for your time, take care of Loke-Loke."

"Of that you can be sure Your Grace, of that you can be sure." The butcher said.

Loki and Fosxyr left the kitchens and headed back upstairs.

"Up-servant means someone who serves the noble class directly, doesn't it?" Loki asked as they walked.

"Yes Your Grace, and down servant is one whose life is permanently below. There is the occasional friendly rivalry, but we mostly get along." Fosxyr said.

"I'm glad to hear it, I would hate to think there was a private war going on within the palace itself." Loki said.

"You'd never hear about it if there was Your Grace, for we'd cease our battles the second you drew close." Fosxyr said with a twinkle in his eye.

Loki bathed and dressed and pulled on Dimcken's earrings. They felt strange in his ears, he kept wanting to tug at them.

"You look perfect Your Grace, now, do you remember what you must do?" Fosxyr asked.

"Greet each person as they come in, spend approximately fifteen minutes talking with each of them, show no favouritism and keep an eye on the King, should he want my presence by his side." Loki repeated.

He was nervous. He *knew* he could do this, he had been to parties before, and even co-hosted them with Thor, but here his role was more important. This was not a party for youth and frivolity, but one for secrets and diplomacy.

He was just getting settled when Canrryen came in and quietly announced that Prince Camtan and his wife were in the outer chamber.

"Show them in." Loki said and smiled nervously at Fosxyr.

"Prince Camtan will help you." Fosxyr said quietly. "You will be fine."

Loki rose to greet them both as they were shown into the room. Camtan gave him a broad grin and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

"You're first party Mother-Loki, this will be fun." He said. Princess Sofftia smiled at him and curtsied.

"Please rise." Loki said hurriedly. She was large now, and looked unsteady as she lowered and raised herself. Camtan slipped an arm under around her to support her.

"Come my darling, let's find you the most comfortable chair in the room." He said.

"It's the one near the fire, with the pink roses." Loki said. "Trust me, I've tried them all."

She smiled at him. "Thank you Your Grace, I appreciate your care."

Camtan made sure she was settled, fetched her a drink from the servant's table himself and made sure
a small table was within her reach, then returned to Loki's side.

"She's not due for a few months yet, but she grows so tired now." He said. "I told her she didn't have to come but she does love parties."

"If she grows tired and wishes to leave early I'm sure everyone will understand." Loki said, as Canrryen appeared again and quietly informed him that Prince Musleen, Lord Fallconyr and his wife were all in the outer chamber.

"Leave Musleen there and let the others in." Camtan said cheekily.

"No, let them all in thank you." Loki said, trying not to laugh at Camtan's sulky expression.

"Mother never lets me have any fun." He joked, pouting.

"What's he sooking about now?" Musleen said as he strode into the room. Lord Fallconyr was behind him, accompanied by another man with soft white hair and kind blue eyes. Loki thought he looked familiar, but couldn't picture where he might have seen him before.

"Your Grace." Lord Fallconyr said, trying to bow. Loki bit his lip as he remembered that Fallconyr was prideful, and would not appreciate being treated like an old man, even though he was one. His wife was equally frail and for a moment Loki honestly thought the two of them would topple one another over, but they succeeded with their bows and stood straight again.

"Welcome." Loki said. "I am pleased to see you again Lord Fallconyr."

"Your Grace may I present my wife, Lord Eadgleyr." Fallconyr said.

Lord Eadgleyr bowed his head at the words. "Your Grace." He said.

Loki smiled at him. "I am pleased to meet you, Lord Eadgleyr, thank you for your attendance."

Canrryen was back, hovering behind the two Lords.

"The King is in the outer chamber." He said when Loki looked at him.

"Show him in." Loki said, surprised that Dimcken was waiting at all. But then Vanahem had certain protocols, and even the King was meant to wait for permission to enter the queen's chambers. It seemed that King Dimcken wished to stand by tradition.

A moment later King Dimcken was in the room, wrapping his arms around Loki and kissing him lovingly. "You look delightful my darling." He said.

Loki kept his head down and managed a thank you. When he glanced up again, he saw Lord Eadgleyr giving the King a look of absolute fury. Fallconyr pulled his wife away quickly.

Canrryen was back. This time seven Lords were waiting, having arrived within seconds of each other only a moment after the King. They were shown in one at a time, so that Loki could greet them properly. King Dimcken stayed by his side as he smiled and nodded and reached his hand out to each of them.

Loki's first hour was thus taken up by greetings, before finally everyone had arrived and was settled with wine. Femtchyr and Canrryen walked through the room with small bites of food, as in the corner the musicians began to play softly.

Loki bounced from one person to another, carefully making sure he gave them equal time. King
Dimcken sat by his daughter-in-law and talked to her about the baby. She spoke quietly, but with an enthusiasm that Loki didn't think he could match. But then she was not the object of the King's desire, so it was easier to think of him as a kind fatherly figure.

She said something and King Dimcken laid a hand on her stomach. A moment later his face lit up with delight as he felt the baby kick.

Then his eyes scanned the room and found Loki. He held out a hand and Loki excused himself from the two Lords currently vying for his attention and walked over to the King.

"Husband?" He asked as he approached.

"Loki my love, come and sit by me for a moment before I lose you to the crowd again." King Dimcken said. "I have just felt the baby kick, it will be a strong one I know it."

"Does it kick often now?" Loki asked politely.

"More often at night Your Grace." She said.

King Dimcken wrapped an arm around Loki's waist and let his hand rest across Loki's stomach. "Soon we'll have a lovely baby in the family." He said, his fingers were making stroking motions against Loki's abdomen. Loki kept his face carefully blank.

"Do you need anything?" Loki asked her, trying to ignore the King's hand. "What can I give you as a birthing gift?"

"Birthing gift?" She asked, looking puzzled. King Dimcken's expression echoed it.

Loki looked between them. "Oh, on Asgard it is traditional to give close relatives a gift for the birth of a child, something small like linen for the bed, or a rattle, or embroidered clothing." He said.

King Dimcken looked pleased. "I like that tradition. What should we get for you?" He asked, turning to Soffitia.

"Oh, I do not know Your Majesty, I have not had to think of it." She bit her bottom lip as she gave it some thought. "We have most things."

"What about a shade cloth?" Loki asked. "The summer will be at its height when you give birth, a shade cloth means you can take the baby to lie in the garden."

Her face brightened. "I did not think of that." She said. "You must have dealt with children before Your Grace."

King Dimcken's face actually darkened slightly at her words, but lightened again as Loki hastily said "Only the courtiers and their children, and Mother used to tell Thor and me about how we would love to lie out in the gardens when we were little."

"Then a shade cloth would be perfect." She said.

King Dimcken smiled again, he dark moment disappearing as quickly as it had arrived. Loki was insulted, did Dimcken think he'd been *faking* the pain he'd felt on their wedding night? Did he think Loki had birthed a child and Odin had neglected to tell him? The mere suspicion of it had made him frown. Loki hoped it was the thought itself that Dimcken found unsavoury, and not that he'd entertained the idea seriously.
"I shall send someone to find the finest shade cloth in the kingdom." Dimcken said.

"Perhaps we should have it embroidered." Loki suggested carefully, trying to gauge the King's mood.

"Yes." King Dimcken beamed. "We shall have it embroidered with tiny flowers and leaves for the summer."

It appeared that the King had come to his senses, and did not think it possible that Loki had lied to him.

Sofftia smiled at them both. "We would be honoured Your Majesties." She said, oblivious to it all.

Later on, as Loki worked his way around the room and chatted merrily to each of his guests, the King sat with a few specific ones and discussed less light-hearted matters. Camtan sat with his wife and they talked quietly to themselves as the King discussed his business. Loki concentrated on doing his duty, although after many hours of making polite chatter, he was exhausted mentally, and starting to feel tired physically as well.

"Your Grace." A voice said. Loki turned to find yet another guest he had not yet given fifteen minutes to. "You look radiant, I must thank you for inviting me to your party."

It was Lord Eveilyr, he had been invited at the King's request, although Dimcken had barely spoken to him. From what Fosxyr had whispered in his ear, Lord Eveilyr was here as a show of disfavour to Lord Kinndyr, who King Dimcken was upset with.

"My Lord, I am sorry I have not been able to talk to you sooner." Loki said, putting a smile on his face.

"It is of no matter, with so many guests I can hardly claim your sole attention." Lord Eveilyr said as he proceeded to do just that.

Loki began to feel uneasy, he was tired, and he got the distinct impression that Lord Eveilyr was an expert politician and had been waiting for just the right moment.

"Have you enjoyed yourself?" He asked, scanning his every word for a sign that he was giving anything away.

"Immensely, Your Grace. I find that parties are a wonderful chance to catch up with friends and acquaintances whom you don't often see otherwise, what with all of our busy schedules."

"I'm glad to hear it." Loki said.

"Please tell me Your Grace, do you know if His Majesty is planning a summer hunt soon? I heard rumours but that is all. He normally takes at least one, sometimes two."

Loki wished desperately for Camtan to rescue him. The hunt was scheduled for the Tower holidays, but did Dimcken care if Lord Eveilyr knew? Or was his ignorance on purpose?

"The hunt will be announced as it always is, Lord Eveilyr, you will have plenty of time to prepare I assure you." Prince Musleen said from behind Loki.

Lord Eveilyr smiled blandly. "Oh I know, I know, I was just making conversation with His Grace, Your Grace, nothing more."
"I'm certain of it." Musleen said, coming up to stand beside Loki. "And how are your lands? Do you have a good harvest waiting this year?"

"A wonderful one, Your Grace, in fact, that reminds me, I must send your taxmen an invitation to come and visit. They should arrive before the harvest, shouldn't they?"

"Yes, they should." Musleen said. "I would hate for them to be inaccurate with such a loyal citizen. I will tell them to watch out for your invitation."

"Thank you Your Grace." Lord Eveilyr said. He bowed to both of them and disappeared into the crowd.

Loki glanced up at Musleen. "Thank you." He said softly.

"There's no real harm in an advanced warning itself, except that he would most likely tell Lord Kinndyr about how you told him personally, which is not good."

"No," Loki agreed, "I do not want to be seen playing favourites, not even by accident."

Musleen gave him a tight smile. "You are doing well." He said softly, and left Loki facing Fosxyr, who was holding a tray of pork squares.

"Eat something Your grace, you have been so good to your guests, but appear to have neglected yourself." He said. In company, his tone was more formal and distant.

Loki picked up a square, dipped it in the sauce and took a bite. "I would hate to disappoint the kitchens by not trying the results of their hard work." He said.

Fosxyr smiled at him, the time was growing late, and Loki reminded himself that it wouldn't be too much longer.

In fact it was only a few minutes later that King Dimcken rose and announced that he was retiring. The older Lords joined him, in fact a few of them had to be woken up in order to take their leave. Lord Fallconyr was still awake, and complimented Loki on his first party, which caused a sudden flood of people eager to do the same. Loki accepted it all with quiet grace, and gratefully saw half the party out the door.

The rest of the nobles only stayed a little longer. Once Camtan took his leave, escorting a yawning and apologetic Sofftia, the rest began to say their goodbyes.

Finally, Loki stood alone with his servants. The three of them began to clean away the glasses and plates. Loki started piling some glasses onto a tray.

"Your Grace, please, we will take care of this." Fosxyr protested. "The common touch is all well and good but we would never hear the end of it if it got out that we allowed you to clean, the other servants will laugh at us."

Loki almost protested, if not for the fact the Fosxyr's use of the words 'common touch' had sent a shiver down his spine.

"Alright." He said quietly. "I will go and get ready for bed."

They bowed as he left the room.

Loki walked through to his bedroom and let the tension out of his shoulders. Wraenyr was standing
by the door to the bathing room, waiting patiently.

"I'm too tired to bath tonight." Loki said. "I'm just going to get changed and go to bed."

"As you wish Your Grace." Wraenyr said and disappeared to fetch a night robe.

Loki got changed in the bathing room, brushed his teeth and then headed back to bed. He had just crawled under the covers when Fosxyr reappeared.

"Almost finished." He said. "Femtchyr and Canrryen have it well in hand. Do you need anything Your Grace?"

"No thank you Fosyr. I just need to sleep." Loki said.

"You did well." Fosxyr said. "Really well."

"Thank you." Loki said.

"Sleep well Your Grace." Fosxyr said and left him to his rest.

Loki waited until the rooms had grown quiet and even the servants would be asleep, then he crept into the next room and carefully pulled out Thor's knife. For a few minutes he just held it, knowing that emotionally, if not physically, he was already in danger from the King. No one could know. No one could ever know, he just had to survive one day at a time.

In the darkness, he gently pressed his lips to the handle and just let himself *love* Thor for a single moment, then put it back and went to bed.
King Dimcken announced that the first summer hunt would occur in two weeks, to coincide with the Tower holidays.

This sent Fosxyr, Femtchyr and Canrryen into a whirlwind of packing.

"Femtchyr and Wraenyr will come with you." Fosxyr said as he walked through the wardrobe room selecting robes for Loki to take.

Loki was kneeling on the floor rubbing the leather-rub into his Aesir clothing. Aesir leather could last for centuries if properly cared for, but it would crack and flake if it wasn't. Under his hands the shine was slowly coming back.

"Canrryen will stay here and clean your chambers while you're gone." Fosxyr continued.

"That's a big job to do alone." Loki said.

"Not as much as you might think Your Grace, without anyone in them it becomes much easier." Fosxyr said.

"Are you calling me messy?" Loki joked.

Fosxyr rolled his eyes at him, making Loki grin. He liked it when Fosxyr let his guard down, it gave him someone to talk to properly. It could get quite lonely in his chambers when the other nobles weren't there.

"Will there be time for me to see a play before I go?" Loki asked. "A girl at the Tower told me about one that has just started."

"I will see if one of the Princes is free to escort you." Fosxyr said. "What was the name of the play?"

Loki paused, annoyed. "She didn't say, and I forgot to ask. I'll find out, it had warriors and a dragon."

"I'll ask Camtan if he's heard of it, if it's new, chances are he has." Fosxyr said. "He loves the theatre."

Loki smiled. "Great, I'm sure he'll be eager to go, if he hasn't managed to see it already."
"I doubt it, he's spending most of his free time with Princess Soffia, and she's so close to her time that he's barely going anywhere. He'll come with you though, he loves the theatre and His Majesty won't let you go alone."

Loki sighed just a little. "I never needed such an escort at home." He cut in before Fosxyr could speak, "But I know that things are different here, my station is different. I know."

"I'm sorry Your Grace, but this is the way things must be." Fosxyr said.

Loki nodded and went back to his task. The manual labour of rubbing the leather reminded him of home, where he was expected to take care of his things, not his clothes so much as his saddle in the stable, his tack and riding boots. A warrior must do things for himself, and Loki had been a warrior. He missed it.

The theatre was packed with people, Camtan and Musleen planted themselves firmly on either side of Loki in the viewing box they had bought for the evening. He sighed good naturedly and took a sip of his wine.

"You double checked the box already." He said, "And we shouldn't really position ourselves as three perfect targets, if you are worried about anything."

Musleen glanced at him, the corner of his mouth tugged upwards almost reluctantly.

"Good point." He said seriously, and shifted to the row behind.

Camtan rolled his eyes. "You wouldn't be such a target of you didn't keep shutting down the rebels personally. Let the royal guard do it, that's why we have them."

"I like to know what is happening in the Realm, if that puts me in danger then I feel that it's worth it." Musleen said.

There was a tentative knock on the box door. The guard opened it to reveal Shiarpia, Daenceia and Rohundia.

"Thainia couldn't make it." Shiarpia said, looking around the guard at where Loki sat. "Her last grade wasn't as good as normal and her father said she had to study harder."

"That's a shame." Loki said, waving them forwards to sit.

They looked around the box with wide eyes, Loki had to remind himself that they were not nobles, and could never have afforded the box on their own.

Shiarpia took the seat next to Loki, Daenceia sat behind them on Musleen's left, Rohundia sat on his right.

A theatre servant fetched them wine and some little meat puffs. Daenceia giggled at the finery, Shiarpia shot her a look of warning.

"Don't act like a commoner." She murmured behind her.

Daenceia blushed but said nothing.
Loki shot her a smile. "You do what you like Daenceia, enjoy yourself."

She smiled, and Shiarpia pulled a face.

Musleen asked her a question quietly to distract her as the lights began to dim.

The play was good, the players were in fine form making everyone laugh, cry, gasp and groan. Loki got lost in the story of the band of warriors who, despite being on a noble quest to win the hand of a fair princess for their leader, suffered through every possible calamity in the nine realms.

There were monsters and crones, the Norns showed up every now and again to tell them that they couldn't take the wide flat path because it wasn't *fated* now go and walk the rocky, swampy, spider-infested one instead.

Periodically, there were rains of frogs. Loki couldn't help but laugh.

At the halfway break, they sat and chatted in their seats. Daenceia asked a quiet question about the marble columns, and Musleen obliged her by giving them a short history of the theatre. Loki saw Rohundia hanging onto every word, although her tongue appeared to be stuck to the roof of her mouth.

When the play was over, the Princes escorted Loki and the three girls outside to where the royal carriage was waiting.

"Can we take you home?" Loki asked them.

Musleen's mouth twitched slightly, but he said. "It would be our honour."

Shiarpia grinned and bowed. "I live in that house right there, but Rohundia lives on the far side of the western bridge."

Musleen held his hand out for Rohundia, who blushed madly and climbed into the carriage. He turned to Daenceia, "Do you live nearby?" He asked.

Daenceia shook her head. "I live near Rohundia, we came here together, Your Grace."

"Then you can go home together." He said and helped her in.

Loki climbed in afterwards, he waved goodbye to Shiarpia as she set off for her house. She was just opening the front gate when the coach rattled away.

They left the girls by their respective doorsteps and headed back to the palace. Prince Musleen had helped them both climb down and had to put up with Camtan's good natured ribbing the rest of the way home.

"Ah the trials of being the last eligible Prince." He teased. "The short one couldn't keep her eyes off you."

"Rohundia." Musleen answered, he sounded surprised. "I didn't realise she was looking so closely."

"She looked away every time you glanced at her. She's in a bad way my brother, she turned a lovely shade of red too."

"Stop teasing, she's got a little crush, that's all." Loki said. "She lovely, and young, she'll get over it in time."
"When she meets a strapping young man from the marketplace." Camtan said. "Poor Musleen, discarded for a butcher's son."

"Will you stop it?" Musleen said, "Father would never approve of me dallying with a commoner. They can have their crush, it's just the jewels they like anyway, they don't even know me."

Loki pulled a face. "That's unfair on her you know. She's a really nice person."

Musleen looked at him. "I'm sure she is, but you can't deny that she doesn't know me, if I weren't a prince then her crush probably wouldn't exist. That's not a criticism, I have seen the way young people react to those Thunder Boys or our finest warriors, it's natural, but you can't confuse it for love."

"I don't." Loki said, "I just don't like them being teased, they're my friends."

"Sorry Loki, we weren't being mean on purpose. I like them actually, Shiarpia's got a quick wit." Camtan said as they rolled through the palace gates. "Musleen just doesn't like to be teased."

Musleen remained silent, his expression one of aloofness. Loki calmed himself down. He kept forgetting that his friends were in fact commoners, and that he was pushing the social boundaries in a pretty serious way.

They were inside and about to head their separate ways when outside the carriage exploded.

Glass shards flew into the corridor, showering them in fragments. Musleen threw himself on top of Loki as a guard pushed Camtan to the ground.

Loki's ears were ringing. He pushed himself up as Musleen pulled out his sword and moved cautiously to the window. Loki followed him outside, where the coachmen lay on the ground. One of them had been killed, the other was lying still groaning in pain.

Loki knelt by his side and laid his hands over the man's torso. He took a deep breath and summoned his magic. His knowledge of healing spells had come from a combination of Eir and trial by error in battle, now he concentrated on healing the rifts through which blood flowed, working his magic through the man's body and forcing rapid regeneration.

The coachman's breathing slowed as the pain receded. Loki turned his mind to the burns from the fire, trying to reduce the damage in the lower layers.

Someone grabbed him and pulled him away.

"No!" Loki yelled and pushed them back, turning back to his task.

"Your Grace, you are not safe. You must come."

"In a minute, he just needs a little more." Loki gasped through the smoke of the burning carriage.

He healed the last of the life threatening injuries and sat back slightly. The man behind him took it as a cue and grabbed him again.

"Inside Your Grace, inside." He yelled as he pulled Loki away from the fire.

The guards were already dousing the flames, and as Loki was pulled away he saw the palace healers come running. He allowed himself to be led up the stairs and along the corridors to his chambers.

Fosxyr was waiting there, anxiety written all over his face. He patted Loki down hurriedly, checking
"I'm fine, I'm fine." Loki gasped. "I was inside, I'm not hurt."

"Yes you are." Fosxyr said. "You have a cut above your eye."

Loki raised a hand and touched wetness. "I didn't realise, it must have been the glass from the explosion." He said.

Less than a minute later a healer came running in. "Where is he?" She asked, even as she spotted him.

Her magic was cool and soothing as it stitched up the cut and healed the scar into oblivion.

"Did you hit your head?" She asked. "Did you get thrown by the shockwave? Are you feeling nauseous?"

"No, no and no." Loki said. "I'm fine now, truly. How is the driver?"

"I don't know Your Grace, my job is to come to you and make sure you are well." She said.

She was satisfied that he was alright, but still didn't leave until the head healer came to make sure. Fosxyr fetched Loki some tea and he sat quietly as the hours passed and the guards investigated. Finally, with the healers satisfied and the guards certain that the threat was far gone, Loki crawled into bed.

"Are Camtan and Musleen alright?" He asked Fosxyr as the servant fussed over him. "Can you find out for me?"

"I will Your Grace, I will check on them now." He said. He looked pale, and Loki remembered with a flash that Fosxyr had helped to raise them both.

"Go and find out now." Loki urged him.

Fosxyr gave him a grateful look and left the room.

Loki lay back and hugged his arms over his body. That was it then, no more trips to the city. King Dimcken would lock him up here under the pretext of keeping him safe, and he would never leave here again.

He was still feeling gloomy when Fosxyr returned. He looked relieved.

"They are both fine." He said. "Neither one of them was hurt."

Loki smiled in relief. "Thank goodness." He said.

"Musleen is still trying to figure out how it happened, and Camtan is back in his chambers being scolded by her Grace." Fosxyr said.

Loki was about to respond when there was a loud knock on the outer door.

Fosxyr had barely taken a step when they heard that door open and heavy footsteps head for the next one.

Fosxyr moved like a shadow and picked up the fireplace poker. Loki sat up in bed as he moved between Loki and the door.
The second set crashed open and then the third set, finally, Loki's bedroom door flew open.

It was the King. He was dressed in his nightshirt and slippers and was being trailed by Fentchyr and Canrryen. Fosxyr lowered the poker and bowed. King Dimcken ignored him and went straight to Loki's side.

"Are you alright my darling? Are you hurt?" He asked.

"I'm fine Husband." Loki said. "I had a scratch but the healer fixed it. I'm fine."

The King gripped Loki tightly and pulled him into a hug. "Good, good, I was woken by the explosion. I thought... I'm just so glad you're alright. I will have the guards flogged for this! They let this happen!"

Loki looked at Fosxyr over the King's shoulder. The servant took a discrete step back and gave Femtchyr a meaningful nod. Femtchyr quietly left the room.

"Does anyone know who was behind it yet?" Loki asked, still clasped firmly to the King's body.

"Rebels, it has to be the rebels. They want Vanaheim to be free of Asgard, and they are willing to kill us to achieve it. We must find out who they are and execute them." King Dimcken said.

He pushed Loki back against the bed and climbed in after him.

"I will stay here with you tonight." He said, pulling Loki close again once he was settled. "I need to know you are safe."

"I am safe Husband, I promise. Musleen and Camtan took good care of me, especially when it happened." Loki said.

"I will stay." King Dimcken repeated.

"I am grateful." Loki said, the lie came easy, his mask sliding over him like he'd been wearing it all his life.

Fosxyr and Canrryen made their exit, and the King fell asleep soon afterwards. Loki lay wrapped in the bony arms and tried not to feel angry. This was his bed, his chambers. He felt violated by having the man here to sleep. Technically there was nothing stopping the King from spending every night here, but he still felt as though his sanctuary had been invaded.

He didn't sleep well that night, and the next morning was spent being interviewed by Musleen as he tried to piece together what had happened.

Loki and Camtan sat side by side. They both looked tired and irritable. Musleen looked worse, he hadn't slept yet at all. His stern eyes scanned the two of them.

"You're sure you saw nothing." He said.

"I'm sure." Camtan said.

Loki nodded. "Not a thing." He said.

Musleen looked straight at Loki. "Your friends, are you certain they are trustworthy?"

Loki frowned sadly. "I thought they were." He said. "I hope they are, but I've only known them for a few months, I can't stake my word on it, as much as I wish to."
Musleen nodded. "I shall have to investigate them. I know where they live. I will go to them today and ask them some questions."

Loki sighed. "I hope they're not involved." He said. "I have so few friends. I'd hate to think that they only spoke to me so that they could kill me."

Camtan wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "I'm sure they're innocent, Musleen will find the perpetrators and you will be having lunch with them again before you know it."

Musleen gave one of his very tight smiles and dismissed them.

The King had demanded to see the guards on duty that night, forewarned by Femtchyr, the scroll on which the guard shift was written had gone missing. Musleen wasted an hour reassuring his father that the elite guards would be doing a full investigation to find out who they were and if they had in fact been part of the plot. And if Loki noticed that the elite guards appeared to have a striking resemblance to the ones on duty that night, well, Loki didn't say anything.

He spent the morning in his chambers, rewriting his essay. King Dimcken requested his presence for lunch, and they ate in the King's chambers. King Dimcken asked him about his friends, it was clear that he did not approve.

"You can't trust commoners." He spat. "They have no concept of loyalty. They betray you as soon as they can. You should have made friends with the noble children. There are more than a few Ladies studying in the Tower."

"I'm sorry Husband, they were very nice to me when I first arrived." Loki said. "Musleen will find out if they were involved."

"I'm sure they were, they want to hurt us, to separate from Asgard. This is foolish, you know what will happen if we do."

Loki frowned a little. "No Husband, I don't. I was never told that story."

King Dimcken looked surprised. "I suppose you are very young, and it was so long ago." He said. "There was a great evil, a strong... being, by the name of Thanos. He needed no army, for he used some kind of artefact to control my people. They turned on one another, killed one another for his pleasure. It was King Bor, with Odin at his side who came to our aid. They brought the army of Asgard and managed to disarm him, but he escaped. Asgard has his artefact in their vault, and we are under their protection. But those stupid rebels think that we bow to them because of it. We do not. I run my kingdom, we give nothing to Asgard but our loyalty, and they are destroying even that! They must be stopped, they do not believe Thanos even existed, but he did, oh yes, I did not lose my son to a myth. I did not find him dead with a Vanir sword in his body! I cannot imagine who was forced to carry out such an act, or what they did to themselves afterwards!"

The King had tears in his eyes as he spoke, his voice choked up at the memory of his lost son.

Loki sat quietly and waited. He felt as though he had opened a floodgate and just had to ride it out. After a few more minutes, King Dimcken got himself under control.

"If he ever comes back, we must have Agard by our side or all will be lost. These rebels want 'independence' but that's what they have now. Asgard does not demand anything of us, does not make us pay them for protection. They take our warriors and train them, but that is for the best. In battle, we show our strength and honour. These rebels do not see this, they only see me as second to Odin. I am not second, he does not rule here."
Loki nodded. "I understand. Sadly the history lesson has been lost." He said quietly.

King Dimcken took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. "These commoners have no idea the dangers beyond their realm. They must be punished for what they have done, for what they tried to do."

Loki nodded again, anything other than agreement at this moment would only bring down the King’s wrath. "Musleen will find them." He said instead. "He will investigate and find out how this happened, and punish those responsible."

King Dimcken nodded. "I was worried you might be hurt." He said.

Loki could have hit him. King Dimcken was so concerned with his welfare when someone else might be hurting him, but he was utterly oblivious to the pain and anguish he put Loki through on a regular basis.

"I am fine Husband." He said, his mask slipping neatly over him. The rage inside receded into the distance, until it almost didn't exist. "I had a minor cut but it is all healed now. Your sons took good care of me."

"They are good boys, I am proud of them." He said. He looked tired, and old. "Come here my darling." He said.

Loki moved obediently to the King’s lap. He swallowed down the sudden fear in his heart.

King Dimcken wrapped his arms around Loki’s body and pulled him down onto his lap.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” He asked, his voice gentle as he stroked Loki’s hair back away from his face.

“Yes Husband, I am unhurt.” Loki said, fighting the rising fear inside of him.

“I’m glad, so glad.” King Dimcken said and pulled Loki in for a kiss.

They kissed for a long time, it was clear the King Dimcken wanted more but the previous night’s evens had tired him. He pushed a hand up Loki’s skirts and rubbed the inside of his legs instead, working his way up until his fingers were pushing into Loki’s vagina. Loki sat as still as he could and tried to keep his breathing calm as his body yielded to the King’s hand.

“You feel wonderful.” King Dimcken said, shifting his fingers inside until he made Loki jump slightly. “Good boy.” He murmured in response.

Loki bit back what he wanted to say. Forcing himself to take huge breaths of air instead as he fought the urge to scream.

“Move on me, move on my hand. Show me what you like.” King Dimcken breathed in his ear.

Loki thought he would be sick. This was too much. Making him participate?! What he *liked* was to be left alone.

For a brief moment he wondered how the King would react if Loki took him at his word and left the room, but self-preservation, and the thought of Thor, made him plant his feet on the floor instead and push himself up and down on the King’s fingers.

‘Just a few minutes’ Loki thought. ‘Just a few minutes and it will all be over.’
He was gasping softly, little hitches of breath echoed in the room. King Dimcken clearly mistook them for pleasure, for he was smiling and murmuring encouragement into Loki ear as he rose and fell.

“Good boy, good, you like that angle? Lean forwards a little, is that better? How about now? Oh you like it *that* way? I can do it that way.”

The angle in question was causing King Dimcken’s fingers to rub up against a sensitive point. Of all the angles, Loki would not have chosen this one, but he’s jumped when the King first touched him there, and now he was forced to endure several long minutes of unwanted stimulation.

Finally, the King had had enough, and he withdrew his fingers and ended their session with another deep kiss.

“You will stay inside the palace walls until the investigation is over.” He said against Loki’s mouth.

“Yes Husband.” Loki said, hating both the filth he felt on his body, and the fact that his movements could be so restricted on another man’s word.

He vowed that when he got out of this place he would travel as far as he could, just to know that he was free.

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Loki walked slowly back to his chambers, escorted by Fosxyr. As soon as they were inside the servant ordered Wraenyr to run a bath.

Loki undressed slowly and sank into the hot water. There wasn't enough soap in the world to erase the inky feeling he had all over him. He scrubbed at his skin anyway until Fosxyr made him get out.

Afterwards, Loki stalked his chambers. He felt trapped by the four walls.

"I want to go to the garden." He said suddenly.

"Your Grace, the public gardens are off limits until the investigation is complete." Fosxyr said. "I can take you to one of the private ones inside the palace walls."

"Alright." Loki said, there was a helpless feeling settling on his shoulders. The explosion had trapped him, and he didn't know for how long. He couldn't have his riding lesson, he wouldn't be allowed to visit the Tower for lessons, he had nothing.

Loki followed Fosxyr through the corridors and into a small garden surrounded by four high walls. It took him a moment, but Loki recognised it as the same garden that Fosxyr had brought him to on his wedding day.

"Is Old Horundyr here?" Loki asked softly.

Fosxyr scanned the area and pointed. "There he is Your Grace."

Old Horundyr looked up at the sound. He gave Loki and Fosxyr a cautionary glare and went back to his weeding.

Loki walked slowly among the tree blossoms, which were in full bloom. He slowly let the tightness in his chest drain away. He was still here, still had a long way to go. His future stretched before him unchanging for centuries, but...
Thor was waiting. He of the blue eyes and bulky arms, the golden sun to Loki's silver moon. He was far away, but as long as he was waiting, Loki could survive.

He stayed in the garden until it was time to get ready for dinner, then nodded in respect to Horundyr, who had been watching him carefully in case he dared step on the flower beds, and returned to his chambers.

****

That night Musleen announced that the explosion had been planted by a mage of extraordinary ability. He had questioned all three girls extensively and spoken to Sheiftyr about each of their abilities. He had read their school records and even had a sorceress who was an expert in time scrying create a portal so that he could look back and see their practical efforts. He declared that night at dinner that they were in the clear, and that the same time-sorceress had helped him pinpoint when the carriage had been sabotaged.

"It was while we were leaving." He said. "A rebel managed to get close enough while being hidden by the crowd. He's being tracked as we speak."

"But we detoured and the explosion still went off after we made it back." Camtan said, puzzled.

"That's because we weren't the target." Musleen said calmly. "The carriage is stored in the stable area in the western wing. The records office is located two floors above the carriage stables, if it was destroyed by the resulting fire then all of the taxes would have to be recalculated from scratch. It would take a decade before everyone was paying their fair share again."

King Dimcken scowled deeply, his earlier activity with Loki had tired him, and he was irritable as a result.

"Are they a part of the wider rebel cause?" He asked.

"I believe so, they want the resources to buy weapons and magic to travel to Asgard in secret. By sending us into chaos they could have used the time to their advantage." Musleen said. "Not to mention the propaganda. They have already started telling the populous that Asgard has failed to protect us from their own attacks, although they blame them on the dark elves."

King Dimcken grunted. "They need to be punished. Find them Musleen and execute them. This was too close, they must know the price of attacking the royal family."

"Yes Father." He said as the others ate quietly.
Okay. MAJOR warning for non con involving oral sex. It's very bad, very graphic, and if you want to skip it then feel free to do so. It starts after dinner. Just skip at that point to the last 16 lines/paragraphs. Start reading again at "Thank you Husband."

Seriously, you have been warned. I feel so much better now that this is out of my head.

Loki rode slowly through the forest pathway. He had been riding for an hour and was just starting to grow uncomfortable in his back. The three Princes were unaffected, and King Dimcken didn't seem too bad either. Loki gritted his teeth and tried to stretch in the saddle without being noticed. They had a four hour ride ahead of them until they reached the first stopping place, and another five hour's ride the next day and the day after to reach the hunting camp.

Behind him on the road, carts full of tents and supplies were being pulled. Loki turned to watched them, mostly to unwind his back without being noticed.

He had been given a bow; the King had taken him to the armoury to find one that suitable. Both the King and the guardsman in charge had tried to give him a typical queen's bow, smaller and lighter than normal. But Loki had protested as best he could without being confrontational by offering to test the bow on the archery range. He'd pulled it back far enough to snap the string, and the guardsman had been sent immediately to fetch a proper hunting bow.

Loki had shot the centre of the target four out of five times, and the fifth was only slightly out. King Dimcken had been delighted, he often was when Loki proved to be good at something, having a talented queen made the King look good by reflection.

Loki twisted again and winced as his spine protested. He didn't know how the Vanir could ride like this.

"Dismount. You're riding in the carriage." King Dimcken said suddenly. Loki jumped slightly, he hadn't realised the King had been watching him so closely.

"I - " He started.

"Now." King Dimcken said. "You are a new rider my darling, you must rest. I remember when Camtan was learning to ride, he kept insisting he was fine and wound up with a nasty twist in his back. He couldn't walk for a week."

Loki looked over at Camtan, who nodded seriously.
"I spent the time bored to tears." He said. "Poor Musleen tried to read to me, it didn't end well."

"I'm sure I could entertain Loki." King Dimcken said. Loki flushed in response, the sudden horror of what King Dimcken might do to him in that state flashing across his mind.

"Dismount Loki." The King said again. Loki nodded. "Yes Husband." He said and pulled the horse to a halt.

The horse was tethered to a cart and Loki climbed into the carriage to sit beside Princess Sofitia. She was not enjoying the trip, the jolting was making her feel unwell and she spent most of the next hour with her eyes closed and her head resting against a pillow. Loki watched the forest go by from the window, making sure to twist the other way to stretch his back properly. Under no circumstances did he want to be so helpless with the King.

He rode again in the late afternoon and into the evening, although by the time they reached the yard of the coaching inn he was grateful to stop.

The innkeeper was standing outside in a crisp, spotless robe. King Dimcken grinned broadly at him as they approached.

"Rohastyr! How are you fairing?!" He called out, walking up to the man.

Rohastyr bowed low and replied.

"I fair well Your Majesty, I have the finest beds in all the realm at your disposal."

King Dimcken touched the man's shoulder in familiarity and he rose.

"Meet my wife," King Dimcken said, "Loki of Asgard, isn't he a beauty?"

"Stunning Your Majesty, I made the ride to the city for your wedding." Rohastyr said. King Dimcken brightened at his words.

"Did you now? I am well pleased, well pleased."

"Would Your Majesty and Your Grace like to come inside for some food and wine?" Rohastyr asked.

"We would, come along you four." King Dimcken said, pulling Loki inside with him as the Princes and Princess Sofitia followed behind.

The inn was warm and inviting, with a good fire going in the grate. The King walked with Loki to a large table near to the flames and seated himself. A tug on Loki's arm pulled him down next to the King and he sat obediently as the others settled themselves.

Rohastyr and a woman Loki presumed must be his wife brought over a tray with glasses and several bottles of wine.

Loki drank slowly as the family relaxed. He had not been able to relax all day and envied them, as he was unlikely to do so tonight either.

The cook came out with a huge tray of meats and vegetables and placed it in the centre of the table. His assistant brought fresh bread that smelled wonderful. Despite the stress he was under, Loki's stomach growled audibly.

King Dimcken chuckled at Loki's suddenly embarrassed expression. "Eat my darling, eat well, you
have ridden quite well today and for a long time too."

Loki forced a smile. He was really getting tired of the way people assumed he was not capable. The King's tone was so patronising it made him want to scream.

Instead, he turned to King Dimcken and said. "Thank you Husband, but I wouldn't wish to touch a bite before you."

King Dimcken practically glowed with the flattery. Camtan pulled a face, lighting fast, and Dorgen glared at him like he'd suggested he murder a puppy.

The King grabbed some bread and meat. Once he had begun, Loki followed, serving himself a good helping. The Princes followed and Princess Sofftia went last, although there was so much food she missed out on nothing.

Loki *was* hungry, and he ate well as the light from the windows dimmed and Rohastyr came and built the fire up further.

Loki could hear the sounds of the servants setting up the other’s sleeping arrangements outside. Fosxyr was out there somewhere, he had climbed into a cart at the rear of the long train that morning and Loki hadn't seen him since.

The royal family sat and talked into the night, before the King declared he was ready for bed. Loki rose and followed the King upstairs and to the largest bedroom in the inn. He knew what would happen, and he could not stop it. He took a series of deep breaths and tried to stay calm.

The King pulled his robe off and dropped it on the floor. He sat naked on the bed and watched with interest as he gestured for Loki to do the same.

"We haven’t had much time together while preparing for the hunt.” He commented as Loki carefully removed his robes.

“No Husband.” Loki said. He’d enjoyed the last two weeks immensely, he’d barely seen the King outside of meal times.

“We must make up for lost time.” The King said.

Loki didn’t answer, hiding his face beneath the fabric of his under-robe as he pulled it over his head. Ever since the night the King had trapped him in them, he’d been torn between undressing slowly and reluctantly, and pulling them off as quickly as possible so as not to get caught again.

King Dimcken beckoned Loki closer. He reached out and laid his hands on Loki’s hips, moving his fingers in the slightest suggestion of strokes as Loki stood there and tried not to let the disgust show in his face.

The King smiled, and pulled downward. Loki found himself on his knees in front of the man. A wave of terror washed through him as the King gently took Loki’s jaw in one hand and guided him forwards, toward the King’s half erect penis.

A thumb against the side of his mouth indicated that he was to open it, and Loki did so reluctantly. He didn’t want to do this, as much as the though pained him, he had almost gotten used to sex, he could cope with it, but this? This was far more, too much more.

The tip of Dimcken’s penis pressed against his slightly parted lips and Loki forced himself to open wider. The tip slid in, it felt heavy on his tongue, and Loki forced himself to just keep breathing.
He would get through this, somehow, he would get through this. Every second that passed was one less he had to endure.

The King rested his other hand on the back of Loki’s head and curled his fingers into his hair.

“Good boy.” He murmured, pushing Loki’s head closer, forcing him to take more inside.

Loki felt the thick intrusion press further toward the back of his throat and felt a new stab of fear. He couldn’t possibly swallow it, his throat wouldn’t stretch, how did people even do this? Why did the King have to *want* this?!

King Dimcken pressed his fingers against Loki’s mouth, encouraging him to close his lips over the penis and hold it there. He moaned appreciatively at the sight of Loki on his knees.

“You look wonderful.” He breathed.

Loki felt his head being pushed forwards, forcing in more, the tip pressed against the back of his throat and he pulled back violently, coughing and gasping as he fought not to vomit.

King Dimcken watched him as he gulped air and swallowed hard, fighting the rolling of his stomach.

Loki looked up at him fearfully from the floor.

“I’m sorry Husband.” He said. The words came so quickly, they were automatic now, anything to halt the King’s displeasure.

King Dimcken regarded him with an understanding expression.

“It’s a little difficult the first few times my darling, it’s alright. Come back here.”

Loki forced himself to shuffle back. He was still on his knees and he felt added humiliation that he was being forced to come to the King in such a manner.

King Dimcken reached out and stroked his hair gently.

“Come and lie on the bed.” He said. “No, not like that, sideways, lie across it, on your back, good boy.”

He reached out and tugged Loki’s shoulders gently until he was moved into the correct position.

Loki found himself lying with his head just resting over the side of the bed. He clenched the blanket beneath him nervously.

King Dimcken was leaning over him from where he stood, his manhood was dangling inches from Loki’s upside-down face.

“Good boy.” He said again, and placed one hand on Loki’s jaw, teasing his mouth open. “Just relax now. Take a deep breath, and another, one more. Yes, that’s good. Now, one more deep breath and then swallow.”

Loki did as he was told, there were tears in his eyes and as the King thrust forward they spilled over and trickled down the side of his forehead.

The King’s penis filled his mouth, filled his throat. Loki fought the urge to vomit again, knowing that this time he couldn’t pull back. Instead he swallowed over and over, trying in vain to clear the thing blocking his throat. Inch after inch moved downward, until the King’s pubic hair scratched Loki’s nose and the King’s balls pressed against his closed eyelids.
Loki kept swallowing, it was the only motion that prevented him from choking. He desperately tried to pretend that he’d swallowed a piece of meat that was too big. He couldn’t cough it up, so he kept trying to force it down. Somewhere above him the King moaned in pleasure.

Just as Loki thought he would start to really choke, King Dimcken pulled back. He pulled all the way out, and Loki gasped in air desperately.

“Good boy, wonderful, take some deep breaths, good, good, just , one more big one. Yes.” Dimcken instructed, he pushed his way back in for a second time.

Loki felt his throat stretch, felt the horrible thing slide down, watched as the King’s balls came pushing towards his face, then he was trapped again, fighting to stay calm as he swallowed around the King. The musky scent of Dimcken’s manhood was in his nose and the hair was scratchy. The King’s balls were squishing against him, preventing him from seeing, although right now he didn’t think he wanted to see anything anyway.

The King pulled back again and Loki gulped air.

“Almost.” King Dimcken said, he was breathing heavily and sounded close. “Almost darling, deep breath.”

Again Loki faced the horrible invasion, one of the King’s hands was stroking his throat lightly, feeling it move desperately around the penis blocking it, the other he reached down between them and fondled his balls with. Rubbing them in place, which in turn rubbed them against Loki’s face.

Loki just kept swallowing, he told himself that it couldn’t last much longer, the King did not have the kind of stamina to last, he just had to survive a little bit more.

The King pulled back again, gasping. “I’m almost there.” He wheezed as Loki gulped air. “Almost there.”

Loki barely had time to take a deep breath before King Dimcken pushed back in. This time he was barely inside before he gave a loud moan of pleasure and released himself into Loki’s throat.

Loki could feel it spurting down inside of him and forced himself to keep swallowing. The King pulled back slowly, moaning softly as Loki continued to swallow around him. The end of the King’s penis reached Loki’s mouth and the King’s hand came up to hold Loki’s lips closed around it. He pulled out, leaving the traces of his release inside Loki’s mouth as Loki’s lips scraped him clean.

Loki could taste it now, he wanted desperately to spit it out, but he couldn’t. Royalty don’t spit.

The thought almost made him laugh as he swallowed the slimy stuff down. That had been a lesson from a nanny many years ago when he’d spat out a vegetable he didn’t like. Royalty don’t spit. Hilarious. He bet she hadn’t been thinking of this when she’d said it.

He knew he was near hysterics. He knew that the thought was just something to distract him from the horror of what he’d just done. But it was still funny.

King Dimcken wasn’t finished.

The realisation sank into him like a lead weight in a pond. The King was leaning over him, resting his hands on either side of Loki’s body on the bed and breathing heavily. His manhood was dangling just above Loki’s face.

With a low moan of enjoyment, King Dimcken laid himself down on top of Loki’s body. One of his
balls came to rest neatly against Loki’s mouth.

“Use your tongue.” The King rasped. Loki hesitatingly poked his tongue out and touched it to the horrible fleshy thing pressing against him. The King’s now flaccid penis was lying down the left hand side of Loki’s jaw. He could feel the dampness of it leaving traces against his skin.

The King gave a sigh of enjoyment, then reached down, pulled Loki’s penis out of the way and licked a large strip right across Loki’s vagina.

Loki shut his eyes. It was all he could do to shut out what was happening, and it wasn’t enough. The King pushed his tongue into Loki’s vagina and started moving it backwards and forwards.

Loki gasped in shock, which was a bad move. The King’s ball ended up in his mouth. His eyes flew open again and he stared at the ceiling from between the King’s legs.

When was this horror going to end?!

He tried to push the King’s ball back out of his mouth using his tongue. It wasn’t easy, it had more skin than was strictly necessary and the folds made it difficult to get it all out.

King Dimcken was still working his tongue in and out of Loki’s body, pulling out every so often to lick a circle around Loki’s entrance before plunging back in.

Loki lay there and reminded himself to breath, but that only brought the scent of Dimcken into his nose to join the horrible taste in his mouth.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t. He couldn’t. No no nonono!

Loki gave a cry of protest and struggled desperately against the King, fistig the blanket in his hands and kicking his legs out. The sound of his cry was muffled by the ball still in his mouth and only a tiny fragment of self-preservation stopped him from biting down on it, but the King still pulled back and rolled away from him.

Loki froze in fear. He’d ruined it. He’d broken his side of the bargain. After all he’d been forced to endure, he’d broken it and would not be allowed to marry Thor.

If Thor even still wanted him, tainted as he was.

He looked up fearfully to where the King lay.

King Dimcken was grinning.

“I knew I could make you climax.” He said, reaching out and giving Loki a patronising pat between the legs.

Loki had to look away, his heart was pounding, and he couldn’t deal with it all.

The King thought his struggles had been a climax? He supposed that the stiffening muscles, the cry, muffled so it’s true meaning could not be heard, and the desperate, wide-eyed panting *might* be mistaken for a climax, if the person in question was vain enough to think they could ever cause such a thing.

A scratchy kiss on his shoulder reminded him that the King was still in the room. This wasn’t over, but he could salvage it, if Dimcken really thought that Loki climaxed then he could salvage it.

“Don’t be shy my darling wife, there’s nothing wrong with it.” Dimcken murmured in his ear,
kissing him again.

Loki braced himself, and turned to face the King.

“I’ve never done that before.” He said softly. True. He’d never done *any* of that before.

“It’s fun isn’t it?” King Dimcken said. “You don’t have to be nervous with me, you can relax.”

No he couldn’t. Not ever.

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said. His throat hurt and his voice was raspy from the King’s attentions.

King Dimcken pulled them both under the covers and kissed Loki deeply.

“You taste wonderful.” He said and settled himself to sleep.

It didn’t take long, and then he was snoring. Loki lay in the bed and stared at him, wishing that he would stop breathing. Sadly, he continued snoring without difficulty.

Loki crawled from the bed and moved to the only chair in the corner of the room. He didn’t want to be anywhere near the King. He felt filthy. The inky feeling that had covered so much of him was now in his throat and stomach, moving its way slowly through his system, coating everything as it went.

Another thing he could not save for Thor. He had nothing left now, or did he?

After some thought, Loki decided that there was a spot on his back that he was pretty sure the King had never touched, that and the soles of his feet.

It was a pretty poor offering. Thor probably wouldn’t want him. He’d touch the inky stuff on his skin and reject him.

Loki felt tears sting his eyes and bit down hard on his thumb to keep from sobbing. Thor said he loved him, Thor said he’d wait for him. Thor promised. Loki would be alright. Thor would still love him, he was a man of his word, that’s why Loki loved him so much. Somehow when it was all over, they would find a way to make it work.

Loki realised suddenly that he was cold. It was ridiculous. He was sitting here, emotionally devastated, desperate not to go back to the King’s bed, and what happens? His body gets cold. It had no sense of the seriousness of his situation.

He sat and shivered for a few minutes, but the feeling would not recede. He stared at the bed and wondered what would happen if he let himself freeze tonight, but the thought wasn’t accompanied by any strong emotion. He felt as though he’d run out somehow.

He had barely survived a protest. No Trouble. No Mischief. Get back to bed.

He rose and walked silently back to the bed. He lifted the covers almost automatically and crawled back in. A few minutes later he was warm again, lying as far from the King as he could and wondering why he didn’t feel more traumatised.

Maybe he’d run out. Maybe there was only so much horror and disgust a person could feel. He’d used it all up when swallowing down the King so now lying in bed beside him was just… nothing. It was a bed, he was warm, his husband was asleep, so he didn’t feel anything.

He felt torn between hoping that this was unusual and hoping that it stayed until the King died. It
would be nice not to feel anything. It *was* nice. He could just stop worrying and caring until it was
time to go home.

With that thought drifting through his mind, Loki fell asleep.
Loki opened his eyes. He was lying on a forest floor. Next to him, on his side and watching Loki silently, was Thor.

The forest sounds drifted around them as they lay there together, just drinking in the sight of one another. Loki found his lips curling upwards into a smile, genuine and warm.

Thor returned it with one of his own.

“I have missed you.” He said softly.

“I have missed you too.” Loki replied.

The low noises around them seemed to make the place almost magical, and, with a gentleness that Loki had not felt in months, Thor reached out a hand and brushed Loki’s cheek.

“I think of you every day.” He said. “I am waiting for you. I am always waiting for you.”

“I love you.” Loki whispered.

Here, in this place, there was no inky feeling, no horror or pain, no humiliation and lies. Here he was whole, as he had been, as he wanted to be for Thor.

“I love you too.” Thor said with his warm smile. His touch was like the sun, burning against Loki’s skin with an energy that he craved.

“I am not as you left me.” Loki confessed, allowing the darkness to reach him. He wanted to deny it, but to deny it was to lie to Thor and he couldn’t. He couldn’t lie to his heart.

“I love you regardless.” Thor promised.

Loki tried to draw breath to reply but he was gone from that place, falling away and awake.

Loki opened his eyes.

He had been woken by the innkeeper and his wife as they brought hot water through the room and into the small bathing room beyond. They were followed by Fosxyr and Hieddenyr, who were carrying an armful of clothes each.

Fosxyr laid the clothes out carefully and gestured for Loki to get up.

“Come and bath Your Grace, we ride out after breakfast.” He said softly.

Loki glanced questioningly behind him, but King Dimcken was still asleep.

“Do not worry Your Grace, he does not mind going second in this regard.” Hieddenyr said. “He is
fond of a few more minutes of sleep.”

Loki rose and made his way into the bathing room as Rohastyr and his wife left it. They had carried up two huge buckets of water each, which half-filled the tiny tub. Loki watched as Fosxyr closed the door, blocking the sight of the King.

Like the changing of the wind, Loki’s face crumpled. He shoved a hand in his mouth to stifle his cries as the horror of the previous night came back and hit him with full force.

In an instant Fosxyr was there, wrapping his arms around Loki and holding him close.

“Hush Loki, please, you must be quiet.” He urged. “Do not wake him.”

Loki tried hard to be silent, but the strain of it all would not leave him. He clung to Fosxyr and wept into the servant’s shoulder.

Fosxyr just held him and murmured soothing phrases, one eye always on the door. He did not know what had happened the night before, but he knew it had to be worse than normal.

“Please Loki, please, try to calm yourself. Please, you must not let him see you upset.” He urged out of fear.

Loki managed to bring his sobs to a shuddering halt, but could not stop the tears from trickling down his face.

Fosxyr just kept a tight grip on him and waited. There was nothing he could do but wait and hope that Loki could control himself.

“I’m sorry Your Grace, so sorry.” He whispered.

Loki took a deep breath and pushed himself upright.

“It’s not your doing.” He said, his voice was raspy, and he didn’t know if it was from crying or from the previous night’s activities.

He climbed into the tub and grabbed a washcloth.

Fosxyr must have suspected that he would be upset, he had brought only the softest cloths, Loki could not scrub away at him skin as he was incline to do if left alone to bathe.

He tried anyway, rubbing hard at the inky feeling that covered almost all of him. He grabbed another cloth and wiped his mouth, then his lips, then under his lips. He had the cloth in his mouth and was pushing more in when Fosxyr reached out and grabbed it.

The servant looked concerned, and gently rinsed the cloth and began wiping Loki’s shoulders and back as Loki rubbed the other one against his vagina.

“We will be camping in the tents tonight.” He said.

Loki ignored him, he was still scrubbing, a disgusted look on his face.

“It is a long day and His Majesty will be tired.” Fosxyr said gently.

Loki’s movements stopped, he stared straight ahead at nothing.

“Last night I ran out of fear.” He said, his voice strangely dull. “I just stopped. Nothing bothered me.
It was wonderful. But this morning when I woke I felt it all over again. I want to stop again. I *need* to.”

Fosxyr rubbed Loki’s back awkwardly. “I do not even pretend to know what you endure Your Grace. But I know that those who feel nothing are very unwell people. I urge to avoid it, as attractive a prospect as it may be.”

Loki slumped in the bath. “I do not know how to make it stop again. I just hope that it will. It was so nice, not to care.”

Beyond the door came the noises of King Dimcken rising. Loki went rigid.

“Get out now.” Fosxyr hissed, and Loki climbed out as quickly as he could.

He was wrapped in a towel when the door opened. Before Fosxyr’s eyes, Loki’s expression changed, lightning fast, from wide eyed and fearful to calm and pleasant. The transformation was so complete that it was terrifying.

“Good morning Husband.” Loki said.

King Dimcken beamed at him.

“Good morning my darling wife, we have a long way to go today.”

“I know, Musleen told me that the campsite was quite far.” Loki said.

Fosxyr nudged him in the back to get him to start moving. They walked out of the door and into the bedroom as King Dimcken let his robe drop and climbed into the tub.

Once the door closed, Loki raised a hand quickly to his mouth. A look of panic showed in his eyes as Fosxyr realised that he was about to be sick.

The servant grabbed a vase of flowers and pulled them free. Loki heaved into the vase as Fosxyr tried to muffle the sound by hastily placing pillows against the bottom of the door.

Loki put the vase back on the table with a lost kind of expression.

“I can’t.” He whispered. “I can’t do this. I thought I could but I can’t. I thought if I did this then I could marry-“

He broke off quickly, a new kind of fear coming into his eyes as he stared at Fosxyr.

“I do beg your pardon Your Grace, I wasn’t listening. I am very sorry to have failed in my duty.” He said.

Loki kept looking at him warily as the servant stuck the flowers back in the vase. Fosxyr then picked up Loki’s under-robe and held it out.

“Time to dress.” He said.

Fosxyr was just buttoning the over-robe into place when King Dimcken came out of the bathing room.

“You look delightful today my dear.” He said to Loki, who smiled easily.

“Thank you Husband, I only hope to do you justice.” He said.
Every note was calm, every word fell naturally. At King Dimcken’s feet, Hieddenyr shot Fosxyr an alarmed look. Fosxyr kept his own face blank as he finished preparing Loki for the day.

Inside, behind the mask, Loki was horrified at how easy it was. The words, the movements, they felt natural and automatic, they felt *real*. It was like he’d taken the truth and sort of… moved it away, where it wouldn’t interfere. The lie was now the truth, and would be the truth whenever Dimcken was around. It was Dimcken’s lie, Loki just lived it.
Chapter Summary

A Mother's Love Versus A Daughter's Hate

The hunting camp was set up in a large clearing in the forest. A small waterfall was present just on the edge where the land rose up to a peak, and the grass was thick on the ground.

Loki watched as the servants began setting up the tents. He was to share with the King, for three weeks. He wondered if he'd go insane.

Maybe. Maybe He would go numb again. He found himself hoping that that would be the case.

No. He would survive. He would survive for Thor.

He walked slowly away from the main group and towards the waterfall. It was a merry little thing, bouncing water down from rock to rock until it splashed cheerfully into a small pool at the base. A creek ran off from the pool away into the forest, and Loki crept close to the tree line to peek down the shadowy path.

"Don't wander too far, you might get lost." Musleen said from behind him.

"I wasn't going to go in." Loki said, turning. "I wanted to, but I wasn't."

"Camtan and I followed the creek for an hour once when we were children. The whole court was sent out to find us, we got into a lot of trouble." He said.

"Thor and I once snuck out to the marketplace when we were barely up to our father's armpit, we were brought back by the palace guard in disgrace." Loki shared.

Musleen gave a tight smile, he rarely gave any other, and scanned the tree-line.

"There should be some good game in the forest, we've not been here for months, they will be fat and complacent."

"I look forward to it." Loki said.

"You cannot shoot from a horse though." Musleen said. "The hunt is done on horseback."

"Oh." Loki said, deflating, "I thought there was a combination."

"No, we ride out." Musleen said. "You won't be able to shoot."

"Then why was I given a bow?" Loki asked.

Musleen's expression was kindly. "He probably just didn't want you to be disappointed." He said.

Loki knew who he was referring to, and he felt his anger rise. It wasn't fair. He could ride well, shoot well, and do both together very well, but not here, not the way these people did it.
"I suppose I'd better go and sit quietly then." He said bitterly.

Musleen reached out and touched his shoulder.

"Smile Your Grace, he's watching." He said.

Loki felt sick, but plastered a smile onto his face as he walked away back to the camp.

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The hunters all rode out the next morning as the sun was rising. Loki stood and watched them go, trying not to look sulky. He consoled himself with the thought that he at least got to spend the day away from the King. Instead he went for a walk around the camp, familiarising himself with where everything had been set up.

He found Fosxyr, who gave him a gentle smile.

"I'm sorry Your Grace." He said softly.

Loki tried not to look upset, but he knew he was failing.

"I can shoot." He whispered. "I wanted to hunt."

"Your riding lessons are going well, you will be able to hunt next time." Fosxyr said in a soothing tone.

Loki sighed. "I just wanted..." He broke off. There were tears in his eyes. Actual tears. It wasn't the disappointment itself, it was the fact that it was one disappointment among many. He felt weighed down by disappointment, he just wanted to sob.

He couldn't. He was on display all the time until the hunting ended.

Fosxyr stepped to the side and guided him away from the camp to the waterfall. "I know you are upset Your Grace, but please, you must not show it." He urged, a worried look on his face.

Loki looked down, his face felt hot and he was sure his eyes were turning red. "I can't do this." He hissed under his breath.

"You must." Fosxyr said. "Try to enjoy yourself anyway, Your Grace, speak to the nobles left behind, invite them to eat lunch with you. His Majesty will not be back until the evening, you have the day to yourself."

Loki nodded, Fosxyr had a point, and Loki couldn't afford to appear a sulky child, that would do his cause no good.

"I will be happier." He said, managing a weak smile.

Fosxyr returned it. "Next time you will be better than Musleen, I am sure of it." He said.

"Your Grace." Said a voice from behind them. Loki turned to see Fallconyr walking slowly up to them.
"Lord Fallconyr, I did not know you had come hunting." Loki said, surprised.

"I snuck into one of the carts." The old Lord joked. "I always come, for years now I've been heading up to the top of the peak and doing a little hunting of my own."

Loki looked at him questioningly.

"We're heading up there soon with a picnic if you want to join us." Fallconyr offered. "My wife, two sons and a granddaughter are coming with me."

Unseen by the old Lord, Fosxyr moved behind him into Loki's eye-line and nodded gently.

"I would like that." Loki said.

Lord Fallconyr chuckled. "And you can tell that wily servant I'm on to him, and no I don't mind." He said. Loki fought not to smile as Fosxyr looked caught out.

The party was almost joined by a number of nobles, by Fallconyr gave them a stern look and they found other things to do. Loki was surprised but he didn’t argue. He didn’t really want to be surrounded by fawning nobles anyway. Together the little group made their way slowly up the hill path to the rocky top high above.

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Lord Fallconyr’s ‘hunt’ turned out to be for flowers. One type in particular, a tiny one with blue petals, was used in healing magics. It created a very powerful sedative.

“We use it to brew the sleepy tea.” Lord Fallconyr explained as his sons and Granddaughter worked.

Loki gathered as many of the tiny flowers as he could, being careful not to take too much stem as this would damage the plant.

“It is very peaceful up here.” He commented.

“It is a special place.” Lord Fallconyr said. “It is the place I fell in love with my wife, the place I asked him to marry me, and the place where one of our children was created.”

Loki blushed slightly. Lord Fallconyr grinned evilly and pointed to a rocky nook a little way away. “Over there, actually.” He said.

Loki ducked his head, he was turning red.

“Our eldest daughter in fact.” The Lord continued.

Loki started laughing. “You are embarrassing me! I will be unable to look at your daughters at all if you continue!”

“You will look, you have to at court, but you will turn a very bright shade of red, and I will be watching for it.” The old Lord teased.

Loki couldn’t help his smile. This place, and these people, were like space to breathe.

“I am tired. I think I will go and rest by the rocks, not *those* rocks, the other rocks. Will you join me?” Lord Fallconyr asked.

“I will.” Loki said, enjoying the way his chest was loosening and his shoulders were unwinding.
"My daughters are a great source of comfort to me in my old age." Fallconyr said a few minutes later as he and Loki lounged in the sun with their backs against the rocks.

"They haven't come with us, have they?" Loki asked.

"No, no they have families in the city and could not come away. I am lucky in all my children. But I feel I should tell you about my eldest daughter."

"Oh please, no more about her creation!" Loki joked.

"No more, I promise. But perhaps a little of her life." Lord Fallconyr said. "At least, the part I know of."

"Know of?" Loki questioned.

"We stopped talking a long time ago." Lord Fallconyr said. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"You are kind Your Grace, my daughter was always quite strong willed, but we always managed to mend our differences, until she fell in love." The Lord pulled a face quite unbecoming of his station.

"And you didn't approve?" Loki guessed correctly.

"Of course not, he was an arrogant, vain, high-minded, cruel, boy. I forbid her from seeing him."

"What happened?"

"She married him."

"Oh dear."

"She went away to live with him and hasn't spoken to me since." 

"I'm sorry to hear that my Lord."

"Until three months ago, when out of nowhere she sent me a letter, asking me to watch over her son."

Fallconyr looked at him with piercing blue eyes. "She said he was coming to live in a realm far from home and that he would need his family, even those he'd never met before."

Loki's mouth dropped open and he stared in shock at his grandfather. *Now* he knew why Lord Eadgleyr had been familiar! He'd seen him in the face of his own mother. They had the same eyes and the same shaped face. A change of gender and a generation gap had done a good job of obscuring it, but now that he knew it was obvious.

"You didn't say earlier." He managed to say.

"I thought a more private setting was appropriate." The old Lord said. "Things have been strained for a long time and I did not know how much you knew."

"Nothing." Loki said sadly. "She never mentioned you, she never mentioned any of her family from Vanahem, I thought you must all be dead."

"No, our parting was painful and full of things shouted that were would have been best left unsaid.
She must be desperate to speak to me again now. She must love you more than she hates me. I am glad of that, for it is the way things should be."

Loki looked at Lord Fallconyr with new eyes. "I'm glad too." He said. A frown creased his forehead. "You thought *what* of Odin?!"

"I stand by my statement. He was young and arrogant in his power, perhaps he has gained wisdom, but I never saw it."

Loki was on the verge of saying 'he hasn't' but bit his lip at the last minute. No Trouble, No Mischief. "He is a good King." He said instead, which was technically true.

Lord Fallconyr read him like an open book. "I'm sure he is. But if you ever find yourself in need a father, I'm only a messenger away."

Loki felt tears prickle his eyes and his mouth curl upwards. "Thank you." He said.

Lord Fallconyr just looked at him, eyes steady and kind.

Loki let out a sob. "I can't do this." He gasped. "I can't! I've only been here slightly more than two months and I can't do any more! He d-does things t-t-to me. I d-don't want it b-but I have to l-l-let him!"

He was shaking, his whole world was crumbling. But he had to speak, he couldn't hold it in anymore.

In fits and starts, with a great deal of sobbing, he told Lord Fallconyr everything. Every last thought and fear, he told him about Thor, and Odin’s thrice sworn promise, about not realising what Dimcken wanted until he was already here and trapped, about leaving home and trying to make friends, about the horrible Mask that came over him and how frightened he was that it would take control of his mind and leave him trapped inside, unable to be himself.

Not long after he’d started Lord Eadgleyr had joined them, a few minutes into it he had laid his hands gently on Loki’s back and rubbed them the way you would a child.

“What exactly did the oath say?” Lord Fallconyr asked.

Lord Eadgleyr shot him a warning look and kept rubbing Loki’s back. Loki was still just sobbing as he lay curled up on the grass.

“Tell me about Thor, Loki, I’ve never even seen my other Aesir grandson.” Lord Eadgleyr said gently.

Loki began speaking again. This time he spoke about Thor’s larger than life personality, his stubbornness, his gentleness, the way he captured the hearts of the people and made them love him, about his stupid moments and his shining ones. By the time he was done, the tears were gone, his voice sounded warm and enthusiastic. He was even smiling a little.

“You clearly love him very much.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “I hope that you have many years of happiness together one day.”

Loki sobered. “It’s a long way away. I do not think I will survive that long.”
“Tell us what Odin’s oath actually said.” Lord Fallconyr tried again, now that Loki was calmer.

Loki took a deep breath and recited it perfectly, it was, after all, the promise that gave him a path to Thor.

"If Loki marries King Dimcken and lives with him in Vanheim until his *natural* death, without making trouble or causing mischief, and without being difficult, if he strengthens the ties of our two peoples as this marriage is meant to, then when he returns you may marry. If you still want to."

“That promise doesn’t say anything about sex.” Lord Fallconyr said bluntly. “Next time, tell him no.”

“I can’t do that!” Loki exclaimed. “No Trouble. No Mischief.”

“Odin said it in his oath, you’re here to strengthen ties between our two people, *as this marriage is meant to*, I don’t see how having sex with that old goat helps your cause.” He said stubbornly.

Lord Eadgleyr shot him a look. “It may come under the heading of ‘being difficult’. You don’t want to get the child into more trouble.”

“*I* will tell him to stop it then.” Lord Fallconyr said bluntly.

“Calm yourself my Husband. You don’t want to wind up in the dungeons again at your age.” Lord Eadgleyr chided gently. “Dimcken throws him in there every few months or so and has done for years. He just won’t stay out of trouble.” He said to Loki.

“Why hasn’t he executed you?” Loki asked.

“I am too powerful. I am a great Lord you know.” Lord Fallconyr said, preening slightly. Lord Eadgleyr rolled his eyes.

“Surely there are those in Asgard that Odin must be mindful of, even if he is the King?” He said. “My dear Husband is from quite the noble family.”

“Oh.” Loki said.

“Say you are tired next time, he will be angry but he cannot harm you, he will fear Odin’s wrath.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

Loki shook his head. “Father doesn’t care.” He said.

“I have my doubts that Dimcken’s desires were fully explained to your father prior to him agreeing to this plan, but even if he does not care for you, Dimcken doesn’t know that. You have more protection than I do.” Lord Fallconyr said. “I concede that you may have to have sex with him, but all that special stuff is too much for a baby like you. He should know better.”

Loki looked between them. “I don’t know if I can tell him no. The Mask just happens now, it’s so fast I don’t even realise until after I’ve spoken.”

“Just try my dear child, you only have to show proper obedience in public, your mission is to make us love you, well, the people will not know what you are like when the doors are closed. Resist him as best you can, we will come to see you often, we will tell him that we are your family. He will get the message.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “We will help you.”

From deep inside of him, Loki found a tendril of hope. It felt wonderful.
The hunting party returned as the sun was going down. Loki did his best not to look like he was sulking when he saw the fine kill Musleen had made. The hunters sat around and told the rest of the camp all about their adventures that day as they waited for the deer to roast for dinner.

“Your Majesty.” Lord Fallconyr said suddenly. “I was wondering if you could grant me but a moment of your time?”

Beside the King, Loki froze. He didn’t want Lord Fallconyr to get into trouble. He watched with nervous eyes as the King rose and the two of them headed a little way from the fire.

“I had a most pleasant day with my Grandson.” Lord Fallconyr said casually as he walked with the King.

“I’m glad to hear it.” King Dimcken said, but there was a question in his voice. As an opening line, this was not what he’d been expecting.

“Yes, Loki is a fine boy, he reminds me of his mother.” Lord Fallconyr continued.

A look of wariness flashed across King Dimcken’s face. “Loki?”

“Yes, he’s Frigga’s son, and she is my daughter, although I admit that she has been gone for so long now, hardly anyone seems to remember.” Lord Fallconyr continued in the same casual manner.

“I see.” King Dimcken said, his tone was flat.

“Do you remember how you threw me in the dungeons when I spoke out against your last wife?” Lord Fallconyr asked suddenly.

King Dimcken’s face darkened. “I remember that I apologised for that.” He said.

“Yes, you thanked me for trying to warn you against such an unsuitable match.” Lord Fallconyr said. He stopped and rested against a tree trunk. “I am risking your wrath again my old friend, but I must speak. Loki is young. He is barely past being a child. He is far from home and away from his parent’s influence for the first time ever. He does well by your side, but I feel the strain of being newly married is taking a toll on his wellbeing. I ask you, as his grandfather, and as your friend, be careful with him, be gentle with him.”

King Dimcken was scowling, but he did not dismiss Lord Fallconyr immediately. “I see.” He said at last. “And what would you have me do?”

Lord Fallconyr was far too old and wise to fall into the trap of telling the King to stop having sex with Loki. Instead he bowed low and said. “He’s young, if it was me, I’d spoil him rotten.”

King Dimcken’s mouth curled upward slightly. “I suppose I have not been very attentive to his
needs. I forgot to organise his allowance at first, I should not have done that, and I don’t think anyone has shown him the library yet. Fosxyr told me he likes to read, but I was too busy and did not think to grant him access.”

“You are the King, you have always been busy.” Lord Falconyr agreed. “But a little time spent on his happiness would be a kindness. He was unhappy today when you all left to hunt, especially after you gave him a bow.”

“I did not think it through, he can’t ride well enough yet to join us.” King Dimcken said.

“My wife and I kept him busy, but it would hardly be a crime if you were to let him hunt on foot for a day. There must be areas in this forest that can be navigated in such a manner?”

“I will instruct Musleen to find a good spot. You are right my friend, the boy needs a little spoiling. I do not want him to be unhappy.” King Dimcken said.

Lord Falconyr bit the inside of his mouth to keep from speaking his mind, lest he find himself in the dungeons again facing the King’s wrath, and, far more dangerous, a knowing look from his wife.

His point made, as far as it could be, he turned and gestured for the King to precede him back to the fire.

“I do hope you will not take it amiss if my wife and family were to visit Loki regularly?” He asked as they approached the group. “He should get to know his family.”

“Of course not.” The King said, although his voice was slightly hesitant, the children and grandchildren of Lord Falconyr and Lord Eadgleyr were numerous and still growing. “I would be happy for Loki to know his kin.”

They returned to the ears of the others and went their separate ways.

Lord Eadgleyr and Loki both sat with matching, slightly nervous looks on their faces. Lord Falconyr sat by his wife and gave him a smile, King Dimcken did the same.

“Musleen.” King Dimcken called out suddenly. “I have a task for you tomorrow.”

“Yes Father?” Musleen asked.

“I want you to go into the forest and find a good place for hunting on foot. I promised Loki that he might hunt, we must find a place where he can do so.” King Dimcken said.

Loki looked surprised, he couldn’t help a quick glance at Lord Falconyr, but the Lord was watching the fire intently.

King Dimcken turned to Loki and gave him a quick pat on the knee. “I should have had him look today.” He said.

“No Husband.” Loki replied. “He has had a good day’s hunt, I would not wish to spoil the first day for Musleen.”

Musleen was not looking very happy about having his second day ruined, but he did not argue.

“Perhaps not, but tomorrow he will find us all a good place, and we shall hunt on foot. Next year of course your riding lessons will have progressed enough that we can all hunt on horseback.” King Dimcken said, smiling.
Loki returned it, aware he was on display. “Thank you Husband.” He said.

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That night in their tent, King Dimcken kissed Loki gently before declaring himself too worn out from the hunt to do more. Loki was relieved, he honestly didn’t know if he could refuse the King. He was afraid to in such a public setting. Perhaps, he felt, it would be better to wait until they returned to the palace and were far from gossiping nobles. For now he took the short reprieve gratefully.
Thirty Two Steps

Chapter Summary

Hunting on Foot

Loki crept quietly through the forest, bow in hand. He was having fun. The deer was close by, and still oblivious to his presence. The others were making things a little difficult, unused to hunting on foot they had made a lot of noise early on, but Loki had quietly moved away from them and was about to make his first kill.

He drew back his bow smoothly and fired.

It was on target, the deer tried to run but it was too late, the arrow had pierced its heart and it fell mid leap.

Loki ran forwards and drew his knife, but it was not needed, the deer was already dead.

Loki drew his hunting horn and blew hard. The sound was high and similar to the wolves that also roamed the forest. The other hunters could tell the difference, but the deer couldn't, and it wouldn't startle any of the others that might be nearby.

A few minutes later a small party of servants arrived with ropes and poles for carrying. Musleen also arrived and looked over Loki's kill with a knowing eye.

"Good kill." He said, a little stiffly. He was not as good at hunting on foot and looked hot and bothered.

Loki nodded at him. "Thank you." He turned to head further into the forest but Musleen stopped him.

"Father wondered where you were a minute ago, he's back this way."

Loki swallowed his frustration and followed Musleen back along until they reached the King.

King Dimcken looked relieved when he saw Loki. "There you are." He said. "I was worried you might have gotten lost. There are wolves in this forest you know."

"I know Husband, I'm sorry to have worried you." Loki said, taking in the sight of the nobles standing around the King.

King Dimcken kissed him as Musleen said. "Loki made a fine kill. That was his horn we heard."

"You did? That's wonderful!" King Dimcken exclaimed.

Loki smiled, his mask so firmly in place that the reaction almost felt natural. "Shall we continue Husband?" He asked.

King Dimcken looked tired. For a second Loki thought the day's fun would be over, but instead he said. "Yes, let's head to the ridge. It's near here isn't it Musleen?"
"Yes Father, about a half hour that way." Musleen said.

The party made their way toward the ridge, which was on the edge of a large gorge. When they stepped out of the trees and into the sunlight Loki couldn't help but admire the view before him.

"This is amazing!" He exclaimed. "It's so beautiful."

The gorge stretched away below them, it went for miles in both directions. Loki stepped a little closer to see the river below.

"Stay back for the edge." King Dimcken said. "I don't want you to fall."

Loki smiled again even as he fumed inside and stepped back. "Yes Husband." He said. "I just wanted to see the river, is there a safer viewing place?"

King Dimcken smiled again. "There is a better on up further that way, we will go there."

The other hunters were less happy about the detour, they still wanted to make kills of their own, but they followed the King along the ridge and to a wider spot with a shallower slope.

"Here we are." He announced, turning to look at Loki.

Loki stepped up nearer to the edge and looked down the length of the gorge.

"This place is amazing, truly amazing." He said.

King Dimcken couldn't look any happier.

"Do you like gorges, rivers and waterfalls and things like that?" He asked.

"They are very beautiful." Loki said. “Waterfalls always make me feel as though I am seeing something magical, although I know that’s childish and a little bit silly.”

King Dimcken just smiled.

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They roasted Loki's kill over an open fire that night. The King kept his arm around Loki and gave him a squeeze every so often. Loki kept a polite smile on his face and tried not to let his disgust show.

At least he'd got to go hunting. That was a positive. He was not going the next day, as the others wanted to use horses again, but King Dimcken had put a stern foot down and told them that they would be hunting on foot at least twice a week for the three weeks they were here so that Loki could try again.

This was not a popular move, but the King didn't care. The ‘talk’ a few nights before had clearly had an effect, and it appeared that he did want his young wife to be happy, even if everyone else had to suffer in order for that to happen.

It was the first time Loki had ever considered this thought, but it was true. If he wanted something that didn't endanger him, and didn't clash with the King's plans, then the King would give way.

He wondered if he could test it, and whether that would count as 'trouble'. Probably not, if the King stayed happy.
Maybe he should ask for a horse of his own? Chances are Dimcken would get him a pony, but it
might be worth asking.

What about a workroom for his seidr? Loki nibbled on a piece of deer as he thought over the
question. A proper room with all of his equipment in it. A central fireplace for a cauldron, a heavy
stone workbench for mixing and preparing ingredients, and windows without glass, one wrong spell
could cause them to shatter, and Loki worried about raining down the huge wall of glass in his
chambers onto the palace grounds below.

He decided that he would ask when they returned to the palace. If he was going to be stuck here, he
might as well take advantage of what generosity King Dimcken was willing to provide, especially
given what Loki had already done to earn it.
Loki spent the next three days climbing the hill with the others and talking quietly to his grandparents. They told him stories about his mother as a child, and he found himself genuinely laughing at the trouble she got up to.

"She was a little hel-raiser." Lord Fallconyr said. "She was our wild one, but at the same time she could be so still. When she was lost in thought or working hard on something she would be someone else entirely."

"She got into her fair share of trouble, but she was always kind." Lord Eadgleyr said in his soft way. "She was always loyal to her friends."

He reminded Loki of his mother, and not just in looks. He had her quiet manner, although apparently that was something she'd gained with age.

"How did she meet my father?" Loki asked.

"At the end of the war. He came with his father, King Bor, and the Aesir army. They saved us, and at the feast they saw each other. She fought for Vanheim and still wore her shield. They were both young, barely beyond childhood. By the end of the night they were in love. We tried to make her wait, but King Bor thought she was a wonderful bride, and she left for Asgard less than two months later." Lord Fallconyr said.

"Is she happy?" Lord Eadgleyr asked. "With him? In Asgard? Is she happy?"

Loki thought about his mother, her smile and the way she had, until news of his betrothal reached her ears, looked at his father with such love in her eyes.

"She has been more happy than unhappy, over the years." He said.

Both of the Lords were too clever not to spot the hidden meaning behind his words, but they seemed to take comfort from it regardless.

"I am glad to hear that." Lord Fallconyr said. Lord Eadgleyr just snorted. Clearly he still felt that she had made the wrong decision.

“Do you think that she will visit you?” Lord Fallconyr asked.

“I don’t know, she hasn’t said so in her letters, but, maybe after the first year.” Loki said hopefully. “I would like to see her, her letters tell me much of the goings on in Asgard, but there is still so much I wish to know. All the little things I took for granted, and now I feel so isolated.”

Lord Eadgleyr nodded in understanding. “I know that feeling child, I felt it too when I first came here, although my circumstances were rather different from yours.”
Lord Fallconyr frowned in warning, unlike the first day, the other nobles had joined them for picnics at the top of the hill. Lord Eadgleyr was skirting a little too close to the painful truth, and listening ears could cause trouble.

“Being married to the King,” Lord Eadgleyr continued regardless, “means that you cannot go home except as part of an official visit. For my first decade here I used to go home for a week every year.”

Lord Fallconyr relaxed a little. “You cried for your family more than once. I felt like such a bad person for taking you away.”

“I chose to go, but that doesn’t make it easier. You see things, hear things, laugh at things, and your first instinct is to tell your loved ones all about it. Then you remember that they are far away and it is not just a case of running to find them, or seeing them at dinner.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “I would not blame you if you were a little unhappy now and again, feeling homesick is very natural.”

Loki couldn’t help but marvel at the two of them, they knew that at least one, and probably more, nobles were listening in, and had neatly laid the groundwork in case anyone should catch him in tears one day.

“It is so nice to have someone who understands.” He said, playing along. “I do love Vanaheim, it is a most amazing realm, but I also miss my mother. I feel guilty for being unhappy when I see all that is around me.”

“Oh child, do not feel guilty, it is natural.” Lord Eadgleyr said with a knowing twinkle in his eye. “Just head back to your chambers and write to her until you feel better, no one could blame you for that.”

He and Loki shared a smile.

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The King was exhausted. He clearly loved hunting and would rise every morning to join his sons, but the activity wore him out completely. Loki found that with each passing day he was enjoying the hunt more and more. He slept almost peacefully, knowing that the King was unconscious beside him. A thunderstorm would not wake him after a day’s hunt.

On the days when they would hunt on foot, Loki proved to be an excellent marksman. The others were less lucky, although Musleen still made a kill and smirked about it for the rest of the day.

Sadly though, the three weeks ended and it came time to leave. Loki mounted up awkwardly and rode with the royal family as they made their way back to the palace.

Riding slowly on a clear pathway was evidently less tiring than hunting, but King Dimcken still restrained himself when they camped for the first two nights. He *had* started kissing Loki on the first night, but Lord Fallconyr had shouted an extremely loud ‘goodnight’ from his tent nearby and the King’s interest suddenly waned.

Loki had to bite his thumb not to giggle as the old man lay down to sleep with a frustrated snort. He had no doubt that when they were finally alone things would turn quite bad, but that was for another night. The ease at which he pushed the thought of it away should have been worrying, but Loki had come to accept the slight reprieve from the stress it brought him, just as he had begun to accept the Mask in public, and the way the guards would watch him closely on horseback to ensure he did not fall off.

On the third night they stayed in the Rohastyr’s inn, and all of Loki’s terror came flooding back.
The bed was in the same position, the sheets had been cleaned but he was certain they were the same ones. He undressed with hands that shook, and tried not to let King Dimcken see.

“Come here my darling.” King Dimcken said, gesturing for Loki to come closer to where he sat on the bed. “Come and sit by me.”

Loki obeyed. His heart was hammering so fast that he thought it would break from his chest.

King Dimcken slipped an arm around Loki’s waist and kissed him gently for a few minutes.

“The last time we were here was quite a night.” He said.

Loki almost choked at the words, he could *feel* the King’s penis in his throat, feel the slimy, inky stuff sliding down inside. It filled his mouth, it covered his skin. He felt dirty.

“I… may have been a little eager with you, my sweet one. I must admit that I forgot your tender innocence in my passion. I may have made you a little uncomfortable.”

Uncomfortable.

Un. Com. For. Tble.

Was that really the word for it? Loki wondered as he sat there, outrage, disgust and fear warring inside of him. How could he even answer such a ridiculous statement? UNCOMFORTABLE?!!!

“It was all so new.” He said, surprised at how his voice did not stumble or stutter.

Then he felt it, the Mask, it came down and took control of his whole body.

Eyes wide, lips slightly parted, knees pressed together modestly.

“I didn’t know that such a thing could be done.” The Mask said. It’s voice was young, innocent, utterly guileless. But behind that, driving it, somewhere between the outside and Loki, who watched in horror, there was something else, something almost sinister, a strange, silvery presence who wanted, very much, a workroom to practice magic in.

“There are many things that can be done.” King Dimcken said. “But I think perhaps we should try them slowly. I do not want to overwhelm you.”

“You are very kind Husband.” The Mask said. “I hope my ignorance doesn’t displease you.”

“No my sweet one, I find it charming! I find *you* charming.” King Dimcken said hurriedly, giving Loki’s body a squeeze.

The Mask smiled sweetly. “And I find you worldly. There is so much I do not know, so much I have yet to see and learn. You are so generous to allow my seidr studies to continue.”

“Of course they must, I have no desire to prevent you from learning, you are quite gifted, or so Horrseen tells me.”

“I am grateful, although, you see…” Voice trailing off, eyes cast down, bite lip, eyes up.

“What is it my sweet?”

“I was wondering, Husband, if maybe, perhaps I might have a room to practice in? If a spell I am practicing goes wrong I would hate to cause any damage to my wonderful chambers, they are so
splendid and fine.”

Slight hunch to the shoulders, one ankle over the other, little pout, wait.

“Of course you may my darling, I will arrange a nice big room for you to practice in. You are lovely
to have thought of the rooms, yes they are very fine and must not be damaged. You must make a list
of what you require and I shall have a room set aside as soon as we return.” King Dimcken said,
grinning broadly.

Smile, eyes bright, shoulders up in pleasure, head still slightly down modestly.

“Oh thank you Husband, thank you!”

“My pleasure my dear, my pleasure, now come to bed, it has been a long day and I am tired.” King
Dimcken said, pulling Loki under the covers.

“You’re welcome.’ Whispered the Mask smugly as it closed Loki’s eyes to sleep, a look of happiness
still plastered onto his face.

Inside, Loki felt a wild panic at this loss of control, outside, he made no movement at all.

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The next day, after a few hours of riding, King Dimcken made Loki get into the carriage with
Princess Sofftia. Loki immediately stuck his head out of the window and almost had it knocked off
by a horse as it cantered by too closely.

“Loki sit inside.” King Dimcken said hurriedly, he looked a little panicked.

“I’m sorry Husband.” Loki said. “I just wanted to see. There is not much to look at in the carriage,
and I don’t want to wake Sofftia, she needs her rest.”

“Where’s Fosxyr?” King Dimcken said suddenly. “He can ride with you and keep you company.”
Fosxyr was brought from the tail end of the camp train. He looked unhappy and was trying to hide it.

“Ride with Loki.” King Dimcken said, oblivious.

Fosxyr bowed deeply and climbed in to sit opposite Loki.

“I’m sorry.” Loki said once the carriage wheels began to turn and the noise of the leaves and
branches being crushed by the wheels drowned out their conversation. “I didn’t ask for you.”

“It is perfectly alright Your Grace, it is my duty.” Fosxyr said, although he still looked ill.

“You can put your head down if it will stop the motion sickness.” Loki said. “I don’t mind at all.”

Fosxyr looked a little startled, but shook his head. “I will be fine Your Grace, I just don’t enjoy
camping very much, I am a palace servant through and through.”

Loki knew that was a lie, and a poorly told one at that. Fosxyr had been fine in the camp, he’d been
fine on the other two days of riding, but for some reason he was finding this day extremely
distressing.

They rode in silence for a while, Loki kept his head inside the carriage and watched the scenery from
safety instead. Fosxyr just sat silently and stared at nothing.
They were about four hours from home, at the slow pace of the horses, when Loki saw something out the window.

“What is that?” He asked.

Fosxyr turned green. “It is the execution ground, Your Grace. It is where the traitors are left for the wolves.”

Loki stared at him, remembering the last queen. “How do Camtan and Musleen ride past it?” He whispered.

“They gallop, wait for it Your Grace.” Fosxyr said. He was sweating.

A moment later, two horses went past the carriage at a fast pace, the noise of their hooves echoed loudly among the quiet sounds of the forest.

“Does the King not object to their actions?” Loki asked.

“The road is straight and wide, they have made it into a race for many years. You will hear them laughing and boasting soon Your Grace.” Fosxyr said. He did not look any better.

It took a long time for the slow moving carriage to completely pass the execution ground. When they caught up with the Princes, they were arguing over who had won the race in voices that were just a little *too* loud and cheerful. But the King didn’t notice, he congratulated them both, and the three of them rode on together talking happily.

Loki wondered if they had Masks too, and whether he’d ever spoken to one of them. It was a disturbing thought.

Fosxyr got noticeably brighter and more cheerful as the city came into view. He started telling Loki about the history of the settlement from its very early beginnings. Loki listened with enthusiasm, partly because it was interesting and partly because he was desperate not to think of the execution grounds, and the poor queen whose family was not powerful enough to protect her.
Loki supposed that he should try to tell someone about the Mask. In the beginning it had been like a glamour, sitting over his mind, saying the right things and giving the right responses just a split second before he had time to feel disgust or horror. It had kept him safe.

But now it was something more. It was *talking* to him. It was taking control in private as well as in public.

This was very wrong. Something was very wrong with him. But...

The Mask kept him safe. The second night back, when King Dimcken had started their night time activities again, the Mask had taken over completely, leaving Loki existing behind his own eyes, listening to his own voice as it gasped and moaned its way through it all. He could feel what was happening, in a dull kind of way, but the terror of the first few months had become shielded.

It was *easier* to let the Mask take over. He could just retreat and let it all happen, separate from him.

It always released him when he was alone. He would feel in control again, do what he liked, read what he liked, chat away to everyone else normally.

But whenever the King was in the room, the Mask would slide down over him. Sometimes only a little, like when he was at dinner and the conversation flowed back and forth between everyone, and sometimes completely, like when he was alone with the King.

He almost told Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr when they came to visit, he'd told them about it before, when it was still just a little thing. Now though when he tried his mouth locked up. The Mask *stopped* him.

'Don't you want me to take care of you?' It asked him in its odd, silvery way.

Loki didn't answer. He knew he had gone mad, but it kept him safe. The truth was, he didn't want it to leave.

So he ignored it. He went back to his studies at the Tower, he entertained nobles in his chambers and spent time with his friends.

He went to see the Thunder Boys again. This time he actually managed to catch sight of one, briefly, before the crowd of girls obscured his view again.

He pretended that everything was just fine.

"It's the King's birthday soon." Fosxyr told him over breakfast. "You will need to buy him a
present."

Loki's hand froze halfway to lifting a glass to his lips.

"What should I get him?" He asked.

"Something very fine and decorative." Fosxyr said. "You've got a month, we can arrange a day out in the city for you to commission something."

Loki took a careful sip of his drink. "Will there be a public celebration?" He asked.

"Yes, every year the King throws a magnificent party. All the nobles will be there." Fosxyr said. "But your gift will be given in private at lunch, he wants his family around him on his birthday."

Loki twisted his mouth up in distaste at the thought of being 'family' to the King.

'Relax. *I* will take care of it.' Whispered the Mask in his mind.

Loki hastily grabbed his glass again and took a swallow. He didn't like it when the Mask spoke to him.

"I will think about what I can get him today." he said. "Perhaps a fine coat." The Mask added. "He wears winter robes except during the hottest parts of the day."

"You're right, he does Your Grace." Fosxyr said, thinking about it. "A fine coat would be a wonderful gift."

Loki tried to remember when he'd last noticed what the King had been wearing and realised he couldn't. He spent most of his time *not* focussing on the King.

The Mask was not just thinking for itself, it was noticing things for itself too.

He went to his new workroom after breakfast, to practice his homework.

Sheiftyr had set them the task of altering the colour of a wax candle by changing its components. Loki wasn't bad, he could change the outside already. But he knew Sheiftyr was unlikely to be fooled and would just cut the candle open to see how far down his change went. He needed to reach all the way to the wick if he wanted a good mark.

He spent the morning happily engaged, putting his dark thoughts about the Mask completely out of his mind.

He ate his lunch with Camtan and Sofftia. She was near her time now and clearly ready.

"Oh yes, Father's birthday!" Camtan said. "He's so hoping the baby will be born then."

Loki looked to where Sofftia sat, she was smiling. "It would make him very happy, but the baby will come when it is ready. It kicks all the time now."

Loki smiled. "I will have to see about that shade-cloth." He said.

"Sofftia told me about that." Camtan said. "It sounds like a wonderful tradition."

"I've never had to do it before." Loki confessed, "My friends aren't quite at the age where they were looking to have children, in another few centuries or so they will probably start."
"You will be back in Asgard by then to give them gifts." Sofftia said.

Camtan's eyes flickered to where the servant stood, he looked too far out of range to overhear anything.

"Possibly, but dwelling on it is hardly a constructive use of time my dear." He said softly.

She frowned in response and ducked her head. "I did not mean anything by it, I was stating a fact, but you are right, that was tactless of me."

Loki kept his eyes on his food and tried to think of something to talk about.

"The Thunder Boys were very good. They're following is getting bigger every day." He said.

"Yes." Camtan said. "They have a wonderful new way of playing, and their songs are great fun. We should have them play here, for a party."

"I don't know if His Majesty would enjoy their music." Loki said. "It's very loud."

"A party for us young things. It will be great. We can invite everyone and dance until dawn." Camtan suddenly looked guilty and glanced at his wife. "Except for me, I'll be home by midnight at the latest." He said quickly.

She laughed. "Go and have fun, I will be fine, but if the baby comes, you had best come running."

"I will." He promised, gazing at her lovingly.

Loki felt a smile creep onto his face at the sight. Thor used to look at him like that.

'Thor?' Whispered the Mask. 'He is rather attractive isn't he? You should be at home with him. Leave it to me, and I will make it happen.'

Loki's blood ran cold.

Once Camtan had set his mind on having a party, nothing could stop him. He dragged Loki out to find the Thunder Boys, and Loki got to see them for the first time.

They were young, skinny and good looking, with shaggy hair and wide grins. Although these were not on display at the moment, apparently being in the presence of two members of the royal family was something of an experience.

"I understand one of you has a father who works in the palace?" Loki said to them as they stood there like naughty children.

"Yes Your Grace, I do." Piped up one with a terrified tone to his voice.

Loki nodded. "I've heard via the complicated servant communication chain that you are studying to be an architect?"

The youth almost fainted. "Yes Your Grace." He said.

"Good, good, although you seem to be doing well with your group." Loki said.
The poor boy said nothing, stunned into silence.

"Actually, that's why we're here. We want you to play for us at a party." Camtan said.

As one, the group's eyes grew enormous.

"They would be honoured Your Grace." One of the boy's father's said quickly. "It will be a great honour."

They nodded all at once, the sight was kind of humorous. Loki smiled at them all.

"I've heard you play twice now, I think everyone's going to love you." He said.

They looked shocked.

"You've heard us play?" One of them asked, forgetting propriety in his shock. "You?"

"I went to the Rolled Oat with my friends from the Tower, yes." Loki said. "They adore you." He added. "Although I think they all have different favourites."

The group's faces couldn't be redder, although two of them were grinning at the same time.

"Are any of your friends girls Your Grace?" One of them asked, he was shushed by his father, but Loki grinned.

"As a matter of fact, they all are." He said.

This got a few more grins.

"We must go." Camtan said. "But we can expect you in a fortnight's time?"

"Yes Your Grace, we'll be at the palace gate that afternoon to set up." One of them said as the others nodded.

"Excellent." Camtan said.

Food was organised through the kitchens, and invitations were made to all the youthful Lords and Ladies in the palace.

Loki invited the King as well, as it was tradition, but Camtan had already spoken to his father and King Dimcken declined with good humour.

"You young people must have your fun." He said. "I will get a good night's sleep and see you at lunch the next day."

Loki felt a sudden bout of nausea at the thought of what King Dimcken would do to him at lunch after resting well all night, but there was no escaping it, besides, the Mask could take care of it.

The thought was horribly comforting, but rather than dwell on his madness, Loki put it out of his mind and concentrated on the party.

It was with surprise that he realised how many friends he'd managed to make in his four months in
Vanaheim. He knew every person on the guest list by sight, and he knew more than a few facts about at least half of them.

This was mostly due to Camtan, who insisted on including Loki in his own social gatherings. As a result, slowly but surely Loki's group of friends was growing.

He wished that he could invite Shiarpia and the other girls, but the social divide was deemed too great, a fact Fosxyr was clearly grateful for.

“They would not do well among the nobles Your Grace. See them at the Tower, that is the best place.” He advised.

Loki didn’t argue, he knew that Fosxyr cared deeply for his niece and was terrified that she might find herself in the wrong company.

Shiarpia herself took an altogether different view.

“You *have* to sneak me in! The Thunder Boys are going to be playing in a single room! No stage between us! I could make the drummer fall in love with me if I could only meet him, I *know* it!” She exclaimed.

Daenceia was blushing, Rohundia was biting her lip and Thainia was clasping her hands together dramatically.

“I can’t.” Loki said. “They won’t let me. I’m sorry, you know I’d have you there in a heartbeat if I didn’t have to keep up appearances.”

“You’ll be very bored without us.” Shiarpia said, pouting.

“Musleen will stop you the second he sees you.” Loki said.

Rohundia and Daenceia immediately shuddered.

“He was so imposing when he came to ask us about the carriage explosion.” Rohundia said with a quiver in her voice.

“He seemed so much taller than he was at the theatre.” Daenceia said. “I was shaking in my seat.”

Loki gave them a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry you got caught up in that. I’m just glad that taking you home didn’t delay us any further, or else we all might have been caught in the explosion.”

The girls shuddered again.

“Don’t even think it.” Rohundia said with fear in her eyes. “Please don’t even think it.”

“It’s alright Rohundia.” Loki said. “They caught the man who did it.”

“Yes.” Shiarpia said. “And now he’s dead, killed for his ideals.”

“Killed for trying to kill others.” Thainia corrected.

“Except that he didn’t.” Shiarpia said. “Loks said it himself, the explosion was supposed to go off after the carriage had been put away, no one was meant to get hurt.”

“It’s still an attack on the royal family.” Rohundia said. “I’m glad he’s gone, I feel safer now.”
Loki watched them argue back and forth. His own opinion probably wouldn’t be all that welcome, coming as it was from the Aesir perspective. He did not think that attacking the palace was a good idea, even if your ideals were sound. He could still remember the shocked faces of those around him as they ran to try and save the injured coachman, and the one who was killed instantly, Loki had never found out his name.

At least his friends had been proven innocent. He took comfort in the thought.
The day of the party, something went very wrong.

Fosxyr came to Loki as he and Camtan sat together, working out last minute details.

"Horseen and a Sorceress named Sheiftyr are here, Your Grace." He said. "They say they must speak to you urgently."

Loki frowned in puzzlement. "Show them in." He said, following Fosxyr to the meeting room.

They came side by side, and very serious.

"Your Grace, Your Grace." Horseen began. "There has been a theft at the Tower, Sheiftyr has had her private collection raided."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Loki said, turning to her in concern. "Do you have any leads?"

"Not yet Your Grace." Horseen answered. "But we know the theft occurred yesterday, during lesson time. One of the items taken had been put back just before the class started, and was missing at the end of the day."

"Why are you here, Horseen?" Camtan asked, his voice had a slight edge to it.

"We are speaking to every student, to ascertain whether they saw anything suspicious." Horseen said. "We just wanted to talk to His Grace for a moment."

"Of course." Loki said as Camtan folded his arms in annoyance.

"Royalty do not get investigated Horseen you know that." He said.

"I assure you Your Grace, we are not investigating His Grace, just asking a few questions." Horseen said hurriedly.

"It's alright Camtan." Loki said. "They need to find the culprit."

Camtan scowled but sat silently as the two mages turned back to Loki.

"The item taken was a pair of crystals, they can be used to force a shift of living material. The first crystal must be placed with the mage performing the spell, the other, with the victim."

"Or volunteer." Sheiftyr cut in. "They were designed to enhance the power of mages who otherwise would not be able to perform such a spell."

"They are a solid blue, light does not go through them, and they are about the size of a mouthful of food." Horseen continued.
Loki shook his head. "I haven't seen them." He said. "I'm sorry." He said to Sheiftyr.

"You were nearest to the cabinet Loki, are you sure you saw nothing?" She asked.

Camtan made a noise at her familiarity, Horseen stared at him closely, as if there was a possibility that the crystal might suddenly appear in his lap.

"I'm sorry." Loki said again. "I didn't see anything."

Sheiftyr looked at him in a disappointed way.

"Loki." She said sternly. "You asked me if I could take them out and show you."

Loki stared at her. He did not remember that at all, not even a little.

'Let me talk.' whispered the Mask in his ear. 'I will take care of this.'

Loki felt a deep sense of alarm at the words. He knew that the Mask would take control sometimes, but he'd always been present when it did. He'd sat behind his own eyes and watched as it handled the situations he couldn't. But could it be possible that he'd blacked out?

He felt it come and take control of his tongue.

"You mean those little stones? I thought you said they were crystals." His mouth said. "I thought they looked very pretty, but you put them back, and I saw no one else near the cabinet."

Sheiftyr looked sceptical, and Loki didn't blame her, but Horseen looked relieved.

"It's a pity you didn't see anything." he said. "We will have to continue our investigations elsewhere."

Sheiftyr looked angry.

"Loki, just tell me why you took them." She said.

The Mask looked shocked. Eyes wide and outraged.

"I did not!" It made Loki say. "I looked at them and gave them back to you. That is all."

"I don't believe you." Sheiftyr said bluntly as Camtan and Horseen both made a noise of protest. "You asked me questions about their use, about their origin, not once did you mention that they were pretty."

The Mask pouted. "But they were." It said. "I don't have them, and I don't like the way you have accused me."

"Calm down Sheiftyr, I'm sure His Grace wouldn't have taken them." Horseen said, but he looked suspicious.

The Mask frowned. "I hope you find them, and then you can apologise to me."

Sheiftyr looked outraged, she clearly believed that Loki must have stolen the crystals.

"You are lying." She said.

Camtan gasped. "That's enough. You will not speak to royalty like that."

"I don't see why he must be innocent because of that. He already lied about having seen them."
Sheiftyr said as Horseen started to sweat in fear.

"I think we all need to calm down." He started to say.

"You need to leave." The Mask said. "We are having a party to night and you are upsetting me."

"Then *be* upset." Sheiftyr shouted. "I explained how dangerous they could be when you asked about them. You held them in your hands, you sit closest to the cabinet and I caught you right near it when you came back early from lunch! You took them Loki and I want to know why!"

He'd come back early from lunch? Loki had no memory of that at all.

The Mask just pouted. “Don't shout at me.” It said.

"What is going on here?" Said the voice of King Dimcken.

He'd entered the room, a flustered looking Femtchyr was peeking in from behind him as a suspicious looking Dorgen watched from behind his father's shoulder.

"My son and I were busy with realm business when I am told that my wife stands accused of theft." He said, his eyes flashing.

Sheiftyr wouldn't budge. "I am sorry to tell you Your Majesty but you have married a thief." She said. "And a potentially dangerous one at that."

King Dimcken looked at Loki, who said nothing, just looked at him with wide eyes.

"Loki, darling, did you want to have a closer look at the mage's tools?" He asked.

The Mask shook Loki's head. "I saw them during the day. I told her already, I thought they were pretty, but they are far too dangerous for *me* to touch."

Sheiftyr looked horrified at his act, she knew full well that Loki wasn't like that at all. He was lying, and she knew it.

King Dimcken nodded. "If Loki says he didn't take it, then he didn't." He said.

Dorgen frowned. "Father if the evidence is there then we cannot dismiss her claims."

The Mask stared at the King from under Loki's eyelashes. It's gaze was innocent and pleading.

"I say it isn't there." King Dimcken snapped.

The Mask gave him a hopeful little smile, before turning to Sheiftyr. "I hope you find them." It said sweetly.

"Apologise to Loki." King Dimcken said.

Sheiftyr looked as though she'd bitten a lemon.

"I apologise for accusing you of theft Your Grace, I do hope you can forgive me." She sounded as though she was spitting acid.

Loki stared out through his own eyes and felt terrible at the look on Sheiftyr's face. He wanted to apologise for humiliating her like this. There was no way that she would ever treat him the same way again.
"You are forgiven." The Mask said sweetly. "But please don't do it again, it's very distressing."

Sheiftyr's eyes widened in rage, but she managed to hold her tongue. Dorgen looked outraged.

'Did you take them?' Loki asked the Mask from inside.

'Of course not, you wouldn't do something like that.' It answered.

Loki wished that he could trust himself, but he didn't, not anymore.

The party began at twilight and went long into the night. Loki moved from group to group, talking and laughing. When the Thunder Boys started to play, about half the group looked surprised, but the other half had clearly heard them before and immediately started dancing. Camtan grabbed Loki and they moved about like crazy on the floor with the others.

"It's going well." Camtan yelled into Loki's ear.

"Seems to be." Loki yelled back.

The food was a hit, the wine flowed, for a few hours Loki felt the warmth of happiness inside of him, only slightly tempered by the trouble earlier that day.

He knew he should tell someone about the Mask, but he needed it, even if he blacked out, in fact, especially if he blacked out, provided he did it when he was with the King.

He would have to find a way to make it up to Sheiftyr, maybe when she found out who actually took the crystals, then he could talk to her about his behaviour. Surely she would understand that the King made it difficult for him to be himself?

He didn't have to tell her about the Mask, just that the King doesn't like, *difficult* people, she'd understand. But he'd have to wait until the crystals were found, he doubted she'd want to hear anything from him until then. In fact, he thought with regret, he may have to stop going to her classes, just for the moment, until things worked out.

'Don't you worry about that. You come to class and keep learning.' Whispered the Mask.

It was talking to him all the time now. Loki wanted to tell someone, but he needed it so badly to protect him.

He had another drink instead, and put the whole business out of his mind.

The Thunder Boys left at sunrise with four more engagements scheduled. The servants cleaned up the mess while fighting yawns. Loki sat with Camtan on two of the chairs and discussed the result.

"That was the best party I've been to in a long time." Camtan said. "You must throw another after the baby is born, so that Sofitaia may come."

"Yes sir." Loki said, he was tipsy, he'd drunk far more than he normally would and the Vanaheim
wine had finally gotten to his head.

"They like you a lot Loki, Fa-Fa-Falkeen said he wants to invite you on his next trip to the lake."

"What lake?"

"THE lake. It's, you know, a lake."

"Oh a *lake*, I didn't realise it was a *lake*." Loki slurred.

Camtan grinned, he had also drunk more than a little wine. "Shut up. The Lake is a nice place, he organises day trips to go and sail and swim and fish and *stuff*."

"Sounds good." Loki said, he was slouching in his chair. "Sounds v'good."

"You need to sleep." Camtan said. "You're tired, amateur."

Loki stuck his tongue out at him. "Is the sun up? Did I make it? Yes I did, no calling *me* an amateur."

Camtan laughed. "Alright then, party-lover. I will leave you to sleep."

Loki nodded. "Good morning." He said seriously, the alcohol made him feel warm and comfortable.

"Good morning." Camtan repeated and took his leave, giving a nod to Fosxyr as he did.

Fosxyr waited until the door was shut and turned to Loki.

"Would Your Grace like to go to bed?" He asked, in a tone that made it clear that the answer was 'yes'.

"Yes." Loki said obediently.

He rose and staggered his way into the bedroom.

Fosxyr helped him undress and he crawled into bed.

"The King said he wanted to see me at lunch." Loki said, settling down into the soft mattress. "He's gonna touch me all over."

"Sleep now, please Your Grace, you need your rest." Fosxyr said, looking worried.

"It's okay, I won't be there." Loki mumbled. "He'll leave me all inky but I won't be there, it's better now."

His eyes closed, leaving a concerned looking Fosxyr standing over him.
Loki was woken by Fosxyr just over six hours later. He blinked, bleary-eyed up at the servant, who was holding a cup of tea.

"I'm sorry Your Grace, but you must rise and bath for the King. It is an hour until lunchtime." He said.

Loki sat up and drank the tea, his head started to clear quickly.

"What's in this?" He asked.

"It's called wake-up tea, another from the fields of Lord Fallconyr." Fosxyr said.

"It's good." Loki said.

He finished it, rose and followed Fosxyr to the bathing room.

Wraenyr had already made the bath ready, and Loki sank into it with a sigh.

Fosxyr sat on the edge with a washcloth and began to rub it over Loki's back.

"How are you feeling Your Grace." He asked.

"Alright." Loki said. "The tea is helping."

"Did you have a good time?" Fosxyr asked.

"Yes it was great. I had a really good time." Loki said.

"Have you given any more thought to Sheiftyr's stolen crystals?" Fosxyr asked, watching Loki carefully. "If I may be so bold, you did not seem entirely yourself."

Loki blushed. "I didn't take them." He said, "And with the King there, I..." He trailed off. "How can I explain to her when she still thinks I took them?" He asked.

Fosxyr gave him a steady look. "I don't know Your Grace. I truly don't."

"I will find a way." Loki said. "Once they catch the thief I will talk to her, right now I don't think she'd listen."

"Perhaps not Your Grace." Fosxyr said as Loki stood and held out a hand for his towel.

"And today Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked suddenly in a burst, as though he wasn't quite sure how to ask what he wanted to. Last night you said something about 'not being there', what was it you meant?"
Loki froze. "I don't remember that." He said quickly. "I must have drunk more than I thought."

Fosxyr looked at him warily. "Must have Your Grace." He said and handed over the towel.

Loki felt the Mask come down over him as he stepped into the King's chambers. Even it was surprised to see King Dimcken waiting for him in the outer room.

"Loki, my darling, come with me." He said and slipped an arm around Loki's waist to lead him straight back out again.

"Where are we going, Husband?" The Mask asked politely.

"The King's private gardens, we're having a picnic." King Dimcken said. "How was your party?"

"Wonderful, thank you so much for allowing me to have one." The Mask said.

"My pleasure my darling," King Dimcken said. "You young things must have your fun." He turned and pushed Loki hard against the wall to kiss him. "And us old things will too." He murmured against Loki's lips.

"Of course Husband." The Mask said, gasping a little. It started wriggling against the wall, and against King Dimcken. "The stone is cold." It said with a pout as Dimcken's eyes dilated with lust.

"Is it now." He said, leaning back in.

Loki felt a strange kind of detached horror. What was the Mask doing?! It was *encouraging* the King's attentions. He didn't want that!

Inside, he started to struggle against it, as outside his body leaned into the kiss.

The King looked surprised, but delighted. "My dear, you seem quite happy today." He said.

'Willing' Loki thought, 'the word you're looking for is willing. But I don't want to be.'

"I am very happy." His mouth said with a shy kind of smile. "You've been very good to me these past few weeks, especially when I think about how *busy* you must be. I am grateful for your attention."

'NO I'M NOT' Loki thought frantically, but he couldn't stop the Mask as it leaned forward and placed a delicate kiss on King Dimcken's lips.

"My darling?" Clearly that was too much even for the King, as he looked startled by Loki's behaviour.

The Mask lowered Loki's head and looked up at him through Loki's lashes. "You are very powerful, my Husband." It said softly. "I like that."

Then it blushed and turned Loki's head away shyly, as though it had imparted a secret it wasn't meant to have told.

Loki wanted to be sick. King Dimcken's reaction was one of delight.

"Oh my dear sweet wife." He murmured against Loki's mouth. "My darling. I will show you how powerful I can be."

They kissed for a bit longer in the corridor, Dimcken was more enthusiastic, the Mask was more
tentative and unsure, but still horribly willing. Loki tried desperately to break free and make it stop, he'd never pushed back, never.

'Relax. Don't worry. This will get you Thor.' The Mask said to confidently, 'Trust me.'

He didn't want to, but he had no choice.

They ate lunch in the gardens. King Dimcken could not keep the smirk off his face as the Mask blushed and bit its lip as it ate. It was acting like a youth in the first blooms of love and there was nothing Loki could do about it.

'How is this going to get me Thor?' He thought angrily.

'Trust me, by the time I'm done, you will be safe in Asgard with your beloved Thor.' It thought back to him smugly. 'Just stay calm.'

After they had eaten, King Dimcken held his arms out and the Mask crawled into them.

'Stop.' Loki thought. 'This is madness. STOP.'

'No.' The Mask thought smugly. 'You just sit back and let me work.'

Dimcken pushed Loki down onto his back and pressed on top of him, kissing him hard as he leaned his full weight against him. The Mask moaned softly and gave a little gasp as the King pulled Loki's skirts up.

"Here Husband?" It whispered with wide eyes.

"Yes my darling." King Dimcken said, he was grinning. "Right here."

He reached down and began to play his fingers across Loki's vagina. The Mask made a series of soft, encouraging noises. Loki wanted to vomit.

The noises were encouragement enough for the King and he pushed his fingers inside.

He was too eager, and there was a sting of pain, but the Mask just gave a soft cry and fluttered Loki's eyelashes a little. Loki wished that he could cry. He felt as though he was at his wedding night all over again.

'Please stop.' He begged.

'Quiet, I'm working.' The Mask said back to him.

Dimcken removed his fingers and lifted his skirts eagerly.

'He really is hideous isn't he?' The Mask said conversationally as Loki fought its hold on his mind.

A moment later their bodies were joined.

"Ooooh oh oh." The Mask moaned. "You feel so big."

King Dimcken grinned and thrust forwards. Loki mentally gagged.

'Stop flattering him.' He thought furiously.

'Men are all the same, they love to hear how you can't quite take it.' The Mask said confidently as
the King thrust above them. It was lifting Loki’s hips just a little bit to match each movement.

‘Stop doing this.’ Loki thought. ‘Please stop, don’t help him, don’t participate. Please.’

‘So I suppose you just lie there like a cold fish?’ The Mask asked. ‘I’m surprised he hasn’t complained yet. Let me work, I know what I’m doing.’

Loki had no choice, and the King certainly seemed pleased. He was moaning in pleasure, gasping short words like ‘yes’ and ‘darling’. Loki tried to block it out.

Then he felt something new. His muscles were contracting, making little clenches that felt as though they were growing.

‘What’s happening?!’ He asked desperately. He didn’t like it at all.

‘You’re going to climax. Just relax.’ The Mask said.

‘NO!’ Loki screamed in his mind. ‘NO DON’T MAKE ME PLEASE DON’T, NOT WITH HIM PLEASE!’

He was screaming, desperately trying to fight the Mask which was working ever harder toward his completion.

‘Oh very well.’ It said, it sounded bored with him.

Loki was lying on his side, cuddled up to the King, who was speaking. There was a distastefully sticky, wet patch between his legs and his skirts were still sitting too high to be modest.

‘-show you now, if you’re ready?’ King Dimcken was asking.

“I’m ready Husband.” The Mask said. It was still in control, but it was allowing Loki to see again. He had no idea whether it had climaxed without him, he suspected that it had.

King Dimcken rose, and Loki rose with him. They straightened their clothing and made their way out of the garden.

The Mask kept giving the King little adoring glances as they walked. Loki just wanted to close his eyes and never wake up. It’s behaviour was making the King happy with him, but at a terrible price.

What if Thor found out about it?

‘Thor will never know.’ The Mask cut in. It heard all his thoughts, which terrified him.

The King led Loki down through some of the less glamorous corridors and to an area outside.

‘Where are we going?’ Loki asked the Mask.

‘He promised to show me how powerful he was, and what happened to people who crossed him.’ The Mask replied.

Loki felt a growing sense of dread as they walked to a foul-smelling area. Chained to the centre of a rubbish pile as she was forced to sort out useable scraps to give to starving beggar children, was Sheiftyr.

“You see my darling, nobody speaks out against *my* wife.” King Dimcken said.
Loki wanted to run to her and unchain her, to beg her for forgiveness. The Mask just grinned.

“Oh Husband what a perfect punishment! Here she must help the poor children too, that will help her to be humble.”

It spoke loudly enough for Sheiftyr to hear, although she didn’t look up from her task.

“She must work here for an hour each day for the next fifty years.” King Dimcken said. “She only gets that because she is from noble stock. If she were common I’d have her executed, these magic users need to know their place.”

The Mask beamed at him. “I may love my hobby, but you are right my Husband, you cannot let them tell you what to do.”

Loki was horrified.

‘She doesn’t deserve to be here.’ He thought. ‘I know she was angry but she still shouldn’t be humiliated like this.’

“Who will teach my class now?” The Mask asked.

“Still her, under guard.” King Dimcken said. “I won’t let her hide from the public while being punished, they must all know why she is disgraced. She will teach you well my wife, or there will be further consequences.”

“You are a good Husband.” The Mask said adoringly.

King Dimcken smiled happily.

“All for you my love, all for you.” He said.
Thirty Seven Steps

Chapter Summary

A Casualty of War

"Your Grace, His Grace Prince Musleen respectfully requests you presence." Fosxyr said as Loki read through his magic texts. He had been studying the phenomena of splitting the mind and whether there was a magical solution that could be applied.

"Oh, um, now?" He asked nervously.

"Yes Your Grace, his request is more of a demand." Fosxyr said, frowning. "You haven't... *done* anything Your Grace? His servant said he is rather angry."

Loki swallowed uneasily. He knew *he* hadn't done anything, but the Mask was another story. He had no idea what it could have done.

"No." He said. "I've done nothing."

Technically true.

"I will go and see him now." He said, rising.

Fosxyr watched him go, before going on an errand of his own.

Loki was announced into Musleen's chambers. The Prince was not smiling. He nodded politely and asked Loki to accompany him into his inner workroom.

The Prince's chambers were much smaller than the queen's, although no less comfortable. Camtan's had been furnished in a welcoming, slightly opulent kind of a way.

Musleen's were functional, and messy with reports and papers.

"Sit down." Musleen said, dropping the politness.

Inside, the Mask bristled at this treatment. Loki told it to be quiet.

"You lied to everyone." He said bluntly, sitting down opposite Loki with a scowl. "I did some investigating, and I found this."

He opened a sealed cabinet to his left and pulled out a bright blue stone.

"Sheiftyr's stone." Loki said.

"You recognise it?" Musleen said.

"Yes." Loki lied. He couldn't remember seeing it before, but it matched the description he'd been given and Sheiftyr *said* that he'd asked about it. "Where did you find it?"
"In your chambers. I examined the evidence and you were the most likely suspect. So I had a look around. You left it in your top drawer by the bed." He looked puzzled. "To be honest, I was disappointed. I don't know why you would take it, but I thought you'd hide it better."

Loki stared at it. In his chambers. The Mask *had* taken it.

"I didn't take it." He said, knowing Musleen didn't believe him.

Musleen glared at him as he locked the stone back away, Loki saw the cabinet flash slightly as a locking spell took effect. "Don't lie to me Loki, I did not think Dorgen's claims had any merit, but now it seems you *are* here to manipulate father. What are Asgard's plans?" Musleen said.

"What?" Loki gasped. "No, I'm not, I swear I'm not."

Musleen made a dismissive noise. "I will be presenting my findings to father, I just wanted to give you a chance to tell me where the other stone was."

Other stone? Of course, Sheiftyr said they were a pair.

"I don't know." Loki said. "I really don't, please don't tell the King, Musleen, I... I have a problem, there's this thing, it's making me..."

The Mask slammed down hard, forcing Loki's mouth to stop.

Musleen was staring at him. "Something is *making* you steal powerful artefacts and lie to Father about it, causing a good and noble woman to shovel through shit every night for fifty years." He said flatly.

The Mask twisted Loki's face into something ugly. "You had better let this drop Musleen. You are far too good at what you do, which is a pity. Don't push me." It said. "Or I will have to remove you."

Musleen stared in shock at Loki, then his face turned dark.

"I see." He said. "You are just a little slut working for Odin. I really didn't want to believe it, what could you possible gain by all this? Vanaheim has always been loyal, Dorgen has no plans to change that."

The Mask just smiled. "He might not, but I do. I've got the King wrapped around my sexy young fingers and I don't plan on letting you interfere with that. Not until it's over."

"What's over?" Musleen said carefully.

The Mask just smiled. "If you are still around by then, you'll see." It said.

Musleen rose suddenly, heading for the door, and the room beyond where the servants waited.

The Mask was faster. Loki had not been encouraged to enter the training yards since his arrival. And so, Musleen, like so many others, completely underestimated him.

The Mask rose and struck Musleen hard on the back of the head with Loki's elbow, just where the Prince's neck began. There was a sickening crack and Musleen collapsed with a thud.

The Mask examined the cabinet carefully, but the spell could not be broken quickly or easily, it. It scowled and rose, it's plans clearly foiled for the moment.

Instead, it calmly found two glasses and poured out some wine from Musleen's drinks cabinet. Then
It casually knocked over one glass and spilled the wine on the tiled floor.

It pulled Musleen into a new position on his back and admired it's handiwork. Then it changed it's expression to one of fear and screamed.

"HELP!"

Loki had accidently knocked his wine over, when Musleen went to fetch a servant, he had slipped and hit his head on the edge of his desk.

That was the story the Mask told as it sat crying in the healing chambers.

Musleen had wanted to talk about the King's birthday, he'd wanted to know whether Loki had any ideas, as he had been so busy with work that he'd been unable to think of anything.

King Dimcken sat beside Loki and held him as he cried.

"I tried to catch him, but I was too slow. I'm so sorry." The Mask sobbed.

"No Loki, darling, you did what you could, it was an accident." King Dimcken said.

The Mask turned Loki's face into the King's shoulder.

"I still feel so guilty, I was right there and I couldn't stop it." It said, holding on to him tightly.

King Dimcken hugged Loki hard. "It's alright my love, I'm sure Musleen will be alright."

But his voice sounded worried.

The healers were not encouraging. Musleen had suffered a terrible blow, his neck had broken and his brain was badly bruised and swollen.

They were not sure if he'd ever wake up.

The King ordered the servants to clean up the wine and lock the doors to Musleen's chambers. They were to be left for him when he woke. His head guard had tried to protest, claiming that he should investigate the accident as Musleen almost certainly would have wanted. But the King dismissed him, after all, Loki saw the whole thing.

The Mask wept it's way through the afternoon and into the evening, sitting quietly at dinner as the others, equally troubled, sat and tried unsuccessfully to maintain their hopes.

Camtan was so pale he looked almost translucent. He looked haunted. Sofftia kept rubbing his arm in comfort.

Dorgen sat with a face like thunder and said nothing. Loki saw him glaring a few times but even in this, the fight had been punched out of him.

The King sent Loki away after dinner, he was in no mood for fun. The Mask was frustrated by this, but Loki was relieved.
'I don't want him to touch me.' Loki thought angrily as he walked back to his chambers.

'*I* want to finish what I've started.' The Mask replied. 'Although I suppose that this gives us time to fetch the stone from Musleen's chambers.'

'No.' Loki thought. 'You are making trouble, you are ruining everything.'

'I am protecting you, the plan is perfect.' The Mask replied.

'Odin will banish me for what you have done.' Loki replied. 'I *hate* you. I will never see Thor again.'

It was that thought that made him start to cry. He'd been trying not to think about it, but there was no way that Heimdall wouldn't tell Odin of what he'd seen, and attacking the King's son was trouble. Loki was banished. Odin hadn't said it yet, he probably wouldn't, diplomatic relations would be shattered if anyone found out about this, but when King Dimcken was dead, Loki would not be allowed home.

'You've ruined me.' He thought sadly as he sat weeping by the fire.

'I didn't know.' The Mask said. It sounded sorry. 'All I wanted was to turn him into a worm and drop him out of the window. They would never find him, and a disappearance would be a mystery. No one could be charged with murder, not without the body.'

Loki frowned where he sat. 'How did you not know about Odin's vow?' He asked suspiciously.

'I just didn't.' The Mask said dismissively.

'But you're me.' Loki thought. 'You're a part of me.'

'Yes, I am, I protect you, but I don't know everything, it doesn't work like that.' The Mask said.

Loki's eyes narrowed. 'You don't sound like me anymore.' He thought.

There was silence from the Mask, then all of a sudden he felt it slam into him, forcing his mind downward and taking control.

'I'm sorry Loki, but the King must die. I wanted to spare you, you really do seem nice, but there is no way to do that now without the stones.' The Mask thought.

‘Who are you?’ Loki thought, furious at having been tricked.

‘I am of the Resistance. We will end the Reign of this tyrant and put his son on the throne. Vanaheim will claim its independence!’ It raged, echoing loudly in Loki’s head. 'And you Loki, you are going to murder the King.'

That night, the Mask asked Fosxyr for a sleeping draught.

"I just don't think I can rest otherwise." It said.

"As you wish Your Grace." Fosxyr said. He was pale and worry lined his face. He watched Loki carefully as the tea was drunk.
'He is suspicious.' The Mask said. 'I may have to kill him.'

'No.' Loki thought desperately. 'He practically raised Musleen, he's just concerned, like we all are.'

'We'll see.' The Mask said.

On the outside, it thanked Fosxyr sweetly and lay down. Only when the tea began to work and Loki struggled to stay awake did the Mask leave him alone.

It was waiting when he woke. It opened his eyes and blinked the sleep away as Fosxyr put Loki's breakfast on the table.

It went through the motions, eating, bathing and dressing, then it sat down with Loki's spell books and stared at the page.

'You may study if you like, but any attempt to speak and I will take over.' It said threateningly. 'If you give so much as a glance at someone, they will die.'

Loki put his head down. Who had he told about the Mask? His grandparents, but that had been early on, before it started thinking for itself. Back then it had just been something light, something that reacted to situations a split second before Loki’s disgust could kick in and ruin it.

He found himself wondering whether this current Mask had been there all the time, starting small to gain his trust, or whether it had come in and he'd just assumed that it was an extension of his own creation.

He didn't know, he'd been so relieved to step back and not have to face the King that he'd just let it happen, and now, he was in so much trouble he didn't know if he'd ever get out.

"Your Grace, Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr have come to see you."

Loki felt a faint amount of hope jump in his chest, coupled with a feeling of dread. One wrong look and the Mask would kill them.

'Yes.' It said, sliding into his mind. 'I will.'

He forced a small smile and rose to greet them. Lord Eadgleyr gave him a hug.

"How are you Loki? Are you coping with all of this?" He asked, studying Loki's face.

Was he coping? No, no he wasn't, not at all.

"I am trying to distract myself before we know how bad it truly is, but they say he may not ever wake." Loki said. "I fear for him."

Lord Eadgleyr gave him a soft smile. "We all do, Prince Musleen is well regarded among the court."

"They say he slipped on a wine spill." Lord Fallconyr said.

"Yes." Loki said, wishing he could tell them everything.

'Don't.' Whispered the Mask.

"The same spill he was fetching the servants to clean?" Lord Fallconyr continued.

Loki felt a stab of fear. "It spread faster than he realised, he just didn't see it under his foot." He said.
Lord Fallconyr looked at him seriously. "Loki, did he... *do* anything to you?"

"Do?" Loki asked, genuinely confused.

"Don't Husband, please." Lord Eadgleyr said.

"There have been rumours about the second Prince, he has never had a dalliance with anyone at the court. *Anyone*, they say he has, *different* tastes. Unusual tastes. I thought maybe..."

He trailed off when he saw Loki shaking his head.

"No, nothing like that, he slipped on the wine I promise." He said earnestly.

Lord Fallconyr did not look convinced. Loki felt absurdly grateful and guilty at the same time.

He was guilty because Musleen's reputation did not deserve their suspicions, and grateful because as long as they suspected Musleen they did not suspect *him*.

Somehow he was going to have to find a way to fight off the Mask alone. It was dangerous, ruthless, and utterly driven. He was starting at a disadvantage because it already had control, but he wasn’t about to give up without a fight.

No Trouble, No Mischief.

No other way.
Thirty Eight Steps

Chapter Summary

A Battle of Wills

Loki spent the rest of the day fighting. From the outside, he seemed calm and steady, on the inside, a battle raged.

First he tried to read books about mind control, which the Mask did not allow. Then he tried to think of ways to get around this, by reading books *next* to the ones on mind control then slipping one into the pile whenever he could.

The Mask was getting annoyed, and finally took total control just to stop him.

Loki didn't rest though. Gone were the times when he would relax and let it take care of him. Now he would focus all his energy into trying to move his hand, or even a finger. It didn't matter what as long as the Mask had to work to stop him.

Sometimes he would get through, and a part of his body would twitch wildly before the Mask could bring it under control.

'Stop it.' It thought at him angrily.

'No.' Loki answered, putting an inflection in his thought that implied that he thought the Mask was stupid for asking.

'I will hurt someone you love.' The Mask threatened.

'How many can you hurt before they start to notice that it's always me at the centre of it?' Loki shot back.

He tried to sound brave, he didn't want the Mask to know that he was scared. While it couldn't hurt too many people before others got suspicious, there was still a lot of damage it could do if it really got mad.

He had to risk it though. All day he threw himself into the fight, wearing it down, because Loki knew something about the Mask that it didn't want him to know.

It needed to sleep.

It was a person, *one* person. The likelihood of two people managing to cast the same spell was very low indeed. And one person could not maintain the spell all day, it had to rest, which is why it drugged him the previous night.

So he fought it all day in little ways, moving his hand, yelling at it, trying to read books it would have banned. He kept up a constant barrage of pressure until dinner time, at which point he suddenly stopped.

'Finally.' The Mask said, it sounded weary.
Loki didn't answer, just sent a wave of exhausted feeling out.

The Mask was quiet at dinner. It was feeling the strain of the day, and Loki sat quietly and meekly as the family ate in the same worried manner.

Once again the King sent Loki away. The Mask was extremely annoyed.

'His son lies in the healer’s wing and may never recover; you didn't honestly expect him to be in the mood for making merry did you?' Loki asked, making sure to highlight his weariness as it entered his chambers.

The Mask slumped down into a chair with a huff.

'May I read?' Loki asked quietly. 'I won't touch the magic books, but the servants will think it's odd if I just sit here and stare at nothing.'

In fact, Fosxyr was already frowning from where he stood.

"Are you well Your Grace?" He asked carefully.

'Fine.' The Mask said. 'You may read, but I'm watching.'

Loki felt the Mask recede slightly and smiled.

"I am well Fosxyr, but I would like a drink." He said as he straightened. "A glass of wine."

"Yes Your Grace." Fosxyr said.

Loki grabbed a book of stories from the shelf and opened it as Fosxyr returned. He took a sip of the wine and smiled. "Perfect, thank you."

Loki opened the book and began to read, he also, with great care not to think about what he was doing, drank the glass of wine. He put the empty glass on the table in front of him without taking his eyes from the page, and gestured for Fosxyr to refill it.

It was a bit like learning to wield a sword. When you first started as a young thing, the sword master made you practise a series of movements endlessly, over and over again. They didn't seem to make any sense, after all, in a real battle there was no telling what the other person would do.

But the truth was, those movements were the best possible combination. That block followed that strike because it was the easiest to make from that position. That series of strikes was the one that didn't give your opponent time to bring his sword up. And when you finally reached the stage where you could do those movements in your sleep, *then* you were unleashed on one another, then the movements all made sense because everything flowed so naturally, so much so that you never really thought about your individual movements, they became a part of you.

Now though he was trying to move without thinking for a whole other reason. The Mask could hear his thoughts, so he made sure to fill his mind with the adventures of the Troll Slayer of Asgard as he drank the second glass of wine and casually gestured for Fosxyr to refill it again.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before the servant questioned him, Loki never drank wine except at parties or feasts, this was highly unusual.

"Fosxyr, I'm still hungry." Loki said as the Mask pricked up its ears. How he knew it was doing that he did not know, but he did. "May I have some sweet cakes from the kitchens?"
"Of course Your Grace." Fosxyr said, placing the wine cask on the servant's table out of reach.

Loki gave him a smile as he left and went back to his book. Then he drank the rest of his wine.

By the time Fosxyr came back, a combination of mental strain and alcohol was starting to make Loki feel sleepy. He had managed to get himself another glass of wine by simply asking Femtchyr for one. He had been right, and the Mask had missed Fosxyr filling up his glass twice already. It said nothing as his 'second' glass was filled.

Fosxyr placed the plate of cakes onto the table and Loki helped himself with a "thank you."

He made sure to eat more than he should, and the combination of cakes and wine were starting to make him feel sick.

'Stop it.' The Mask thought suddenly. 'You are eating too much.'

'I like these cakes.' Loki thought, frowning. 'If you are planning to get me killed at the worst and banished at best then why shouldn't I enjoy them now?'

"Your Grace, are you sure you are well?" Fosxyr asked. He'd seen the frown.

Loki smiled at him just a little bit too widely. "I am fine Fosxyr, but thirsty, may I have some water?"

The Mask was starting to fight him again. It didn't trust him.

Fosxyr gave Loki a new glass with water in it, as he took it in his left hand and thanked the servant, Loki gestured to his wine glass with his right.

Fosxyr looked alarmed, but obediently fetched the wine and poured another glass as Loki downed the water and concentrated on whether or not to have another sweet cake. He decided that he should, just as the Mask decided that he shouldn't.

His hand jerked to a stop as it reached out towards the plate.

'Let me continue or they are going to wonder why.' Loki thought quickly. 'This isn't my doing, it's yours, you can't threaten them for this.'

The Mask let him go, and he grabbed another cake quickly and bit into it as Fosxyr arrived back at the table with his wine. Loki grinned at him, he was feeling warm and relaxed.

"Time for another book I think." He said. He finished the cake, washed it down with the 'remainder of his second glass' of wine, and headed for the bookcase.

He examined the texts carefully, the wine was starting to muddle his head, but he still managed to pull a book on weapons-crafting off the shelf with his right hand while grabbing a book on the power of telepathy with his left. He focussed hard on the weapons book as he walked back to his chair, the other book he placed on the table, spine side up, and ignored the noise of the book as it fell open. He sat again and focussed on his reading.

The wine was helping. He felt wonderfully tipsy, and the Mask's control felt... less.

"I would like more wine." Loki said as he concentrated furiously on the words on the page. Trying to speak while reading different words took real skill, but trying to do it while tipsy felt surprisingly easy.

Fosxyr poured him another glass and Loki downed it in one shot.
"Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked gently. "Are you absolutely sure you that are quite well?"

"I am fine Fosxyr," Loki said. "I am reading my stories. But this story is boring, I will get another."

He rose and practically skipped to the shelves.

'That's enough.' The Mask said.

Loki's body went still. He calmly took another book from the shelf and turned around.

"I'm sorry Fosxyr, I am just upset at poor Musleen's accident." It said. It was slurring slightly, Loki's body was drunk and there was nothing it could do about it.

Fosxyr smiled nervously. "I understand Your Grace." He said.

"I will go to bed," The Mask said.

'If he suspects so much as a thing I will kill him.' It thought furiously to Loki.

Loki stayed quiet, but he thought the Mask sounded tired.

Fosxyr helped him change and tucked him into the bed.

"Goodnight Your Grace, I'm sure there will be good news in the morning," He said soothingly.

"Good night." The Mask said.

As soon as the servant was gone Loki's face turned ugly.

'Listen here you brat, I know what you were doing today and I promise you that if you keep it up tomorrow I will kill that servant and anyone who might witness it, I'll kill your whole damn chamber-service do you hear me?'

'They'll notice.' Loki said back. 'And then you'll never get to the King.'

'I will get to him, he will turn his attention back to you soon enough.' The Mask said. 'A little skin, a tight robe, he will want you again soon. In the meantime, I have work to do.'

It rose and tried to walk to the door. Loki's legs were unsteady, his centre of balance was still affected by the alcohol.

'Little shit.' The Mask thought. 'No more wine for you, I should have known what you were planning, you never drink wine.'

'I thought I'd start.' Loki thought back furiously. 'I'm looking at a death sentence soon, why shouldn't I numb the pain?'

'No more.' The Mask snapped firmly.

It reached the door and opened it.

Fosxyr and Femtchyr were still cleaning up and looked up expectedly.

"Yes Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked.

The Mask paused at the door before saying. "I need water."
"Did I not leave the jug by your bed full Your Grace? I am so sorry." Fosxyr said heading towards the bedroom.

"Oh, I forgot." The Mask said quickly. "I'll get it."

It shut the door in his face.

'Nice cover.' Loki said sarcastically.

'Quiet, I'm trying to think.' The Mask said.

'You weren't really going to try and get to Musleen's chambers now were you?' Loki asked. 'It's still early for most people, there are a few hours yet before the palace will sleep, and a few more again before all the servants are gone.'

The Mask scowled and sat back down on the bed. 'Fine.' It thought.

'Do you want to play a game?' Loki asked, still heavily sarcastic.

'Quiet.' The Mask snapped.

'You're very good at manipulating old men, but you aren't very good at managing palace life.' Loki said.

The Mask growled at him in frustration. 'One more word and I will kill the servant. I can make it look like an accident.' It said.

Loki stayed silent for a moment.

'It will still be suspicious.' He thought carefully.

The Mask made a frustrated noise.

'Two people I was near both getting hurt-'

'Killed.' The Mask snapped.

'Or killed in a short space of time, I care about them, and you're right that I don't want them to die, but if I have to sacrifice a servant to stop you, then I will, servants can be replaced.'

He really, really hoped the Mask believed him.

It was silent for a moment.

'I will kill your grandparents.' It said flatly.

'I will mourn them.' Loki answered, trying to keep his mental voice calm and level.

The Mask narrowed Loki's eyes.

"I will succeed, little Consort, I *will* keep control over you." It whispered out loud. Loki’s voice sounded strange and raspy, like the monster that haunted children’s nightmares.

'I *will* try to stop you.' Loki answered defiantly.

The Mask sat and stared at nothing for hours as the palace fell asleep and the wine wore off. Loki tried over and over again to make his body move, but its control was ironclad.
Instead he taunted it, harried it, yelled and screamed at it, sang to it, anything that kept it from relaxing its concentration.

Finally, the Mask stood.

'It’s time.' It said, it sounded very weary and at the end of its tether.

Loki tried to make his left leg go weak at the knee as it walked. It made his face sneer and continued without incident.

The chambers beyond were dark and quiet, as were the corridors. The Mask moved quickly to where Musleen's chambers were located.

The door was still locked soundly. The Mask sank down onto Loki's knees to examine it.

It raised Loki's hand and sent an unlocking spell into the mechanism. Loki took the opportunity to smack his own head with his left hand as hard as he could.

The impact made a grunt spill from his lips before the Mask took back control.

'No more.' It ordered. 'Or I kill the next person I see.'

Loki immediately thought hard about looking in a mirror.

'Very funny, but you don't want to die, now stop stalling me.' It said and made its way into the inner chamber to where the cabinet was located.

Loki tried to fight it but it was too strong, however his moment came again when it started examining the cabinet.

'Tricky.' It said. 'Very tricky. This is quite the complex magical lock. Our dear Prince is a very paranoid man.'

'He was attacked in his own chambers by the mind controlled wife of his father.' Loki said flatly. 'I think his caution is justified.'

'I can break this.' The Mask thought. 'I just need...'

Loki struck. The moment the Mask's magic began to rise he threw his body sideways into the desk, the very one that the Mask had claimed was responsible for Musleen's terrible head and neck injury.

He hit it with a loud crash. Bottles and books came flying off and onto the floor.

The Mask growled in anger as it rose and looked towards the door. The sound of Musleen's servants could already be heard.

"You little shit." It said in Loki's voice.

Loki fought to regain some control, but the Mask was too strong. It picked up the heavy iron poker from the fireplace.

"Now they die." It said.

"They're not just servants." Loki said, realising as he did that he was saying this out loud. The Mask's control was slipping. "They are also the palace guard, or didn't you think it was odd the way there was no one in the corridors on the way here? They are all in the servant's rooms."
Loki felt his expression change to worried.

"You can't kill them all." He said.

The Mask dropped the poker, waved its hands in a complicated pattern, and Loki's body disappeared.

It snuck out behind them as they came into the room. They may have been dressed like servants, but they were armed, and held them like they knew how to wield them.

The Mask ran swiftly back to Loki's chambers and into the bedroom. It was only a moment later that Fosxyr, Wraenyr and Canryren appeared at the door.

"Are you alright Your Grace?" Fosxyr asked as the other two servants scanned the room. "Someone has forced entry into Prince Musleen's rooms, the palace is being searched for the culprit."

"Oh no, what do you think they were after?" The Mask asked.

"We don't know yet Your Grace." Fosxyr said coming closer. He had a closer look at Loki's face and frowned. "Are you sure you are not ill Your Grace? You look flushed."

"I am just surprised by all this." The Mask said quickly. "It's very exciting."

"Yes." Fosxyr said. "If you will excuse me, I will check the study."

"Of course." The Mask said and watched him go with wide eyes.

'This place is ridiculous.' It said to Loki.

'Welcome to the life of a royal. Or did you think it was all fluttering eyelashes and getting presents?' Loki shot back. 'They will be on alert for the rest of the night, longer if they cannot find the suspect.'

The Mask was silent.

'Then I have no choice, you will kill the King and die for it, Loki of Asgard. There is no other way.'

Loki fought to move his body, but the Mask's hold was too strong.

'Why do you even want to do this?' He asked. 'It's not like Dorgen is planning to break away from Asgard anyway.'

'He will do as we dictate, or there will be trouble.' The Mask said ominously.

'What have you done to him?' Loki asked.

'Nothing you need to know about.' The Mask snapped. 'Time to sleep Loki.'

"Fosxyr?" It called.

"Yes Your Grace?"

"May I have another sleep tea? This panic has woken me up and tomorrow I have to go to my magic lesson." It said, making Loki's face sad and pleading. "I have to face Sheiftyr, she still thinks I'm guilty of theft."

Fosxyr's face softened. "I will fetch you some." He said, but you shouldn't rely on it Your Grace, it is
"I know, just this one time more." The Mask said.

Loki tried to make a noise come out of his throat but it was useless.

The Mask held its control firm until Loki lost consciousness, only then did it release its hold.

The following morning the palace was still locked down tightly. The thief had not been caught, and Musleen's guards were finally allowed to enter their leader's chambers to search for clues.

'They're closing in on you.' Loki taunted.

'They're closing in on *you*.' The Mask shot back.

Loki was riding in the carriage to his magic lessons. He was nervous. Today would be the first day that he would face Sheiftyr.

The Mask was sitting in the back of his mind, allowing him to have most of his control. But every time he tried to cause a scene or alert someone it locked back down again hard. He was exhausted, and he hoped that the Mask was too.

Sheiftyr did not hide her look of absolute disgust when she looked at him, she had two guards who accompanied her, but they were behind her and did not see. Loki shrank slightly in his seat.

Shiarpia was absent, she was sick, according to Rohundia, who wasn't looking too well herself.

"There's an illness going around in the city, she was supposed to meet me for lunch yesterday but had to cancel." Daenceia said, who was looking tired with dark circles under her eyes.

Loki sat slumped in his chair and tried to concentrate while Sheiftyr began to speak about transmutation. They had done reasonably well with their candles, and now she wanted them to try and change the candle into a stone pillar and back again.

Loki's effort was less than impressive, he had no heart for it, and he'd taken more than a few hard glares from the other students. Sheiftyr was a very popular teacher and they knew that her punishment had something to do with Loki.

"Good Loki, ten." Sheiftyr said.

He sank in his seat. It was not a ten, it was barely even a five. She didn't want to mark him down because the King might punish her.

'I'm sorry.' He mouthed to her as Rohundia took her turn.

Sheiftyr's frowned in confusion, so did Loki, the Mask hadn't stopped him.

He opened his mouth to shout a warning but only managed a strangled noise as the Mask clamped back down.

"Are you alright Loki?" Sheiftyr asked as Daenceia fetched him some water.
"I'm fine." Loki's mouth said. "I just swallowed a bug."

Sheiftyr was still looking at him suspiciously. The Mask gave her a smug grin. "Shouldn't you be teaching?" It said.

Her face darkened and she went back to the head of the classroom.

They practiced changing the candles for an hour before moving on to some more theory. Loki spent his time trying to find a weakness in the Mask's defences. His candle was rubbish, but so was everyone's. The presence of the guards was upsetting people. More than once Sheiftyr had to ask Rohundia to pay attention, and Daenceia to stop looking out of the window. The other students were no better, and by lunchtime everyone was relieved to get away from the classroom.

Loki sat with Daenceia and Rohundia and tried to summon the enthusiasm to eat his roll.

"This is terrible." Rohundia said. "What even happened with her and the King?"

Loki looked at her in surprise.

"You don't know?" He asked.

"No one does." Daenceia said. "All we know is she has to work in the palace middens for *fifty* years."

Loki looked guilty.

"She said something in front of the King that he wasn't happy with." He said. "He punished her."

"She was glaring at you." Rohundia said. "Why?"

Loki waited for the Mask to make an excuse, but it stayed silent.

"I was there, I didn't stop him." He said. "But he's the King, I know I'm married to him, but I can't control him, I found out about it afterwards."

All technically true. He was saying a lot of technically true things lately.

'Good boy.' The Mask said. 'I'd hate to have to kill them.'

"Rohundia? Are you alright?" Daenceia asked.

"Yes, I'm just worried, I can't help but feel that something bad is going to happen." She said. "That or I'm getting the same thing Shiarpia has."

"Stay away from me if you are, I can't get sick, I'm too exhausted already," Daencia said. "I haven't been able to sleep for days."

"Our holidays were only a few weeks ago." Rohundia said sadly. I feel as though they never happened.”

"Why can't you sleep Daenceia?" Loki asked her, concerned.

She blushed like a sunset. "Oh, um, I've just had a lot on my mind now, since, um, it doesn't matter, I just have a lot to think about." She stammered.

Any other day Loki would have pursued it, asking and teasing until she broke and told him, but
today he was exhausted, and he only had the Mask to face that night.

It stayed mostly quiet for the afternoon, only warning him once or twice to keep his mouth shut. He tried writing a note begging for help, but the Mask knocked his inkwell all over it in a lightning fast movement.

That night, the Mask dressed in a golden robe, cinched tightly, with ‘demure’ green over-garments. It carefully did Loki’s hair so that it curled around his ears, and then went to dinner with the King.

‘Tonight you kill him Loki.’ It said as Loki struggled to gain control. ‘No more stalling, tonight you will kill him and the revolution will begin.’
Thirty Nine Steps

Chapter Summary

UnMasked

Like every other night since Musleen’s ‘accident’, dinner remained a solemn affair. The King was in no mood to do anything but worry, the Mask was determined to change his mind.

It sat Loki down in such a way that his leg brushed against the King’s when he moved, it shot him low, concerned glances and made sure to ‘innocently’ sip from Loki’s wine glass in such a way as to show off his throat.

By the end of the meal, there was no denying that the King was interested, but he still didn’t seem enthusiastic. He said goodnight to them all the same as the previous night.

Loki felt something akin to relief.

“Husband?” The Mask said, putting on its best ‘worried’ look. “May I speak to you please?”

For a moment Loki thought the King would decline and send him away, but instead he gestured for Loki to follow him.

“Come my darling, you may help me change for bed.” He said.

‘Big favour.’ The Mask said sarcastically to Loki.

Loki privately agreed, but did not say so. The Mask was the enemy. The Mask was keeping him from Thor.

It walked into the King’s bedroom and turned Loki’s wide eyes onto the King.

“I am just so worried about the thief, he got into Prince Musleen’s chambers, do you think he could get into anyone elses?” It said nervously.

The King smiled gently. “The guards are on high alert, they won’t let anything happen to us. They will catch the thief soon and there will be nothing to worry about.” He said soothingly.

The Mask smiled shyly. “I am silly to worry about it.” It said.

The King reached out and drew Loki into a hug. “Not at all, it is natural to worry, but you need not fear, they will find him.”

“May I...?” The Mask said and hesitated.

“You’re good.’ Loki conceded bitterly.

“May I stay here tonight?” It continued, biting Loki’s lip just a little. “I’d just feel safer with you.”

‘I cannot believe he’s falling for it.’ Loki thought as he struggled.
‘He’s a foolish old man. Of course he’s falling for it.’ The Mask said back to him, it sounded smug.

“Of course my darling, you may stay, come and help me dress for bed.” King Dimcken said.

The Mask helped undress the King before going to retrieve a nightshirt.

‘How do you want me to do it?’ It asked smugly as it collected the nightshirt from Hieddenyr.

‘What?’ Loki asked it. He managed to make his arm jerk, but the Mask clamped down.

‘None of that.’ It warned. ‘You’ve lost Loki, you fought me and lost, you can’t wear me down

enough to stop me, now, how do you want to do it? Now while he sits there naked? Or later, when

the palace is sleeping?’

‘I hate you.’ Loki hissed at it. ‘I hate you because you are not just taking me from Thor, or banishing

me from my home. You are making me fight to save a man I loathe, I man I wish would die, you are

making me save my rapist so that he may continue. I will *never* forgive you.’

The Mask was silent as it returned to the King and helped him into his nightclothes.

“I don’t have anything to wear.” It said softly. “Shall I send Fosxyr to fetch my nightshirt or shall I

sleep without one?”

There was the tiniest spark of interest in the King’s eyes. Loki wished that the man didn’t find him so

desirable, if only because he missed the obvious clue the Mask had accidentally dropped right then.

‘You said my nightshirt, not *a* nightshirt. Royalty have many types of many things.’ He said, more

to distract it from its plans than anything else.

‘Of course you do, you couldn’t possibly understand what it’s like to *work* for a living.’ The Mask

snapped.

Loki took the opportunity and tried to fling himself sideways, even the King could not ignore such a

violent move.

But the Mask’s control held, and it began to undress slowly in front of the King.

‘I’m going to punish you Loki, for trying to stop me, you are just another spoilt brat raised to believe

himself better than everyone else. I will make you mount the King one last time. In fact, I’ll kill him

while he’s inside of you, so you can feel *all* his struggles.’ It taunted.

Loki fought as hard as he could, but there was no sign of it on the outside. The Mask continued to

strip slowly, letting the King see everything without making it look obvious that it was showing itself

off. When Loki was naked, it walked towards where King Dimcken sat on the bed and slid into the

spot next to him.

“Shall we go to bed my Husband?” It asked.

Dimcken was still looking at Loki’s body, the lust was clear on his face.

‘See? All it took was a little teasing, even a worried man needs… comfort.’ The Mask said.

It tilted Loki’s head gently and leaned forwards. It brushed Loki’s lips just lightly against King

Dimcken’s.

“Husband?” It asked in a low voice. “Will you hold me tonight?”
King Dimcken gave in, he was already hardening, and apparently decided that Loki was what he needed.

He pushed Loki back against the bed and kissed him hard and wanting. The Mask gave a little moan and wrapped Loki’s legs around the King’s waist.

“Oh Husband.” It said breathlessly when King Dimcken released its lips. It looked deeply into the King’s eyes. “Take me.” It whispered.

They kissed like that for a few minutes more as Loki desperately fought to stop the Mask.

It was having none of it, and it suddenly rolled the King over onto his back and sat up playfully.

King Dimcken looked surprised, but the Mask looked at him with a little smile and wriggled on his lap.

The King moaned a little at the sensation. The Mask was still looking kind of shy and nervous, like it wanted to be adventurous but was still unsure.

The King laid his hands on Loki’s thighs and rubbed upwards. The Mask gave a little moan and lifted Loki up slightly. It reached for the King’s penis and wrapped his hand around it rubbing up and down as King Dimcken moaned in pleasure.

The Mask grinned in delight as it shifted up and sank Loki down on the King’s penis.

It began to ride the King, moaning and gasping in delight. It let out a few cries of delight as it rocked Loki’s hips back and forth.

“You’re disgusting.” Loki said.

The Mask just smiled. It was not a nice smile, not anymore.

It leaned forwards and latched both hands onto King Dimcken’s neck.

“Do you like that you disgusting old man?” It asked as it squeezed.

King Dimcken’s face changed as his air was cut off. He reached out and tried to prise Loki’s hands away.

“I’ve been wanting to kill you for years.” It said. “I couldn’t believe my good fortune to be the one chosen to end *your* life. You sicken me, you are nothing but a helpless worm in my hands.” It chuckled.

King Dimcken was starting to turn red. Loki put all of his effort into fighting.

“Stop.” He gasped, out loud.

“No. He dies.” The Mask said.

Loki gave a cry of effort and lifted his right hand away from the King’s throat. He punched his own face as hard as he could.

“Stop it you little shit.” The Mask growled as it struggled to keep the pressure on the King’s neck.

“No, you can’t kill him!” Loki said, trying to fight it.
“You can’t stop me now.” The Mask hissed.

With only Loki’s left hand on his throat, King Dimcken managed to lift it away briefly, gasping hugely as he did so.

“Hel-“ His voice was cut off as the Mask clamped the hand back onto the King’s neck.

“I won’t let you.” Loki said.

“You can’t stop it.” The Mask said.

Loki took a deep breath. “HELP!” He screamed.

The Mask howled in anger and got both hands back on King Dimcken’s neck.

The King pulled an odd kind of face, and then Loki felt a familiar sensation inside of him. All his wriggling as he fought the Mask had caused the King to spill.

It laughed manically as it realised what had happened. “Oh what fun for you Loki! I bet they won’t even let you clean up before they kill you!”

Loki tried hard to fight it but the Mask was too strong, the King was turning purple.

Strong hands grabbed Loki’s arms and pulled him backwards. The Mask let out a cry of protest as Loki was lifted off the King and dragged across the room.

“No!” The Mask screamed. “I will kill him, I will KILL HIM!”

Loki was slammed painfully back into a chair by Hieddenyr and Fosxyr. They forced his hands behind his back and held him tightly.

“Your Majesty, please, his sash, we must tie him.” Fosxyr said as he struggled.

King Dimcken picked up the sash that had tied Loki’s long robe at the waist and handed it over to where Loki still thrashed.

“I’ll kill you all! You are all a part of the problem! You must all die!” The Mask screamed as Hieddenyr tightened the knot.

“That’s not Loki’s voice.” Fosxyr said.

“It sounds like him.” Hieddenyr said carefully.

“No, it’s his mouth but listen, he has a Vanir accent.” Fosxyr said.

The Mask just glared at them.

“You are all filth.” It spat.

“Someone fetch a mage.” King Dimcken said as Hieddenyr draped a robe over his shoulders. Fosxyr fetched a blanket and carefully wrapped it around Loki to preserve his modesty.

‘They’re on to you now.’ Loki said.

“So what?” The Mask spat back. “You’ll still never see your precious Thor again.”

“They will find you.” Loki answered. “And when they do they’ll execute you.”
“Now that sounds like Loki.” Fosxyr said. He was watching very carefully from a safe distance.

The Mask spat at him, but he was too far back and it hit the floor.

Horseen arrived forty minutes later at a run. He was out of breath and struggling to carry his equipment. He was also not alone.

“This is Polweren Your Majesty.” He said. “He is a very powerful mage working with the mind. If there’s a spell in play he can find it.”

“Do it.” The King said.

Polweren set up a cauldron and began to brew a potion. “It’s a cleansing draught, Your Majesty.” He explained. “It will force the presence to remove itself from the host body.”

It took the better part of an hour, with the Mask alternating between silently glaring and screaming profanities at them all for being ‘enablers’ of the old regime.

But finally it was ready.

“If there is a spell on him, this will hurt him.” Polweren said. “But it won’t cause lasting harm.”

King Dimcken nodded. His face was stern and frightening. “Do it.” He said.

They all watched closely as Polweren poured a little of the potion onto Loki’s skin.

It burned. It burned like fire and he screamed in agony as he felt the spell being torn apart. This was no careful undoing, this was slaughter. Loki and the Mask screamed together as they were cleansed from one another.

Taking advantage of Loki’s open mouth, Polweren grabbed his jaw and forced more of the potion down Loki’s throat.

He thought his world would explode into pain. There was nothing *but* pain. But behind it all, he felt something leaving, something screaming ever more faintly, as the Mask was torn from him.

Loki stopped screaming and came to a stuttering, whimpering halt. The Mask was gone, he could feel it.

“Your Majesty?” He asked in a voice that sounded raw. “I’m so sorry, are you alright?”

The room relaxed slightly.

“We still need to find out who it was.” Fosxyr said carefully.

“Whoever it is, they will be unable to wake, their mind will have been destroyed by the spell.” Polweren said.

The King was watching Loki carefully. He seemed thoughtful.

“Everyone leave us.” He said quietly.
Everyone filed out quickly, leaving Loki, still naked and tied to the chair, alone with the King.

“Are you alright?” King Dimcken asked carefully.

Loki nodded slowly. “I’m sorry.” He said again. “I tried to fight it.”

King Dimcken had to believe him, if he didn’t, Loki would never see Asgard again.

The King was nodding.

“How long did it have control over you?” He asked.

“On the way back from the hunt.” Loki said. “It started then.”

“And do you remember anything after that?” The King asked, still watching Loki carefully.

Loki realised with a start that the King was *embarrassed*. But why? Oh, the Mask had played at a boy in love and the King had *fallen* for it. He’d happy deceived himself that Loki had fallen in love rather than realise something was horribly wrong.

Loki was disgusted to think that he’d learned anything from the Mask, but it was true, he had. Sometime you had to get creative with the truth, especially when you wanted to manipulate the King.

“I could see things when it was weak.” He said. “It saved its energy when I was alone, or with a crowd of people, so I could see what it was doing, but sometimes it would block me out entirely.”

“When did it do that?” King Dimcken asked, just a little too quickly.

“Whenever I was going to see you.” Loki said. “The last time I remember talking to you alone was on the last night of the hunt.”

The King nodded slowly, he looked relieved. Loki took a deep breath, there were things he had to say, even though it was not going to be pleasant, for anyone.

“It told me that once you were dead, Dorgen would do what they wanted or he’d be taken care of. And, Husband, Your Majesty… it attacked Musleen, he knew something was wrong and it tried to kill him.”

There, it was said.

The King looked very, very old.

“I have ruled this kingdom for most of my life.” He said. “I have never faced such a cowardly attack.”

He walked to the door and summoned everyone back inside.

“We must put a watch on Dorgen.” He said. “They have some way of controlling him, we may need more of the potion.”

They nodded seriously.

“Your Majesty?” Loki said tentatively. He couldn’t offer much but there was one thing he did know, one thing the Mask would never have let him say. “Eir, the head healer of Asgard. I can make no promises, but she has healed wounds like Musleen’s before. In the training yard, accidents happen.”
“I shall send for her.” Loki was surprised that the King didn’t argue or dismiss the suggestion that an Aesir healer could help, but apparently he’d had enough shocks for the night and was willing to go along with it.

Fosxyr came over and stood by Loki.

“May I untie His Grace, Your Majesty?” He asked.

“Yes.” King Dimcken said. He sounded exhausted, in fact, Loki reflected, he probably was.

“Tell Musleen’s guards everything.” King Dimcken said. “Have them track down the culprit, and find out why they believe my son will do their bidding.”

“Yes Your Majesty.” Hieddenyr said and left the room.

Fosxyr untied Loki and went to grab his robe. “You need to rest Your Grace, you have been badly harmed by all this.” He said.

“Loki.” King Dimcken said. “I am sorry we did not take better care of you.”

Loki had a moment where he felt utterly torn. On the one hand he was glad the King clearly did not blame him, on the other, more damage had been done by the King himself than by the Mask.

“Thank you Your Majesty.” He said.

“Call me Husband.” King Dimcken corrected.

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said.

He had no Mask to protect him now, he was on his own.

Maybe that’s why he still felt so scared.
Fosxyr took Loki back to the queen's chambers. He had Wraenyr fill the bath, had Canrryen make some Vanaheim tea and settled Loki into bed.

Then he stood there and waited.

Loki stared back at him for a moment.

"I'm alright Fosxyr." He said. "It's over now."

Fosxyr looked at him, unconvinced.

Loki stared back at him in a kind of confusion, he was fine, it was over, the King wasn't dead, the King...wasn't...dead...

His face crumpled and he started to sob.

Fosxyr moved quickly to sit on the bed by Loki's side and hugged him gently.

"Oh Loki, let it out, that's it." He said, stroking Loki's hair. "You've had a terrible time, it's okay to be upset, just let it all out."

Loki did. He couldn't *stop* it, now that it had begun. He'd fought and fought and fought and why? To save a man he hated, to keep on living a life he loathed and feared. It wasn't fair.

After a little while, he managed to get his sobs down to the occasional hiccup. Fosxyr stayed by his side as he stuttered to a halt.

Canrryen stuck his head around the door.

"Your Grace, Lord Eadgleyr is here, he requests permission to see you." He said.

Loki nodded.

"In here." He said.

He didn't feel like getting up.

Lord Eadgleyr came in a moment later, he was dressed, but his clothes were slightly rumpled, as though he had pulled them on in a hurry.

"Loki baby." He said, holding out his arms as he came closer.

Fosxyr vacated the spot by Loki's head and Lord Eadgleyr replaced him.

"My poor baby." He said again and took up stroking Loki’s hair. "I was told about it. How are you
coping?"

Loki had to smother another sob. He wasn't coping, not at all.

He wrapped his arms around Lord Eadgleyr's waist and gave in to the impulse to be a child again.

"I can't sleep." He said. "It was horrible, all of it, I couldn't stop it."

"From what I hear you delayed it, and shouted out a warning." Lord Eadgleyr said. "That was very brave."

Loki buried his face in his grandmother's side. "I didn't want to stop it." He whispered, so low he wasn't sure that Lord Eadgleyr had heard.

But he had.

"Then you were even braver." He said softly. "That would have taken great strength."

Loki had never thought about it like that before. He wasn't entirely certain that it helped.

"I don't feel strong, I just want to go home." He said.

"You are very strong my dear boy, and brave and clever and all manner of things." Lord Eadgleyr said. "You remind me of your grandfather, although I trust you have not inherited his foolishness."

"Where is he?" Loki asked, looking up with a frown.

Lord Eadgleyr sighed a weary sort of a sigh. "In the dungeons." He said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What?!" Loki exclaimed, sitting up.

"He got into an argument with the King. Apparently, you weren't acting like yourself and he thought you may have been under a spell. The King disagreed and there was a great deal of shouting. He may have called the King a blind idiot, but that's just speculation at this point." Lord Eadgleyr continued.

Loki just stared at him.

"How is he not dead?" He asked, a little fearfully.

"Well he's so often right you see, the King knows that, and besides, they really are friends, at least, they were." This last part was said with a dark look at Loki. The friendship, it appeared, had been severed by his arrival. "They've known each other since they were children, they fought then, they fight now. I imagine he'll be let out soon. At least these days the King lets him take a coat." Lord Eadgleyr said.

He started stroking Loki's brow again. "Try to sleep dear, you look exhausted."

Loki realised that he was. All the excitement and energy he'd expended had left a price to pay.

"I don't want to." He said, already struggling to keep his eyes open.

"I'll stay with you if you like." Lord Eadgleyr offered. "I'll be right here."

It was comforting, and Loki found he was reminded of his mother's gentle ways. His eyes closed,
and a few minutes later he was asleep.

Fosxyr appeared by the side of the bed.

"If Your Lordsir is to stay, would you like anything, a drink?" He asked.

"Some tea please Fosxyr, and thank you for sending someone to fetch me." Lord Eadgleyr said with a smile.

"At once Your Lordsir." Fosxyr said. "And it was no trouble."

"Just as it was no trouble to come and tell us your observations?" Lord Eadgleyr said gently. "Thank you for taking such good care of him, and if you ever need a Lord on your side, know that we are in your debt."

Fosxyr bowed deeply. "I hope I never need call upon it, but thank you Your Lordsir." he said, and went to make the tea.

As Loki slept...

...Eir arrived three hours after the message was sent, she went straight to the healer's wing with her stones and potions. Two hours later, Prince Musleen's neck was healed, and the bruising on his brain was much reduced. She made no guarantees, but continued to watch over him as he slept a normal sleep.

...King Dimcken dressed in his warmest robes and made his way down to the dungeons. He stood on the outside of a dark, stone-lined cell and looked through the bars at where Lord Fallconyr sat.

Lord Fallconyr raised an eyebrow in inquiry.

"You were correct." King Dimcken said. He sounded as though he was chewing a lemon.

"I am sorry for my language." Lord Fallconyr said, sounding as though he was anything but.

"You were blunt but fair." The King conceded, begrudgingly. "We are trying to track the perpetrators now."

"Prince Musleen's guards are doing the investigation I take it?" Lord Fallconyr asked.

"Yes, they are quite determined to find out who it was." The King answered.

"And my grandson, is he well after his ordeal?"

"He is in his chambers, your wife is with him."

"Good, he will be fine tonight then. But I ask you now, may we have him to stay with us for a little while? A few weeks in the country with family would be good for him."

The King looked annoyed.

"I do not want him to feel as though he is unwanted after such an incident, it wasn't his fault."
"I doubt he will feel rejected by you." Lord Fallconyr said, his voice a fraction too calm. "If it concerns you, perhaps you could buy him a present to show your... care, that way he can go without feeling as though you blame, or wish to punish, him."

"That is a good idea." King Dimcken conceded in an irritated tone. "A week?"

"Three, at least. A nice long break while you find those responsible. He cannot go back to the Tower until you are sure that no one there is of the Resistance, he may as well get some country air."

King Dimcken sighed. "Very well, I will give him something nice, and you can host him in the country while he recovers." He said. "He must be back for my birthday celebrations, it will look odd if my Consort is not here for the feast."

"If he leaves the day after tomorrow, he can have three full weeks and still be back in time." Lord Fallconyr said.

"His father may well question our ability to keep him safe." King Dimcken reluctantly confessed.

"I'm sure he will be most satisfied with your investigation." Lord Fallconyr soothed.

"Yes, yes he will be, we will be quite thorough." King Dimcken said.

He pulled a familiar ring of keys from his belt and unlocked the cell.

"Thank you Your Majesty." Lord Fallconyr said as he rose and left the cell. "Although if I may make a suggestion? A few cushions to comfort my aching bones would be greatly appreciated next time."

"You are certain there will be a next time?" The King said as they walked back up the stairs together.

"Quite." Lord Fallconyr answered, with great dignity.

...Sheiftyr was woken in the middle of the night and ordered to hand over her list of students and their abilities. She was questioned for hours, but released. Once freed she made her way to Horseen's residence and banged on the door until he let her in.

"I was sleeping, you know." He said grumpily. "It's been quite a night, and I will need my rest for tomorrow, when they start making arrests."

"You are sure they will find them that quickly?" She asked.

"Them? I thought it was only one." He said.

Sheiftyr rolled her eyes. "If the Resistance was a single person there would be nothing to worry about. They have power, unfortunately. These young people have no understanding of politics, or protection. Many have been caught up in a wave of enthusiasm, I worry that it is those youths who will be found, not the real culprits, who will continue to convert the minds of the youth."

"If they are converted then they are the enemy, Sheiftyr. Go home, get some rest, we will all be needed in the morning I feel. I know you care for your students, but if they are involved in this then they must be punished." He said.

Sheiftyr pulled a face. "It's not right." She said.
"Are you angry because one or more of your students may face punishment or because one student in particular has been badly violated and you did not see it?" Horseen said, demonstrating that while his magic was not overly strong, his ability to read people was first rate.

She sighed, defeated. "I should have seen it, he wasn't himself, but I thought all those pretty clothes and things had turned his head. Such finery can be the undoing of a person, especially a young person." She confessed.

"He was far from affected once cleansed, I think that he will forgive you if you apologise." Horseen said.

She nodded. "I am sorry to have disturbed you." She said.

Horseen shook his head. "It is of no matter, but we must both rest."

"Yes." Sheiftyr said. "I am sorry again, I will go."

She saw herself out, and went to bed hoping that none of her students would be so foolish as to have tried to murder the King and frame the King's Consort.

...Musleen's guards interviewed all of Sheiftyr's students who had a talent for mind magic, that is, all but one. The one they did not... could not be woken.

By the time the sun rose over Vanaheim and Loki finally woke from his exhausted slumber, three people had been arrested for their part in the attack.

Fosxyr came over to him as he sat eating breakfast with Lord Eadgleyr, who true to his word had remained with him, and Lord Fallconyr, who had arrived during the night.

"Your Grace, I have news of a distressing nature." Fosxyr said gently. "The one controlling you has been found. It was Rohundia Noonesdotter."

Loki froze in shock. "Rohundia?" He echoed. "But, but she was my friend." He looked down and swallowed hard. "I thought she was." He said softly.

Lord Eadgleyr reached out and rubbed Loki's back gently. "I am sorry you have been so betrayed Loki." He said.

"She lies in state in the dungeons while they decide what to do." Fosxyr said. "Her mind was destroyed by the cleansing spell. There are two with her, they were trying to wake her and attacked the guards when they arrived.

"What of her parents?" Loki asked suddenly. "Are they alright?" Then his face darkened. "Were they a part of it?" He asked.

"Her parents cannot be found." Fosxyr said. "It appears she was a prostitute working in the slums from quite a young age, she had a talent for magic but could not afford to attend the Tower. The Resistance paid for her to go, and in exchange, she helped them by taking control of you."

"That's not fair." Loki said. "She was one of the strongest in the class, she should have been allowed to study for free if she couldn't afford it. Instead she was found by the wrong crowd, but the only one
to give her an option."

"That as it may be. According to the reports, the Resistance ordered her to get close to you as soon as they realised that you would be attending classes at the Tower." Fosxyr said. "She did everything they asked Loki, she never said no."

Loki frowned. "Maybe she thought she didn't have a choice." He said.

"Maybe." Lord Eadgleyr agreed, although privately Loki was the only one on the table who really thought that to be a possibility.

"They are to go on trial today. The two men have confessed enough to be sentenced." Fosxyr said. "And the investigation continues even now for others."

Loki sagged in his seat. "Do I have to be there?" He asked.

"I'm sorry Your Grace but you do." Fosxyr said gently. "I will go and get your bath ready."

He left Loki alone with his grandparents.
A Present and an Old Friend

Loki sat in the courthouse next to the King, who was looking stern. He had makeup on again, and his clothes were dark and serious.

The two men were brought in and made to kneel before the Judges and the two thrones.

"You have confessed." The Head Judge said. "You have confessed to the crimes of aiding an attack on the King, aiding an attack on the King's Consort, attacking the royal guards, and rebellion."

The two men were looking defiant. Loki realised that they were quite young, about the age of Camtan and Musleen.

"Your sentence is as follows." The Head Judge said. "You will be executed by hanging and your bodies to be left at the execution ground for the wolves."

One of the men forced his way onto his feet.

"The revolution will not be stopped! You are all a part of the sickness! We are the cure! We will be victorious!" He screamed.

They were dragged to the side by the guards and the yelling man muzzled. Loki wanted so badly for it to be over.

Then Rohundia was brought in.

She lay as if sleeping on a stretcher. She was still in the dress she'd worn that day at the Tower. Loki bit his lip and looked away. He did not want to think about how he had been betrayed.

He glanced back and saw the King’s mistake.

She looked as though she was sleeping, lying still with her soft curls falling about her face and her hands linked on top of her body. To the eyes of the crowd she was beautiful. Loki may have been young, but even he could see that before the day was out the Resistance would turn her into a symbol of their cause.

She looked so peaceful, and yet he could remember the voice of the Mask in his head. It had been so *angry*, it hurt to think that she had been holding such hatred inside of her.

"Rohundia Noonesdotter." The Judge announced. "We, the judges of the court, have been assured that she will never wake again. Her actions have destroyed her mind. Therefore we sentence her to be executed by magic. Her heart is to be stopped and she is to be left for the wolves with her comrades."

Loki swallowed hard. He wanted to hate her, he *had* hated the Mask. It had certainly hated him, but there was a part of him that still thought of her as his friend, the sheer difference between
Rohundia and the Mask made it seem almost impossible that they were one.

But the proof was right before him. Her mind had been torn apart by the cleansing spell, she was working with the Resistance, she had been ordered to get close to him. It turned out that she was a master of deception.

It still hurt.

The court was closed immediately afterwards. The people went back to their homes and the royal family went back to the palace. Loki was miserable, but he tried to hide it in front of the King. He was certain that King Dimcken would not understand his sadness at losing what he thought was a friend.

Unfortunately, without the Mask to help him he was far too open.

"You are unhappy my darling." King Dimcken said, pinning Loki with a look.

Loki looked guilty. "I am glad justice has been done Husband." He said.

"No one blames you my dear, no one at all." The King said. "I promise you that."

"I know Husband." Loki said, wondering where the King was heading with his line of conversation.

"I have something for you when we get back to the palace. I arranged it this morning." The King said.

Loki tried to smile, he knew he was failing. "What is it Husband?" He asked instead.

"You'll have to wait and see." King Dimcken said with a twinkle in his eye that made Loki want to shudder, his smile was more genuine than Loki's.

It was a horse. A proper riding horse, tall and strong.

"I know you are still learning to ride, but the stable master tells me you are getting better every day." King Dimcken said. "So I want you to have a horse of your own. This one used to be a warhorse, although he was injured and cannot gallop or jump anymore, but he is perfect for palace riding."

Loki reached out and touched the horse's nose. "What is his name?" He asked, too glad to have a horse of his own to worry about it being an injured one.

"Lightning." King Dimcken said. "He fought in the recent conflict with the troll invasion of Niflheim."

Thor had fought in that battle. He'd led a section of the army himself and come back positively glowing with the feeling of victory.

Loki had not been allowed to participate. He was too young, Odin had said. Hunting was one thing but a proper battle was no place for a child, even one only a few years from manhood.

Lightning had fought on the same battlefield as Thor. He was perfect.

"I love him, thank you Husband." he said.

King Dimcken grinned nervously. "I'm glad you like him." He said. "There was something else I
wanted to tell you." He said in a kind of rush.

Loki paused with his hand on Lightning’s nose.

"Yes Husband?" He asked, a little nervous.

"I thought it might be best for you to spend some time in the country to recover from your ordeal." King Dimcken said. "Your grandfather has asked me if he might host you at his country estate for a few weeks, I have said yes."

Loki stared at him, he couldn't hide his shock. He was going to be allowed to leave the palace? To go to the country? Without the King?!

"This isn't a punishment Loki my sweet, you are not being banished, you know no one blames you for anything." King Dimcken said, pulling Loki into his arms.

If ever there was a time when Loki would actually by willing to hug the King, this hug was the closest to it. Closest, but not close enough, he still found it disgusting.

Loki was confused, did the King *really* think he was upset about this? Apparently he did.

"I understand Husband." He said. "I know the peace of the country is good for regaining a settled mind." He said.

King Dimcken smiled as he pulled back. "Yes my darling, exactly. It's only three weeks, you will be back just before my birthday."

Loki made himself smile. "Thank you Husband, for the horse, and for allowing me time to recover."

Of course you must recover, you were attacked my dear." King Dimcken said, stroking Loki’s hair and tucking an errant strand behind his ear.

Loki suddenly remembered that the King would have his own injuries.

"Are you well Husband?" He asked. "Your neck...?"

"Is fine my dear, I was attended by the healers last night. There is no damage."

"I'm glad to hear that." Loki said. In truth he was disappointed that the King hadn't suffered even a mild injury. Chances were it was the last time Loki would ever be able to injure him and get away with it.

"You can ride Lightning to your grandfather's estate."

"Yes Husband, I hope he is doing better." Loki said.

"That is what I am hoping to hear." King Dimcken confessed as they walked to the healer's wing.

They were met halfway by one of the healer's apprentices, she was out of breath and threw herself into a quick curtsy.

“What is it?” King Dimcken asked, worry evident in his voice.

“Your Majesty, Your Grace, the Prince Musleen has woken briefly, I was sent to find and tell you.” She burst out.
King Dimcken broke into a run, Loki jogged beside him.

Eir was in the healer’s chambers, and a warm smile broke out on her face when she saw Loki. Then her gaze travelled to the King and she lowered her head and bowed.

"How is my son?" King Dimcken asked.

She smiled happily at him. "He woke not ten minutes ago for a few seconds." She said. "Which is a normal stage of the recovery process, he asked after you, Your Majesty, he said he had to tell you something important, but then he fell asleep again."

King Dimcken nodded seriously. "I would see him." He said. "You stay here Loki, he shouldn't see you until he is well enough to understand what has happened."

Loki nodded. "I understand, I will stay here with Eir." He said.

King Dimcken nodded and headed further inside.

Loki was left alone with Eir.

"Loki, how are you?" She asked.

Loki thought about all that had happened to him.

"Well." He said, deciding that any complaints might find their way back to Odin. "I am well, and you? Groa? Everyone? Mother writes to me but there is so much that never makes it into a letter."

She laughed. "I am well, less busy now with you here and Thor travelling. Groa is still teaching, she has a new student, a lovely young girl with a talent for summoning fire."

Loki smiled one of his rare genuine smiles. "I miss you all so much." He said.

It was clear that Eir had no idea of the trauma Loki was being subjected to by the King. It occurred to Loki that the people of Asgard probably believed his marriage to be purely political, and expected that he was more or less on holiday in the Vanir Court until King Dimcken’s death.

He wondered if Odin had thought the same or if he had been aware of King Dimcken’s sexual appetite and sent his son anyway. It didn’t matter now, Loki was trapped here until the end, Odin wasn’t the only one bound by his thrice sworn oath.

“And have you been practising your healing magics?” Eir asked him.

Loki shook his head. “I am taking classes in illusion and transmutation.” He said.

Eir tutted and sighed. “You shouldn’t let it slide Loki, One day when you are off with Thor adventuring, you will need those talents, trust me.”

Something about the way she spoke made Loki’s heart give a nervous leap.

“What happened?” He asked, unable to hide his fear.

“He and those friends of his came back in a hurry, three of them suffered blisters in a very unfortunate place, a curse on the castle they were raiding while trying to find this ‘Emerald’ Thor insists is real.” Eir said.

“I will ask about healing magic.” Loki promised her seriously. “Honestly, you can’t leave Thor alone
for a minute, can you?”

He joked to cover his unease, what if Thor had been unable to return to Asgard? What if he was badly injured without Loki there to help him?

Oblivious to Loki’s feelings, Eir sat and chatted about the people back in Asgard for about ten minutes before the King returned from visiting his son. Then Loki said a fond goodbye, and left to go and pack for a stay in the country.
Forty Two Steps

Chapter Summary

A Stay in the Country

King Dimcken insisted that Loki take Fosxyr as his personal servant while he was gone. Lord Fallconyr raised no objection.

King Dimcken made Loki promise that he would only ride when properly supervised. Loki promised.

King Dimcken insisted the Loki pack enough clothes for three months, rather than three weeks, as he might get cold, or hot, or he might go outside, or stay in. Wraenyr and Fosxyr did so immediately.

King Dimcken sent for the head healer to make sure that Loki was completely recovered physically from his ordeal. She pronounced him to be in perfect health.

King Dimcken stood on the steps of the palace and spent ten minutes kissing Loki goodbye. Loki endured it.

Then, finally, he was free. Actually, totally, completely free, for three whole weeks.

Loki rode in the carriage with his grandparents. As much as he longed to ride, it was impolite not to sit with them for the journey. Lightning was being led by one of their guardsmen on horseback, and Loki was hoping that he would be able to ride while he was away.

His enormous luggage was being pulled behind in a cart. Only the essentials were with him, placed on top of the coach, including the box containing Thor's knife. Loki had made sure it was packed, taking it out briefly and running one finger down the handle as he thought about his far away lover.

Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr were in good spirits. They told jokes, pointed out features of the landscape and, occasionally, leaned into one another in a way that made Loki feel his faith in love rekindle.

It *was* possible to love someone for all of their long lifetime.

The route to the lands of Lord Fallconyr was to the east. They drove on the highway road for hours through huge swaths of farmland.

"Those are the fields that feed the palace and, to some extent, the city." Lord Eadgleyr said. "In another few hours we will pass the last of them and enter the meadows. It will still be just light enough to see the flowers. We will be travelling all night my dear. Normally we would stop at the couching inn, but..." He trailed off and shared a look with his husband.

"We don't want the King changing his mind." Lord Fallconyr said bluntly. "We want to be well away, so we're stopping just long enough to change the horses and we will continue. I hope you don't mind sleeping in the coach?"

"No, not at all." Loki said, a hint of his old mischievous smile just starting at the corners of his
He could already feel the tension of the last few days in particular draining away. He looked out of the window again and watched the farmland pass by. This was perfect.

Loki's grandparents fell asleep long before he did, they had eaten a picnic-like dinner in the coach just after changing the horses and were now both snoring lightly in their seats.

Loki rested his head against the cushioned chair of the coach and tried to sleep. He gently closed his eyes...

...and stood at the foot of Thor's sleeping mat in the centre of yet another forest. Thor was awake, and smiled as he saw Loki standing there.

"You look happy." Thor said softly, as though he was afraid he would break the dream if he spoke too loudly.

"I have three weeks away from him." Loki said, kneeling at the foot of Thor's bed. "I have met our grandparents and they are wonderful. You should find out from mother why she never let us meet them."

"I shall do." Thor said. "I promise you I shall."

Loki laughed, the sound echoing through the air. "It is not a quest my love, you do not have to be so solemn." He said.

Thor looked at him seriously. "A request from you is everything. I would conquer the nine realms if you asked it."

"Such power." Loki teased, feeling as though, in this place, he could be the person he used to be, the person he had lost in a single, hard, thrust.

"I love you." Thor said simply.

Loki felt tears prick his eyes at the words. "I love you too." He said, knowing as he did that, as simple as it sounded, he was really saying so much more. "You have my heart." He whispered.

"And you mine." Thor responded, even as he faded from view.

Loki reached out a hand to try and touch him, try and hold on to him for just a little longer, but the image faded, and Thor was gone.

Loki opened his eyes and looked around him. The coach was still traveling along at a steady pace, and Loki's grandparents were still asleep opposite him.

Early morning light was creeping in through the window. Loki pulled the curtain back so that it shined on his face, while keeping his grandparents in shadow.

The land outside was full of flowers. The meadows of Vanaheim were beautiful in the summer, with carpet after carpet of bright colours waving gently in the breeze. Loki realised that he was smiling. He felt so *light*, it was wonderful.
They stopped for breakfast and ate a little way from the road on blankets set out among the flowers. Lord Fallconyr had a stiff neck from the night and Lord Eadgleyr sat behind him and rubbed it for him.

Loki felt vaguely guilty about it, if it weren't for him then they would have spent the night fast asleep in a proper bed. Lord Fallconyr couldn't walk without his cane, and Lord Eadgleyr had that thin look people got when they aged, he looked very twig-like.

Despite this, they both insisted that they were fine, and after breakfast they all got back into the coach to continue their travel.

"We should reach the castle by late evening." Lord Eadgleyr said to Loki as they got underway again.

"Castle?" Loki asked. "You live in a castle?"

"My family have been in these lands for quite a long time." Lord Fallconyr said, with just a slight trace of boasting in his voice. "Back when Vanaheim was broken up into kingdoms, my family were the local rulers. They were quite powerful too."

Lord Eadgleyr rolled his eyes, but he was smiling.

"They were eventually conquered by the King's family." Lord Fallconyr continued. "My great grandfather was allowed to keep his lands as a Lord, as were all the other rulers. We were the biggest of them, which I do love reminding people of when they treat me like a dodderly old fool."

Loki suppressed a giggle.

"Don't do it lad, never treat the elderly like they're old, they don't like it." Lord Fallconyr said with authority. "Everything you've ever thought of, I've thought of first, every trick you've ever played, every 'new' idea 'new' courting technique or 'new' plan you've ever had, I've tried it, at least once."

"I'll remember that." Loki promised.

It was early afternoon when the fields changed and Loki noticed something in the air.

"Can I smell tea?" He asked, inhaling deeply.

"Yes. Those are our fields." Lord Fallconyr said proudly. "We grow all the different types, and the air here is permanently scented, you'll hardly notice it after a while."

"I want to notice it, it's lovely." Loki said.

He looked out of the window and saw someone riding in the distance. For a split second his heart gave a leap, as it looked just like Thor. But then his head caught up with him, and he made himself settle.

The rider came closer, he was going at a canter as he inspected the fence he was riding alongside. Then he looked up and saw the coach. He was just close enough for Loki so see him grin.

"That's Haewkyr." Lord Fallconyr said, catching sight of him as he urged the horse into a gallop. "He's the son of our eldest son, and manages the western fields for us."
"He's coming closer." Lord Eadgleyr observed.

Both of them raised their hands and waved in greeting. Loki did likewise.

Haewkyr came close enough for Loki to get a good look at his face. He was not surprised that he's heart had been tricked, the man was big, blond, and had Thor's wide grin.

'So that's where he got it.' Loki thought.

Well he knew full well it couldn't have come from Odin.

Haewkyr swerved away again, alongside another fence, and Loki realised something else about him that reminded him of Thor.

He was riding astride.

He was *wearing pants and riding astride*.

Loki sat back, he was feeling strangely giddy. Maybe *he* could ride astride while he was here? After all Lightning was a trained warhorse, albeit unable to gallop, but still, *he'd* be used to an astride saddle, so maybe Loki could actually ride properly?

Except that he didn't have any pants. His only pair was in his dressing room at the palace, carefully rubbed to remain soft and pliable, but not in a position to help him here.

Maybe he could borrow a pair? If he asked nicely surely they wouldn't say no.

It was with a great deal of suppressed excitement that Loki sat back and watched the fields pass by for the rest of the afternoon.

The castle, when Loki saw it, was on a hill, with cliffs on all but one side. It was built of large stone blocks that looked dark blue in the fading light. The outer wall was quite large, built to hold a whole township when danger threatened, and as the carriage passed under the gate, Loki saw signs of ancient battles carved into the thick blocks.

The keep, the centre of the castle and the oldest part, was a large square building with what looked like four floors. Around it were other, later, buildings in three distinctly different styles.

"The Keep was built by my ancestors when they first conquered this land." Lord Fallconyr said as the coach rattled up to the courtyard. There was a large crowd gathered there to greet them. "The building to the south was added five centuries later, because my ancestor married and she didn't like the Keep, too cold." He continued. "If you are interested in the history of your ancestral home, there are a few budding historians among the family, who would love to give you a tour."

"I would like that." Loki said, as the coach rolled to a stop.

They climbed out of the carriage and stood before the gathered crowd.

“Father! Mother! Welcome home.” Greeted a cheery-looking man with ruddy cheeks and a pleasing manner.

He was talking from his knees. Loki looked about at the kneeling crowd in confusion until he caught Lord Fallconyr's eye. The Lord made a rising gesture with his hand and Loki remembered in a flash that he outranked all of them.

“Please rise.” He said hurriedly. “And please don’t kneel like that again, I’m here to meet my family,
not make them bow down.”

The crowd rose, most of them were grinning.

“So this is Asgard Two.” Said one man of about Loki’s age.

“Asgard Two?” Loki questioned.

“I heard Asgard One was a bit of a fighter, and that he likes his hammer.” Said the man.

“Spaottyen, stop teasing Loki.” Lord Eadgleyr said with a smile.

“You’re a bit dark in the hair there, common in Asgard is it?” Spaottyen continued, ignoring his grandmother.

“Not really.” Loki said nervously, “But Odin’s family has many different kinds of ancestors, I guess I must take after one of them.”

Spaottyen suddenly grinned. “I guess so, I think it looks good, like you’ve got built in charisma. Loki, the Raven Haired As from Asgard. Wait, no, that’s a silly title. Loki: The Cunning, no, Loki: Raventongue. No, wait – “

“Ignore the idiot.” Said another of Loki’s cousins. “He *will* try to make you into a single word description of yourself, it’s his latest phase.”

“I would resent that so much more if it wasn’t true.” Spaottyen shot back.

Loki found his lips curling upwards into a smile.

“Come, Father, Mother, it’s getting late and you’ve had a long journey, dinner is on the table and your chamber is ready.” Said the same ruddy-cheeked man.

“This is your uncle, Owelyr.” Introduced Lord Fallconyr. “Our Eldest child and son.”

“I am pleased to meet you.” Loki said politely.

Owelyr bowed his head slightly in greeting. “And I you, nephew, and I you. Shall we go inside?”

The party headed into one of the many fine buildings and made their way to the dining hall.

Loki was seated among the others of his age. He had no objection and found that for the first time in a long time, he had a proper appetite. He sat and answered their questions about Asgard and asked more than a few of his own.

It wasn’t until dinner had ended, when Lords Fallconyr and Eadgleyr announced that they were ready for bed, that Loki realised he had no idea where he was to sleep.

The question was on his lips when the door opened and Haewkyr came striding in.

“Any left?” He asked, scanning the table.

“No, we knew you’d be late so we ate it all.” Said Spaottyen.

“He lies, there’s a plateful in the kitchen.” Said a girl named Kieteia.

Haewkyr nodded and left through a rear door, only to return a few moments later with an enormous
platter in his arms.

He walked the length of the table until he came to where Loki was sitting.

“Budge up.” He said.

Loki obediently shuffled across and let Haewkyr sit down.

“I saw you in the carriage.” He said. “Do you know how to ride?”

“I’m learning to ride side on.” Loki said. “But I can ride astride already.”

Haewkyr looked interested. “Can you jump?” He asked.

“Yes.” Loki answered, pleased that he wasn’t being judged or censured for his ability.

“Good, I’ll take you out riding in the fields sometime.” Haewkyr said, in such a matter of fact way that Loki was taken aback.

“You aren’t going to warn me to be careful?” He asked.

“Why would I do that? If you know how to ride, you know how to take care. Whether or not you do is up to you.” He said, shoving a huge mouthful of food into his mouth. “Has anyone shown you your room yet?” He asked, changing topics.

“We were leaving that to you.” Spaotyten said as the group managed to avoid eye contact. “You can give him the tour while you’re at it.”

“You are all lazy.” Haewkyr said easily and without malice. “Where’d you put him anyway?”

“In the guest room, we were going to put him in his mother’s old room but it turns out that the twins have been sleeping there for the last century, so the guest room it is.” Kieteia said.

After Haewkyr had finished his massive dinner, he showed Loki to his room for the next three weeks.

It was technically large, but felt cosy after the massive rooms at the palace. There was only one room, which contained the bed, and the bathing room, which was much smaller. His things were there already, thus was the nature of servant communication, and Fosxyr was waiting with a nightgown and a warm, overly-large smile.

“Good dinner?” He asked as Loki pulled the nightgown over his head.

“It was great, there are so many of them.” He said. “I’ve forgotten most of their names, and I’m normally so good at things like that.”

“You’ll learn them quickly enough I’m sure.” Fosxyr said. “Enjoy your time here Your Grace, relax and be lazy, or active, whatever you like. This is a holiday.”

Loki smiled, then grinned. It was a holiday. Three whole weeks. He had no doubt that it would go quite fast, but right now it was all ahead of him.

“Goodnight Fosxyr.” He said, sounding the most cheerful Fosxyr had ever heard him.
“Goodnight Your Grace.” Fosxyr said, and dimmed the lanterns to let Loki sleep.
Loki woke to the smell of the tea plants wafting through the window. As he lay there, enjoying the peaceful feel of the morning, he realised that his mother had woken up to this every day of her childhood. The thought made him smile.

Breakfast was a noisy affair at the dining hall. There plates were piled high with eggs and steak, good, solid food for a long day's worth of work.

"Are you coming out riding with me today?" Haewkyr asked him as he shoved down enough food to feed an army.

"I'd love to." Loki said.

"I'll be checking fences and mending them, if you come you might have to work." Haewkyr warned.

Loki grinned. "I'm not afraid of work." He said. "But I don't have any pants to wear for astride riding."

"I'll find you some." Haewkyr said. "There's always a pair around here, side saddle is not good enough for the kind of work we do here."

"Side saddle is fine Haewkyr, just because you've never managed it doesn't make it bad." One of the men teased.

Haewkyr rolled his eyes. "Discrimination." He said. "Just because I finally have someone on my side you all decide to gang up on me. *I'm* going out to check the south-west fences. Loki is coming with me, as soon as I find him a pair of pants. The decision has been made."

Loki was grinning into his eggs as they bantered around him. He felt welcome, and like he'd found a home.

After breakfast, Haewkyr disappeared and then returned, holding a pair of slightly worn pants that sat loosely on Loki's hips.

They saddled up the horses and mounted up. Loki felt a ridiculous level of elation as he swung his leg over the saddle, instead of trying to settle himself awkwardly sideways.

Haewkyr led the way down the slope of the castle and then down southern path and off into the fields. Loki followed him, easily handling Lightning as if he'd never stopped riding.

It took a few hours of riding, but eventually they reached the first fence. The day was warm, and Loki yanked his robe off the second he dismounted. It bunched around his waist anyway. Haewkyr did likewise, and they shared a grin as they approached the fence.

"Look for broken wires, split posts and the like while I make sure this stile is still strong." Haewkyr
said as he squatted down next to the wooden stile that allowed pedestrian access between the fields.

Loki made his way along the fence-line, keeping an eye out for damage. He didn't see any, and a moment later was joined by Haewkyr, who led his own mount.

Loki couldn’t help but notice the well-developed muscles in Haewkyr’s back and chest. By contrast, Loki was skinnier, although no less defined. When Haewkyr had his back turned, Loki could almost pretend he was walking with Thor. The thought was comforting and sad at the same time.

They walked for about half an hour, until they came to an area where the plants were smaller.

"Next season's crop." Haewkyr said. "We can ride down the length of this field as we won't catch on any of the plants."

They remounted and set off, cantering along the length as they kept an eye out for damage.

They reached a field of turned earth, clearly left barren for a season so as to replenish the nutrients in the soil. Haewkyr glanced back at Loki with a grin.

"Ready?" He called out, and urged his horse into a gallop.

Lightning wanted to go after him. Loki could feel the repressed strength of the horse beneath him, but his rear leg was already struggling to push off powerfully enough.

"Easy boy, don't push yourself." he soothed. "Just enjoy the canter."

Haewkyr had turned his head to check on Loki and realised something was wrong. He rode back with a look of concern.

"Out of practice?" He asked as he drew near.

"Lightning was injured in a war, he can't gallop anymore." Loki said.

"Why'd you pick a horse that couldn't gallop?" Haewkyr asked bluntly.

"He was a gift, a recent gift from the King, the King...doesn't like me to do anything too risky." Loki said.

Haewkyr pulled a face.

"That's stupid." He said.

Loki looked down. "He takes a great interest in my welfare." He said.

Haewkyr stared at him for a minute, his thoughts unreadable, then dismounted and went to Lightning's hind leg.

"What are you doing?" Loki asked, turning in the saddle to watch him.

"Jump down for me." Haewkyr instructed. Loki complied, watching as Haewkyr focussed hard on Lightning's leg.

"He partially tore a tendon, a few years ago by my reckoning. He's lucky it didn't go the whole way through or he'd be unable to walk, as it is, it's no wonder he can't push off hard anymore." Haewkyr said. "He's managing alright, he's tough animal, but I can fix this, if you give me time."
"Of course." Loki said. "You have healing magic?" He guessed.

"*_Animal*_ healing magic." Haewkyr said. "It's a form of nature magic, do you have that?"

"No, Thor does, he can control the weather." Loki said, undoing the straps on his pack and removing it from Lightning's back.

"Weather control is a very powerful art." Haewkyr said.

"He mostly does storms." Loki said.

Loki settled himself far enough away so as not to be a bother and watched with interest as Haewkyr began to work.

He spoke to Lightning as he did, running his hands over the horse's flank as the magic flowed.

Lightning stood very still, but with a kind of repressed energy that told Loki he was just raring to run.

Haewkyr's magic flickered and flowed, wrapping around Lightning's leg and weaving through his muscles and tendons.

It lasted over half an hour, then Haewkyr's magic slowly faded.

Loki grabbed a water skin and started to rise.

Lightning, apparently satisfied that he was back to fighting strength, took off as fast as he could. Which as it turned out, was very, very fast.

Loki watched with wide eyes as Lightning bolted over the dirt fields.

"Let him go." Haewkyr said wearily. "He needs this."

Loki handed him the water skin and watched Lightning disappear into the distance as Haewkyr drank.

"Thank you." He said.

"No problem at all. I like animals, and I help them when I can. You need to exercise him as often as possible, he's a bit of a wild one, and now that he's healed he'll want to run." Haewkyr said.

Loki hoped that he'd be able to keep Lightning's healed status from the King. Maybe he could arrange to have him exercised by the palace staff on days when he could not ride.

Haewkyr sat for a while and they ate lunch while he recovered. Then they mounted up on Drafty, Haewkyr's horse, and rode slowly along the fenceline. The powerful Drafty didn't seem to object to the weight of the two men on his back, and they travelled slowly onwards as the afternoon passed them by.

"Grandfather told me not to ask you about your husband." Haewkyr said as they rode.

Loki was silent for a moment, waiting, but Haewkyr didn't say anything more.

"You're obeying him, aren't you?" Loki asked after a few minutes.

"I might be." Haewkyr said.
"It was arranged." Loki said. "I was told two months before to prepare myself."

"That's tough." Haewkyr said. "How do you prepare yourself for that? Practice your kissing on prunes?"

Loki chuckled despite himself.

"I was given instruction from His Majesty's Master of Ceremonies." He said.

"Who's that then?" Haewkyr asked.

"I don't know, he never gave his name, I'm not entirely convinced that he has one." Loki said, and it was Haewkyr's turn to chuckle.

"So did you have any idea what it was you were walking into?" He asked.

"No." Loki confessed, "I thought I'd be playing nursemaid to be honest. I wasn't looking forward to it, but I'd take it gladly now."

"You'll probably be doing that eventually." Haewkyr said. "I went to the palace once, the whole place gave me the creeps. It's so...so...gilded. Like a glaze has been put on everything, no soil beneath your feet."

Loki thought about it. "You're right." He said. "Even the gardens are so perfect they seem unnatural."

"Don't worry about it." Haewkyr advised him. "You can always come here for a while. Grandfather is planning to officially invite you every year."

"He is?" Loki asked, hope filling his voice.

"He's expecting the King to negotiate it out to every three to five years, but you're family, he can't say no completely." Haewkyr said.

Loki thought his confidence was a tad misplaced, but he didn't argue. The idea of coming here even every five years was delightful.

"There he is." Haewkyr said, nodding ahead of him.

Lightning was prancing about in the field, having a fine old time as he bucked and kicked the air.

"I wonder why the palace mages couldn't heal him." Loki said.

"None of them are me." Haewkyr said. "Natural magic is rare in Vanir Loki, and you need it if you want to do a big healing on an animal."

They rode up slowly, taking care to make him aware of their presence so as not to startle him.

He eyed them carefully, then spied the piece of apple Loki had pulled out of his bag. He came over and shoved his nose into Loki's hand.

"You glutton you." Loki said with real affection in his voice. "Will you calm down enough to let me ride you?"

Lightning seemed to understand, as he stood still and let Loki mount him.
Haewkyr grinned at him, and together they took off at a gallop.

*This* was freedom. Loki reflected as he rode high and fast on Lightning's back. *This* was joy, was happiness. He felt rather than heard himself start to laugh with delight as they raced across the dirt fields and to the planted ones beyond.

Loki managed to pull Lightning up, it was clear the warhorse wanted to keep going, but he obeyed the pull of his reins.

"Good boy, we don't want to ruin the fields now, they won't let us come back." Loki said.

The rest of the day was spent checking and repairing fences, riding and occasionally jumping, and letting the smell of the tea crops permeate into their lungs and souls.

By the time they rode back to the castle, they were covered in a fine layer of dust and sweat, and Loki was grinning from ear to ear.

They went straight to the dining hall, where the others were about halfway through their meal. Lord Eadgleyr looked Loki over from a distance and relaxed as he saw his grandson was uninjured and happy. Lord Fallconyr patted his hand and told him he was silly for worrying.

"Loki is fine, he was with Haewkyr, you can trust that boy." He said.

"I know, but I will always worry. He's my baby, everyone in this room is my baby." Lord Eadgleyr said with a smile.

"Even me?" Lord Fallconyr asked him.

"*Especially* you." Lord Eadgleyr countered. "Honestly, the way you keep getting thrown in the dungeon is alarming."

"I survive it gladly knowing that you are waiting for me, dearest." Lord Fallconyr said, earning himself a snort from his better half.

"You're going to catch a chill one day." Lord Eadgleyr said. "And I will be nursing you back to health for months."

"Because you love me." Lord Fallconyr said.

"Because I love you." Lord Eadgleyr conceded.

Loki spent the next three weeks in a state of happiness. He pushed the idea of his return to the very back of his mind, and threw himself into the various tasks and activities that occurred as a part of the running of the castle.

He helped with a field harvest, which occurred all year round thanks to those members of the family who had growing magic. The tea leaves had to be plucked by hand and the villagers who lived nearby were almost all employed by Lord Fallconyr. The very tips of the new leaves were gathered by one group, and the rest of the leaves by another. These two groups made 'new tea' and 'strong tea', and were dried out in separate batches in the large drying buildings that were placed at the base of the castle cliffs where they could catch the morning sun but be shaded in the afternoon to prevent
overheating.

He helped with the planting too, a whole field was done in a day by the same people who had picked the day before. His nails were filthy underneath when he came in that night, and Fosxyr insisted on spending a good hour scrubbing at them.

"You are these people's queen." He said. "I think what you're doing is wonderful but you cannot have filthy nails at the dinner table again."

Loki sighed good naturedly. His patience with fussing seemed to have lengthened during his time there. "I will not be planting again." He said. "They are moving on to the next field but my grandfather wants to show me the Properties Room."

"What is that?" Fosxyr asked him.

"It's where they make the extra things that they put in the tea. The soothing tea has a small amount of settler herb in it, the sleeping tea has a larger amount plus some leaves from the calmote plant. The awake tea has beans call cafee ground up and added to it, but they're bitter, so a small amount of dried out honey crystals also have to be added."

"You seem to be quite keen." Fosxyr said with a smile.

Loki mirrored it. "It's fascinating." He said. "Like potion brewing but not."

"Your hands are rough." Fosxyr said. "I will have to get some cream to soften them again before you go back."

Loki rolled his eyes. "Whatever you feel is best." He said, which more than anything told Fosxyr how good the trip had been for him.

Lord Fallconyr still handled most of the work in the Properties room whenever he was at home. He watched as Loki scrubbed his hands and then led him to the worktable.

"Every harvest is different," he said. "So every addition is different. The job of those in the Properties Room is to work out what needs to be added to each crop to turn it into the tea we want."

Loki nodded, before him were piles and piles of ingredients.

"We start by checking the weight of the crop, which was done when it had completed the drying process." Lord Fallconyr continued. "Then we use those calculations up there on the wall to work out the amounts."

Loki scanned the equation and looked down at the weight written before him.

"Two and a half measures of settler herb." He guessed.

"Close, very close." Lord Fallconyr said, sounding impressed. "Without a sheet to work on and you were only thirteen mini-measures off."

Loki tried to suppress his smile, he hadn't been praised like that in a while now. Lord Fallconyr saw it and wagged his finger in Loki's face.

"No playing this down, you are a clever boy Loki, as long as you don't make anyone else feel bad about their own abilities, then there is no shame in showing it."

Loki's smile became real at his words.
"Yes Grandfather." He said.

"Good. Now, to prepare it all, we must grind the settler herb into a fine powder, which will then be dusted over the leaves later on, before they are boxed for transport. Grab that grinding handle and attach it to that grinding machine while I weigh out the settler herb."

Loki did as he was told, and spent a happy morning grinding some herbs and spices, measuring others, and listening to the stories his grandfather told.

"I never want to leave." Loki said that night as Fosxyr rubbed cream into his hands.

"This place suits you Your Grace." Fosxyr admitted.

"Does it not suit you also?" Loki asked. "I saw you today helping in the vegetable garden."

"I rarely do outside work." Fosxyr said. "So I was indulging a little, however I feel the novelty would wear off if I were to spend all my days here."

Loki regarded him shrewdly. "I think you are lying to me Fosxyr, I think you love it here." He said.

Fosxyr just smiled his wide smile and said nothing.

The best part of the whole thing however, was that at night he could sit and hold Thor's knife for hours without anyone seeing or suspecting anything. He was safe to run his fingers over the carved handle, to admire the workmanship, and to love his beloved freely, and without fear.

But as with all things wonderful, the days flew by and Loki's last night came far too soon for anyone's liking. He ate what he could at dinner, but the thought of returning to the palace and to the King was sapping his spirit.

Haewkyr gave him a huge hug and whispered a promise in his ear that if Loki had to run away, he'd hide him in a field shelter, no questions asked.

Spaottyen gave him a hug and declared him to be Loki: The Dark Rider, for his hair and for his horsemanship.

Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr walked him to the carriage and promised him that they would return to the palace soon. In the meantime Lord Fallconyr made him promise that he would write.

Lord Eadgleyr waved his husband away and, once he was sure he could be overheard by no one, gently took Loki's arm.

"I have a matter I wish to discuss with you dear." He said. "A bit late I know but I did not want to spoil your fun. Now, are you fertile?"

Loki blinked. He had not been expecting that question at all.

"As far as I know." He said.

The Aesir women and intersexed men would, like many long lived people, only become fertile once every ten years or so. The Vanir were similar, although due to their year being five days longer than the Aesir one, their cycles were slightly longer too.
Loki got his period every fourteen years, two months and eight days. He always had, like clockwork. Apart from some confusion early on, he'd just come to accept it as an odd kind of quirk. Eir had assured him that he was perfectly healthy, and even teased him lightly for once again doing things his own way. According to her, he should be fertile for the month leading up to his period.

Lord Eadgleyr nodded. "When are you next fertile?" He asked.

Loki felt a jolt of fear go through him at the line of questioning.

"Um, in a few more years." He said, barely able to get the words out. He'd been very deliberately not thinking about it, the idea of having King Dimcken's baby was terrifying.

Lord Eadgleyr nodded again. "Tell me when it gets close my dear, I have something to stop conception, a special tea of my own."

Loki hugged him.

"Thank you." He said with tears in his eyes.

"Take care of yourself my baby, I will see you again soon." Lord Eadgleyr promised as he held onto Loki tightly.

Then there was nothing left but for Loki to climb into the coach and allow himself to be taken back to his prison.

He wept for most of the journey, but neither Lord Fallconyr's guardsmen or Fosxyr said so much as a word about it to anyone.
King Dimcken was waiting at the front of the palace when Loki’s coach rolled up. Loki took a deep breath and composed himself. He was going back to it. He was going to have to endure more and more and more, but he was doing this for Thor, and he also had three weeks of bliss to remember whenever things got too bad. He could do this.

He climbed out of the coach and forced a small smile onto his face as the King came over. To his surprise, King Dimcken took his hand and kissed him chastely on the lips.

“Loki, dear, did you have a good time?” He asked, his voice was brittle and his expression was clearly hiding something.

“Yes?” Loki said, feeling as though he almost needed permission to have done so.

“Good, good.” King Dimcken said, patting Loki’s hand. “I’m glad to hear it, in fact I want to hear all about it at dinner.”

“Yes Husband.” Loki said as he was led up the steps.

He was confused. He had been expecting a public pawing upon his return, instead the King was treating him with something approaching respect.

He didn’t object to the arrangement at all, but it was puzzling, and possible troubling. What had happened to make the King act like this?

He had his answer as they reached the entranceway.

“Loki, um, while you were gone, the investigation, well, um, you see…” King Dimcken said, sounding awkward. “The thing is… your father is here.”

Of all the things he could have said, this surprised Loki the most.

“He is?” He said, shocked. Then he remembered that King Dimcken, like everyone else, believed that he had a good relationship with his father. He smiled. “I should speak with him.” He said.

“We’re having lunch together.” King Dimcken said. “In half an hour, you must join us.”

“Of course, I would love to.” Loki lied. “I should go and wash off the dust from the road.”
“Yes, of course.” King Dimcken said. “Off you go then.”

Loki walked away feeling strange. The King was nervous because Odin was here. He was keeping his distance from Loki’s body, which was good. But that meant he truly believed that Odin did not know about the things Loki had been forced to endure. Not only did he think Odin didn’t know, but he also believed that Odin would not approve.

Well that was interesting.

Loki went back to his rooms and, for the first time since arriving, used the shower facility in his bathing room. He pulled on a fresh robe and stood still while Wraenyr and Fosxyr did his hair and chose his jewellery. Suitably presentable in record time, he let Fosxyr escort him to the King’s chambers.

He was shown in immediately, and came face to face with his father.

Odin looked no different, although Loki wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, it had only been five months but it felt like so much longer. His face was serious, and he held his arms out to draw Loki into a hug that was returned, King Dimcken was watching after all.

“Loki.” Odin greeted.

“Father.” Loki said, trying to put warmth into his voice. He wasn’t sure that he had succeeded, and he reflected on how it was always old kings who wanted to move him about like a doll.

They sat at the table and were served a plate each, possibly to eliminate the problem of seniority.

“His Majesty King Odin has come to discuss the findings of our investigation.” King Dimcken said. “After the terrible rebel attack.”

“How do you fare Loki?” Odin asked.

Loki found this smile easily. “I was much distressed of course, but my Husband suggested some time in the country with my family, and I am much recovered now, thank you Father.” He said.

Only Odin realised the barb in his words. He had not written to either of his parents about his distress, he had dismissed them entirely in favour of his grandparents. King Dimcken remained oblivious. He had too many worries of his own to notice the tension between Odin and his son.

“I am pleased to hear it.” Odin said, a little more quietly than he’d stated his previous question.

“They grow the tea crops that are exported to all the nine realms.” Loki said. “They took me riding, and showed me the tea rooms, and I spent long afternoons reading in their library.”

King Dimcken flushed slightly at his words, Loki had no idea why, but while he had the chance, he went on relentlessly.

“I never knew I had quite so many cousins, and they all wanted to show me around and make me happy. It was wonderful to be among family.” He said.

Odin’s face was a mask, but it was only a mask because he was hiding something. Pain, Loki hoped.

“I’m pleased that you had a good time.” Odin said.

King Dimcken was still looking worried.
“We have made more arrests.” He said. “Five more rebels have been found, and we are certain that one of them is a ringleader.”

Odin smiled a little tightly. “Good, they have been raiding our realm again, I have had to put guards by the known Pathway entrances, which is taking up a lot of their time. The rebels must have a very powerful mage working for them in order to send the raiders.”

“Yes, we’ve turned up a number of mages, although mostly minor at this point, but they are being interrogated even as we speak.” King Dimcken said. “We’ll break the backs of this soon, I’m certain of it. Especially now that Musleen is back in charge.”

“Musleen’s alright?” Loki asked, delighted. “Has he made a full recovery?”

“Yes, he’s up and about, that Eir of yours is wonderful.” King Dimcken said, in direct contradiction to his earlier sentiments. Loki let it go, Musleen was well again and that was all he cared about.

“I must see him and apologise.” He said.

“Oh no Loki not at all!” King Dimcken practically shouted, he shot a nervous glance at Odin. “I already told you that you are not to blame for any of it, you were a victim, Musleen knows that.”

Loki forced himself to smile modestly. “You did tell me that, I still feel guilty. I should at least talk to him about it.”

Odin glanced up from his meal. “After I speak to you Loki, I should like to discuss how you are faring once lunch is finished.”

King Dimcken looked sick. Loki gave yet another polite smile.

“Yes Father.” Was all he said.

The most awkward lunch in the history of the nine realms finally ended, and King Dimcken graciously offered his chambers for Odin and Loki to talk.

Odin raised a hand and Loki felt the magic circle the room.

“We may now speak in private.” Odin said calmly.

Loki took a deep breath.

“You didn’t tell me that this was more than political.” He said bluntly.

Odin looked surprised. “Of course it is political, how goes your task to endear the people? If the rebels are rising in power I fear that you are not succeeding.”

Loki just stared at him. In fact he stared for so long that Odin looked vaguely uncomfortable. Finally he spoke.

“You have no idea what he’s done to me, have you?” He asked.

Odin frowned. “I trust he isn’t keeping you locked up in a dungeon?” He asked.

Loki sneered at him. “He touches me everywhere, he puts his hands *everywhere*, and… other things, *everywhere*.” He said.
Odin made a dismissive gesture. “Even a political marriage requires some physical sacrifice, you know that.” He said.

Loki had known. He’d known that he would have to consummate the wedding, and that there would be kisses in public, and hand holding and affectionate hugs. He had not known about penises down his throat, or up his arse. He had not known how *active* the old King still was.

“He is a disgusting old man.” Loki hissed.

Odin shot him a warning look. “He is our ally and he is pleased with you, do not cause trouble Loki, you know what you risk if you do.”

Loki knew, he knew all too well.

“I haven’t caused trouble yet then?” He asked. “I wasn’t sure if getting possessed by an insane rebel counted.”

Anger flashed in Odin’s eyes. “Watch your words son.” He warned. “Do not be flippant with me.”

Loki pressed his lips together in an effort to stop himself. He wanted to yell and scream and throw things. He wanted to go home.

“Will mother visit?” He asked instead.

Odin nodded. “In time, after your first year here perhaps.” He said. “She has been writing to you.”

“I know, I read the letters.” Loki said, then winced slightly as Odin’s eyes narrowed at his sarcasm. “And Thor?”

“*He most certainly cannot visit you.*” Odin said.

“I meant how was he? I have heard very little of him at all.” Loki said.

Odin looked annoyed. “He’s gone on a quest.” He said. “He came back briefly when he and his friends were injured but they came in the night and were gone again by morning.”

“So you haven’t seen him in months.” Loki said, rubbing the point in just a little. “He’s too busy questing. Has he written?”

“No.” Odin said in a voice that threatened to end the conversation if another thing was said.

Loki folded his arms across his body and looked away. He had nothing left to say to his father that wasn’t an accusation or an insult.

Odin too was silent, he looked very faintly guilty, although Loki was turned away and did not see it.

“Would you like anything from Asgard?” Odin asked at last. “Anything you cannot get here?”

Loki almost gave a dismissive shrug, but stopped himself.

“May I have my old books on healing magics?” He asked. “Eir was teaching me when I left, and my studies here are focussed more on illusions and transmutation.”

“I will see to it.” Odin said. He paused for a while. “Really everywhere?” He asked quietly.

“There is a spot on my back that remains unsullied, and the soles of my feet.” Loki said. “I did not
know two people could do such things together. I know now.”

Odin looked a little uneasy. “Everyone must do things that make them uncomfortable sometimes.”
He said.

Loki bit back a laugh. “Uncomfortable. That was the word he used. I dread to think what ‘traumatised’ means to the two of you.”

Odin winced, but walked passed Loki and to the door.

“I am going now.” He said. “I came to ensure that your security was not lacking, I am satisfied that this attack was not due to a deliberate lapse and that the investigations are thorough.” He said. “I will give you love to your mother.”

“Tell her that her father misses her.” Loki said suddenly. “Tell her that her parents are wonderful people.”

“I shall.” Odin said, and the magic around them dropped.

Odin left less than fifteen minutes later. Loki watched the Bifrost light take him with envious eyes.

King Dimcken was looking noticeably brighter now that Odin was gone. He slid an arm around Loki’s waist and smiled at him.

“While you were talking with your father I arranged access to the palace library for you.” He said. “I should have done so sooner, there are a great many Seidr texts that I’m sure you will love.”

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said.

“Fosxyr can show you where it is later.” The King said, leading Loki back towards the King’s chambers. “There are some very powerful texts in there, that’s why you need to have access granted by me. Only certain people are allowed to go in to read.”

“I am honoured Husband.” Loki said.

Loki thought he knew why the King had looked guilty before at lunch. Perhaps he’d been expecting Loki to say how nice it was to be able to access a library, which in turn would have let Odin know that he couldn’t do so here. At least, until now.

They reached the King’s bedroom before Loki realised what the King had in mind.

He shouldn’t be so surprised. Odin had left Loki here, which in the world of King Dimcken, meant that he must approve of their marriage. Loki hoped it wouldn’t hurt too much.

King Dimcken pressed Loki back against the wall and assaulted his mouth eagerly. He pulled Loki’s skirts up and reached underneath to touch Loki’s skin.

Loki tried hard to stay calm. This was the first time since the Mask had been destroyed that he had to have sex with the King. He felt horribly vulnerable.

The King’s fingers pushed into Loki’s vagina and Loki couldn’t help but give a little cry of pain. He wasn’t wet at all. He needed a lot of physical stimulation to become wet with the King, as mentally he rebelled against everything the man represented.
King Dimcken was in no mood to wait. He gave a sigh of frustration and pushed his fingers in again. Loki tried to relax his muscles to make it less painful but it was more difficult than he thought.

King Dimcken pulled back and tugged at Loki’s clothes.

“Take them off.” He commanded and turned away toward the nightstand.

Loki tugged his clothes off reluctantly and stood holding them across his front.

“Come here.” King Dimcken said. He was holding a bottle of oil.

Loki came closer. He reluctantly put his clothes down by the bed as King Dimcken poured oil over his bony fingers.

“Good boy, now spread your legs a little, yes good.” King Dimcken said, pushing his now oily fingers back inside. “Good boy, that’s it, you feel so good. I’ve missed this.”

Loki gritted his teeth and didn’t say anything. He knew he had to please the King but nothing in the nine realms could make him say ‘me too’.

King Dimcken pulled his own robe up and wrapped his arms around Loki, squashing the fabric between them. A moment later he pushed himself inside and started jerking quickly.

Loki bit his lip over the King’s shoulder and told himself that it would end soon. He felt like a common whore, being taken while standing. The King’s hands were kneading his bottom and the tips of his fingers were inching closer and closer to Loki’s anus.

The King worked one oily finger inside and Loki had to fight a scream. A second finger was added as they jerked frantically together.

‘Over soon. Over soon. Over soon.’ Loki thought desperately. The King’s stamina couldn’t last much longer.

King Dimcken made a weird strangled noise and Loki felt him release. A second later he felt the full weight of the King leaning against him as the old man fought not to collapse after his exertion.

“Good boy.” He breathed into Loki’s ear, making him want to shudder.

He managed not to as King Dimcken pulled out of him and sat down heavily on the bed.

“Lovely, you are lovely Loki my darling.” King Dimcken said while trying to catch his breath. “I’ve wanted to do that since I saw you.” He said, looking predatory.

Loki was forced to stand there, naked in front of him.

“Lie down on the bed.” King Dimcken said.

Loki obeyed, desperately hoping the King just wanted a nap.

“Open you beautiful legs, yes good boy.” King Dimcken said. As soon as Loki’s legs were spread far enough, King Dimcken pushed his fingers back into Loki’s vagina and pried the opening apart.

Loki couldn’t help the noise of discomfort that he made.

“I’m sorry Husband.” He said quickly. “It’s just been a little while, and you’re stretching me.”
“Yes I am.” King Dimcken said, sounding anything but upset about it.

He pushed another finger inside. “I wonder if you could take my whole fist?” He mused.

Loki wanted to vomit in fear. Surely people did not actually do such a thing? King Dimcken’s tastes were unusual, but even he wouldn’t… would he?

“After a bit of work you might be able to.” The King continued, oblivious to Loki’s panic above him. “But you are *very* tight my dear, it may be impossible.”

‘Please be impossible.’ Loki thought desperately.

King Dimcken shuffled forward from where he lay and pushed his face into Loki’s vagina.

He rubbed his face back and forth as he used his tongue to lick around inside. Loki gripped the pillows tightly where he lay and tried to make the sounds falling from his lips seem like pleasure rather than protests.

King Dimcken pulled back slightly and began kissing his way up Loki’s body. His fingers went back to circling Loki’s entrance, before suddenly moving lower and pushing their way back into his anus.

It took every ounce of control Loki had not to shout ‘STOP’ in that moment. Somehow he managed not to and the King continued to press his fingers inwards.

“Every part of you is tight my dear.” He said. “I want all of it.” His fingers curled slightly inside. “If I were younger I’d have it now.” He said, working his fingers back and forth as Loki fought to stay calm. “But sadly I cannot. This will have to wait for another day.”

“Yes Husband.” Loki said as the fingers retracted.

“I have work to do this afternoon, perhaps you can go and find Musleen and speak to him, so that you can stop worrying that he blames you.” King Dimcken said.

“Yes Husband, I shall.” Loki said.

“I do have one question before you go.” King Dimcken said.

The fingers pressed deeply into Loki’s vagina, making him yelp in pain.

“Why were you worried about never seeing your precious Thor again?” The King said in his ear.

When Loki had been fighting the Mask, it had made that threat out loud.

Shit.
Loki’s thoughts raced by at a thousand per second. He had one chance to get out of this, and it all depended on what he did right now. But there was another problem, he could feel it in the air and see it painted in runes around the walls that had not been there a second ago. Somehow, when King Dimcken asked the question, he had activated a truth spell in the room, and if Loki had not had magic then he never would have been aware of it, the runes were only visible to the eye of seidr. 

Heart racing, Loki reached down and took King Dimcken’s wrist in a firm grip. He removed the King’s fingers from his body and pressed his legs closed before he turned and frowned directly at the King.

“You *hurt* me.” He said reproachfully, trying to imply, while not actually saying, that King Dimcken had never done such a thing before.

“You haven’t answered my question.” King Dimcken said, although he looked slightly startled by Loki’s reaction.

“I was *worried* about never seeing Thor again because he is away questing. Had that rebel succeeded in killing you I would be placed on trial and executed before he might be found and brought here to say goodbye.” Loki said. “It loved to taunt me about such things, it wanted to hurt me almost as much as it wanted to kill you.”

All true. Not the whole truth, but the whole truth would require a far more sophisticated spell than the one that had been cast.

“Why is he *precious*?” King Dimcken persisted.

Loki raised a single eyebrow. “Because he is my brother and I love him.” He said truthfully. “Do you know what the difference in age is between Thor and I? Just under ten years.”

The King blinked. “That is closer than I thought.” He said. “I thought Musleen and Camtan were close, they are forty years apart.”

“We slept in the nursery together, we played together, we had lessons together, Thor refused to start weapons training unless I was there. The instructor gave me a wooden sword and a dummy to bash to keep me out of the way, but even then it was not good enough, Thor refused to listen unless I was being taught the same. He delayed his questing until my coming of age, as he did not wish to go without me. He was determined that we should be the most victorious brothers Asgard had ever seen. Believe me Husband, I am aware of the great honour done to me by my marriage, but I cannot pretend that do not miss my brother, or that the thought of not being able to say goodbye to him is not painful.”

There was one final point to make, but it had to be said carefully.

“I hope very much one day to stand by him as I attend his wedding and he marries his queen, I think
it a shame he was unable to do so at my wedding.” Loki finished. Technically true, if a bit creatively worded.

The King looked thoughtful. “I did not realise, he has been away all this time has he not?”

“I do not blame him for not delaying any longer.” Loki said. “Perhaps when he is back in Asgard I will hear news, although Thor has never been all that good at the written word, he prefers conversation.”

King Dimcken nodded. “It sounded as though…” He began, then trailed off. “I was close to my brother.” He said instead. “He was a century behind me, but that seemed to matter little when we were grown. He has been gone for five and a half centuries now, I still miss him.”

Loki nodded seriously. “Brothers know all your secrets.” He said, allowing himself a small smile. “And yet when they’re gone we wish only that they would come back to torture us further.”

“Indeed.” King Dimcken said. His eyes looked slightly misty. “Breaveen was a good man. He would have seen right through the rebel’s plot.”

“The rebel was determined to hurt me, I fought to stop it as hard as I could for days, it wanted its revenge.” Loki said carefully.

“Her revenge, the rebel was a woman.” King Dimcken corrected.

Loki nodded, although in his mind he still thought of the Mask as an ‘it’. “She wanted us all to die.” He said.

King Dimcken nodded again.

“I am going to see Musleen now.” Loki said, climbing off the bed. “I will see you tonight Husband?”

“Of course, we shall have dinner as a family.” King Dimcken said as Loki pulled his robes back on. “Loki?”

“Yes Husband?” Loki said.

“You can invite Thor to come and visit you, when he is back in Asgard.” King Dimcken said.

It was probably the closest King Dimcken could come to an apology. Loki gave him a small smile and bowed his head. “Thank you Husband, I’m sure he will enjoy it immensely. Although you may want to warn the Lords to lock up their daughters, he has the same effect on women that the Thunder Boys do.”

King Dimcken chuckled. “I will be sure to warn them Loki darling.” He said. “Go on now, I will see you later.”

Loki left.

Loki had another quick shower, washing the horrible oil from between his legs, before he dressed in fresh robes and went to find Musleen. He had managed to allay King Dimcken’s suspicions, at least for now, but he could not risk coming so close to the truth again.

Fosxyr announced him at Musleen’s door and he sat down in the outer room with the rest of the nobles who had come to see the Prince.
Loki noticed more than a few curious stares in his direction. He had been away for three whole weeks, and it could not have escaped the nobility that his father had come to see him upon his return. He sat quietly, refusing the wine offered by Musleen’s chamber servant.

He did not have long to wait. Musleen himself appeared at the door and called him inside.

They did not go to Musleen’s study this time, staying instead in the public meeting room. The previous noble left with a bow as Loki entered, then they were alone, but for a watchful servant.

“I owe you an apology.” Musleen said immediately.

Loki’s eyes widened. “No, I owe *you* one.”

“You were possessed by a rebel and I did not see it, I said things that I regret fully, Loki, please forgive me.” Musleen said, going down on a bended knee.

Loki grabbed him by his shoulders. “Up, get up. There is nothing to forgive, you were protecting your father, I do not blame you for *anything* anything at all. I thought you would be angry at me.”

“No, of course not. You saved my life Loki, it was you who suggested Eir was it not? She healed me so well that there is no lasting injury, no one here could do that. Indeed, they are speaking of sending some healers to Asgard to learn from the palace healers there.” Musleen said. “I owe you my life Loki, if you ever should have need of me, I swear I shall be there.”

Loki flushed at the words, he truly hadn’t considered that Musleen would think to be in *his* debt. It felt wrong somehow.

“I-“ He started to say.

“I will take no argument Loki, I am in your debt whether you believe it or not.” Musleen said determinedly.

Loki stood there awkwardly for a moment.

“Would you like some tea?” Musleen asked in the silence.

Loki’s lips twitched.

So did Musleen’s.

“Is tea a common way to follow a declaration of debt?” Loki asked as he started to giggle.

“It seems to be a good a way as any.” Musleen said.

“In that case, I shall have some tea.” Loki said.

They were just finishing their first cup when the outer servant appeared through one of the many hidden doors in the palace.

“Your Grace, Your Grace, the Princess Sofftia has gone into labour, she and the Prince Camtan are in the healer’s chambers now, His Grace says there is no rush as yet, but wishes you to be aware.”

Musleen swallowed nervously. “Right. Thank you.” He said. “We will go, um, in a bit.”

“You seem worried Musleen, what is the matter.” Loki asked.
Musleen looked caught. “Uh, um, I once saw a cow give birth and vomited all over my shoes.” He confessed.

Loki tried hard not to smile. “Unless things are very different here, you won’t have to see the birth.” He said.

Musleen just looked at him.

“You *do*?” Loki asked.

“The birth must be witnessed by at least three members of the royal family.” Musleen said unhappily. “Unfortunately there is only one woman at the moment, it’s normally their job.”

“So we have to go and *watch*?” Loki asked. “How does poor Soffia feel about this?”

“She resigned herself to it when she married Camtan, it is a well-known tradition.” Musleen said.

“Oh.” Loki said.

“Princess Mulmyr will be there, and Father, Camtan doesn’t count unless there aren’t any other royals *alive*, so it’s either Dorgen, you or me. Camtan asked me when they first announced the pregnancy.” Musleen said.

Loki nodded. “You have my sympathies.” He said.

“I should have had a wife.” Musleen muttered. “That way *she* could do it for me.”

“What a brave warrior.” Loki quipped.

Musleen shot him a dark look. “You’re half woman, why can’t you do it?” He asked.

“I wasn’t asked.” Loki said cheerfully. “Come on, you’d better get going, I know first pregnancies tend to go for a while but you never know, the baby might decide to come early.”

“If it lasts until tomorrow Father will be ecstatic.” Musleen said, rising from his chair reluctantly. “The baby will come on his birthday.”

Loki felt a sudden stab of fear. The King’s birthday. He had no idea whether Fosxyr had remembered to arrange a present for the King.

He leaned back slightly as he accompanied Musleen to the healer’s chambers so that he could ask Fosxyr as they walked.

“It’s all taken care of, a lovely winter coat will arrive this evening from the stitching rooms of my sister in law.” Fosxyr said. “It will be very fine I assure you Your Grace, and the shade cloth for the new baby has been similarly stitched.”

“What would I do without you Fosxyr?” Loki asked.

Fosxyr shrugged slightly. “I imagine you would do as any noble would when their servants disappear.” He said mischievously.

“Panic utterly?” Loki suggested.

Fosxyr made a non-committal sound and kept walking.
Princess Mulmyr was already there, gently murmuring soothing words to Sofftia as she panted on the bed. Her belly looked huge and her face was covered in a light coating of sweat.

Camtan sat by her other side, looking pained. He shot a nervous smile at the two of them as they were announced.

“Welcome, there are chairs around here somewhere.” He said distractedly, already turning back to his wife.

Musleen found a seat as far as possible from the bed. Loki frowned and him. “Go and sit next to Camtan, you can see nothing from there anyway.” He whispered.

Musleen scowled but obeyed, resettling himself beside his brother. Loki pulled a chair over to Mulmyr’s side and sat down.

Mulmyr gave him a bright smile. “I haven’t seen much of you lately Loki, are you well?” She asked.

“I am.” Loki said. “I have been visiting my family.”

Mulmyr nodded. “That must have been wonderful, I would so like to visit my sons but they are away with the army and having their mother visit would be a terrible embarrassment.”

Loki chuckled. “I’m sure they’ll be back soon.” He said.

Her eyes turned sad. “They both resigned for another decade.” She said. “They sent me a letter.”

“Oh.” Loki said. It didn’t seem like good son behaviour to not even visit their mother to tell her that they were staying away for so long.

She smiled tightly. “They must be happy, that it all I care about.” She said, and turned back to Sofftia, who was trying to endure another contraction.

The King arrived a few minutes later. His face went through a number of expressions as he surveyed the people before him. Delight at Loki, annoyance at Mulmyr, paternal fondness for Sofftia, pride for Camtan and pleasure for Musleen.

“How is it going?” He asked.

“Slowly, Your Majesty, but that is to be expected.” The head healer said.

King Dimcken nodded. “I have much work to do, will the baby arrive before the evening?”

“Probably not Your Majesty.” The head healer said.

Sofftia gave a slight groan at her words.

“Good, I’ll go and get my work done. If things progress, send a servant. I do not want to miss the birth of my grandchild.” King Dimcken said and left.

Loki caught the slight wince on Mulmyr’s face when King Dimcken had spoken. He wondered if the King had bothered to show up for the birth of her children.

What if he hadn’t? What if she had been unable to find three royals to witness it? Would that make her children illegitimate? He didn’t feel as though he could ask her, maybe he could ask Camtan or
Musleen another time.

A servant appeared with a platter of food for them, and they ate and chatted quietly as Sofftia laboured onward. There was nothing they could do, and Loki felt awkward sitting there, unable to help. But there were some things that could only be done alone.

Five hours later, as the time for dinner approached, King Dimcken sent word that he was still working and unable to come until later. Dorgen arrived and took the place beside Mulmyr, wrapping a loving arm around her and holding her close.

Loki remembered what the rebel had said about Dorgen doing whatever they wanted, he wondered whether the control they had had been broken yet. He hoped so.

It was two hours past midnight when Sofftia began to push in earnest. Musleen turned pale and started to sweat as a servant ran for the King.

The head healer began to call out instructions, Mulmyr and Camtan held Sofftia’s hands and the rest of the royal family stood at the far end of the room.

She gave a cry and the head of the baby crowned. Loki watched with wide eyes as, messy, wet and slimy, the baby was pushed into the world.

“A girl!” Shouted the head healer as she pulled the child free. The little princess immediately began to scream as loudly as possible. Musleen made a strange noise in the back of his throat and swallowed hard.

The baby was placed in Sofftia’s arms and she cradled it closely with tears in her eyes.

“Hello baby.” She whispered. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

Camtan leaned over them both, his eyes shining with fatherly pride.

“I have a daughter.” He whispered. “A little girl. She’s beautiful.”

King Dimcken arrived a few minutes later, but it was all over. He frowned slightly in annoyance.

“I told you to fetch me when it got closer, you should have come sooner.” He growled at the servant.

“Did three of you witness it?”

“Yes.” Gasped Musleen, who looked as though he was still debating on whether to throw up or not.

“Me, Loki and Mulmyr saw it all.”

“Loki, Mulmyr and I.” King Dimcken corrected gently. “Sit down my boy, you look tired.”

Musleen sat, he still looked pale.

“Loki my dear, you must sign the birth certificate.” King Dimcken said.

Loki stepped forwards and signed the bottom of the certificate. The head healer was filling out the details at the top. He saw her write the word ‘princess’ and pause.

“What is her name, Your Graces?” She asked.

They all turned to look at the proud parents.

Loki peeked at the little princess, who had fallen asleep.

“She’s beautiful.” He said, smiling.

A hand came creeping around his waist.

“Yes she is.” King Dimcken said happily. “She’ll need playmates when she’s older.” He said in Loki’s ear.

Loki felt his heart freeze at the words. He had never been more grateful for Lord Eadgleyr’s offer of preventative tea.

“Come and look at her Musleen.” Camtan said to his brother, who was still sitting at the far end of the room.

Musleen rose slowly and inched his way forwards.

“She is wonderful brother, very sweet.” He said carefully.

Sofftia was blinking sleepily, her head was resting back on the pillows.

“We should let you rest dear.” Mulmyr said gently. “It is late and you need your sleep.”

She and Dorgen both stood to take their leave.

“Happy birthday Your Majesty.” She said as they bowed.

King Dimcken blinked in surprise. “Of course, yes, it *is* my birthday. I had forgotten in the excitement. We must all go and rest, there is to be a feast tonight. Of course I do not expect you to be there my dear daughter in law.” He said to Sofftia. “You must rest well, you have my granddaughter to care for.”

“Thank you for your kindness Your Majesty.” She said.

Everyone filed out and said their goodnights to the King in the corridor. Loki made sure to bow low, the picture of compliance. He had not forgotten his close call that day and he didn’t want to do anything that might upset the King for a good long while.

The coat was waiting in his inner chambers when Loki arrived. It was very fine, perfectly stitched and styled, and made of good thick furs.

“I’m sure he’ll love it Your Grace.” Fosxyr said as they walked past it to the bedroom. “And the shade cloth is on the table, you can look at it in the morning.”

“It is morning.” Loki said, yawning. “But I know what you mean. I am exhausted, I cannot imagine how tired you must be too.”

“We’ve both had a busy day of travel and excitement.” Fosxyr said. “Time for sleep.”

Loki crawled into bed and fell asleep before his head hit the pillow.
Fosxyr woke Loki in the afternoon. He moaned and tried to burrow back under the covers but the
servant was insistent.

“His Majesty has decided not to have a lunch today after all, as you were all up very late last night.”
Fosxyr said. “But that means you will have to present your gift to him at the feast.”

Loki’s head shot up.

“What do I have to do?” He asked.

Fosxyr tugged the rest of the covers away and waited for Loki to sit up properly.

“You will have to give a short speech and a toast.” He said.

Loki pulled a horrified face for a moment, before his shoulders slumped in resignation.

“When do I do that, and what do I say?” He asked.

“I have prepared a speech that should be sufficient.” Fosxyr said. “You can practise it over
breakfast.”

Loki climbed out of bed. “And when do I do this speech? At what point in the feast?”

“After the first set of dancing. I will signal you.” Fosxyr said.

Loki read the speech as he ate.

“I would like to make a toast in honour of my dear husband…great man…mighty King – really?”

Fosxyr just looked at him.

Loki sighed and turned back to the paper.

“This is laying it on a bit thick.” He muttered.

“Does your father not have those who sing his praises?” Fosxyr asked him.

Loki sighed again. “Yes.” He admitted, and read the paper again. “I can do this, I’ve made speeches
before.”

“I’m glad to hear it Your Grace.” Fosxyr said.

After his bath, Loki took a moment to admire the shade cloth for Camtan and Sofftia. It was perfect,
embrioded with tiny flowers and runes for good health and fortune.
“Your sister in law is very talented, Fosxyr.” He said.

“I will give her your praise the next time I see her Your Grace.” Fosxyr said with a smile.

Camrryen appeared through the servant’s door.

“Your Grace, the King is here.” He said.

Loki froze.

“Why?” He whispered, as though King Dimcken could hear him through the walls.

Camrryen shook his head. “He did not say Your Grace.” He said.

Loki turned and looked to where the King’s present was still displayed on a large wooden dummy.

“Can you move that to the bedroom? I don’t want him to see it.” He said.

Fosxyr and Camrryen took a hold of it and started to move it along the floor. It was weighed down at the base to prevent it from falling over, but that made their job much more difficult. Loki tried to help but there was not enough room for more than two people.

There was an impatient knock on the door.

“Loki?” King Dimcken called out.

Loki looked alarmed. “He’s come through the greeting room.” He hissed and ran to the door.

“Just a minute Husband.” He called out, turning to watch as the two servants struggled to get the dummy through the door.

“My dear I grow impatient.” King Dimcken said, he did not sound happy.

Loki took a deep breath and pulled the door open just far enough to poke his head out.

“Yes Husband?” He asked.

“What are you doing in there?” King Dimcken asked. He was standing surrounded by some of his friends, they were looking surprised. “I came to fetch you, I want to go to the top of the tower and admire the view of my realm.”

He was trying to peek past Loki suspiciously.

Loki forced a smile onto his face. “I’m so sorry Husband, I did not want you to see your present before tonight, it is almost away now.” He said.

King Dimcken was still looking suspicious, there was a dangerous glint in his eye and his friends were looking worried.

“Is that so.” He said softly.

Loki nodded nervously. “Yes Husband.” He said.

“I will risk it. Stand aside.” King Dimcken said, eyes flashing in anger. He practically pushed Loki backwards as he entered the room.

Fosxyr and Camrryen were halfway through the door with the King’s present. They stopped what
they were doing and bowed deeply.

King Dimcken looked Loki up and down suspiciously, he scanned the room and stepped up to the doorway to scan the bedroom, then his eyes finally seemed to notice the coat. He approached it and touched it lightly with his fingers.

“Oh.” He said. “It’s very fine, I, uh, thank you my dear.”

Loki stood quietly behind him, trying to look meek.

“You’re very welcome Husband, I hope you like it.” He said.

King Dimcken looked faintly embarrassed.

“I do.” He said a little gruffly. “Come on now, we will go to the tower.”

Loki took his arm and left, shooting a confused look back at Fosxyr as he did. The King’s friends were also looking a strange combination of embarrassed and relieved.

They were all panting slightly when they reached the top of the tower. It was the first time Loki had been up there with anyone other than the King. He took comfort from the fact that they were there, and was able to enjoy the view.

King Dimcken had apparently recovered from his strange behaviour and wrapped his arms around Loki’s waist affectionately.

“Every year I come up here to admire the realm.” He said. “My dear friends and I work so hard to maintain it all, I like for them to see the result of their work as well.”

“Vanaheim is wonderful.” Loki said as the King’s hand stroked his hip lightly. “A jewel of a realm.”

The others made noises of agreement as King Dimcken smiled happily.

“I have always enjoyed my birthday, although this one has been a little disrupted lately.” He said. “But that is not a problem, not when what has disrupted it is such a blessing. My darling granddaughter, we will toast her tonight at the feast.”

The others gave a little cheer as Loki forced a grin to his face. “You are very blessed to have her born on your birthday.” He said.

King Dimcken gave him a little squeeze. “Very.” He agreed.

The presence of his friends apparently did not stop King Dimcken from enjoying Loki’s mouth, and he spent most of the rest of their time up there pressing their bodies together. Loki had no doubt that he wanted to do more, but after such a long night King Dimcken did not seem to have the energy for anything else. After an hour or so, they all headed back down to prepare for the feast.

“I was hoping for another gift from you tonight.” King Dimcken breathed into Loki’s ear as they walked down the steps. “Sadly I do not have the energy, but perhaps tomorrow night? A late present?”

Loki felt sick. He didn’t know exactly what the King had in mind but he knew he would hate it.

“As soon as you have the energy Husband of course.” He said, trying not to gag at the thought of what the King might want.
The look King Dimcken gave him was not comforting.

“I look forward to it.” He breathed. “I will cover you in gold.”

The King’s hands were actually trembling at the thought. Loki fought to maintain his composure as he climbed down the last of the steps, bid farewell to the nobles and left to get ready for the feast.

“Why was he acting so strange?” Loki asked Fosxyr as the servant washed his hair.

“That’s what she used to do.” Fosxyr said softly. “When her lover was here, she would stall His Majesty to hide her lover’s escape.”

Loki turned in his bath to look at Fosxyr. “His friends, they know that too don’t they?”

“They do. It seemed innocent enough at first, but she started doing it so often, and she was always messy, with rumpled clothes or messy hair. Her servants were never in the room with her, always banished to the servants corridors. He grew suspicious, and in the end he set a trap. He caught her, but not him, someone managed to warn him. Instead he had to watch her be taken to die.” Fosxyr said. His voice was soft in the room, which echoed gently with the sound of the water as it splashed around Loki.

“I shouldn’t do that again.” Loki said. “Even if it’s innocent, I cannot risk it.”

“I think that would be very wise Your Grace, never deny him, it isn’t worth it, it was never worth it.” Fosxyr said. He poured a jug of warm water over Loki’s hair, washing away the soap and making it fall in strands around his chin and neck.

Loki sat silently and contemplated his love for Thor. He had not touched the knife since it had been put back in its place on the shelf. As much as he longed to, Fosxyr was right, it wasn’t worth it.

The feast was loud, merry and festive. King Dimcken was in a fine mood as he ate and drank every one of his favourite dishes. There was dancing, and Loki found that he knew every step. He jumped and twirled and spun with a smile carefully painted onto his face. As one dance ended he glanced up at the throne to see King Dimcken beaming at him. He bowed his head respectfully, and the King raised his glass at him in turn. To the crowd, they made an unusual, but lovely, sight. Loki especially was alluring to look at, exotic and beautiful. His ready smile was charming to all who saw it, and the nobles of Vanaheim fell in love with him a little more each time they saw him.

The common people too were enchanted by him. They saw him as he travelled to his lessons at the Tower of Magic and on his infrequent trips to the marketplaces. He was the subject of many a rumour, most good, and the recent trial in which he had appeared, looking pale and vulnerable as his attackers were sentenced, had caused a dramatic shift in support against the rebels.

Tonight, despite his tiredness, Loki won over even more supporters, but none so many as when it came time to give his speech.

He’d made speeches before of course, but this one was in full praise of a man he detested with all of
his heart. Nevertheless, it had to be done. As the first round of dancing came to an end, Fosxyr gave
him a nod, and Loki stood carefully and held up his glass.

“My Lords and Nobles, fine Ladies and women of the Court, I ask you to heed my words.” He said,
his voice steady and true. “I would like to make a toast in honour of my dear husband. He is a great
man, a kind and generous man who in his life has guided this realm through many triumphs. This
mighty King has seen great battles, and led greater armies. So I ask you now to raise your glasses
and toast his health, his fortune and his honour. To the King.”

“To the King.” They echoed back.

Loki turned to where King Dimcken sat, beaming up at him with a mixture of pride and lust in his
eyes.

“I wish to present to you my gift, Husband.” He said. Two servants brought out the coat, they were a
lot more muscly than either Fosxyr or Camrryen. Loki suspected that they had been drafted into the
job so as not to ruin the effect of his presentation. “A fine fur coat, to keep out the coming winter
chill.” He said.

King Dimcken stood and kissed him in full view of everyone. Loki did his best to appear compliant,
although he still could not make himself kiss the King back.

The crowd cheered loudly, rattling the plates on the table. King Dimcken released Loki and waved
to them cheerfully. His suspicious mood had vanished entirely, now he looked happier than Loki had
ever seen him.

King Dimcken scooped up his own cup and held it high. “Another toast! To my dear wife, who has
made me so very happy.” He said, pulling Loki close.

There was more cheering and sloshing as the nobles drank.

“Your granddaughter, my Husband.” Loki said quietly.

“Another toast!” King Dimcken yelled, he was clearly affected by drink but nobody seemed to mind
in the slightest as they were all drunk too. “To OUR darling granddaughter, who was born this
morning, on my birthday, to my dear son Camtan and his wife Sofftia. Stand up my boy, stand!”

Camtan stood and gave the crowd a wave as they drank to the health of his new daughter.

“Everyone, I command you to be merry! Tonight is for celebration! And I have so much to
celebrate.” King Dimcken said.

Loki was finally released as the crowd went back to their drink and the music started up again. He
took a drink of his own and watched attentively as King Dimcken’s sons each gave him their
presents.

The feast went until the early hours of the morning. King Dimcken fell asleep at one point, and Loki
had to be undressed by Fosxyr as he was swaying on his feet by the time he reached his bed.

“You did well Your Grace, very well.” Fosxyr said.

“Good.” Loki mumbled as he lay down. “Now I just have to get through tomorrow night.”

Unseen above him, Fosxyr winced. “I’m sure you will be alright Your Grace, just get some sleep
now.” He said.
Loki was already asleep.
Forty Seven Steps

Chapter Summary

There is no Difference between a Queen and a Slave in a Mad King’s World

Chapter Notes

Right. Almost all of this chapter is serious, painful and shocking non con sex. There is a bit at the end that is not, but if you prefer to skip over this sort of thing then you've been warned.

Loki was shaking slightly. It was two nights after the feast and King Dimcken had finally asked him to stay after dinner. Whatever the King wanted, tonight was the night.

Oblivious to Loki’s silent terror, King Dimcken was all smiles at dinner, and bid his sons a fond goodnight.

Like flipping a switch, his expression turned lustful.

“Loki.” He breathed.

Loki forced himself to hold still.

“Go into the bedroom my darling; there is something I want you to wear. It’s on the bed, go on. Call me when you’re ready” King Dimcken said.

Loki gave him a small bow and went into the bedroom.

It was golden in colour. That much Loki could see straight away. He approached it while trying to calm his breathing.

A wide, decorative belt, with two sheer lengths of golden material that overlapped just slightly at the back and reached to his ankles, and a thicker, rectangular panel at the front that ended at his knees.

He undressed and put it on, carefully doing up the belt with fingers that shook slightly. The sheer material meant that the curve and line of his buttocks could be made out should anyone stand behind him. He felt horribly vulnerable.

There was something else on the bed. Something… made of chains.

Loki picked up the neck brace and held it in front of him. It was wide and made of hundreds of little chain loops that would sit decoratively on his shoulders, but it also had a thicker, more solid part that sat around his neck. This part had three tiny loops on it, through which passed some chains which was connected to the rest of it.

He took a deep breath to steel himself and fastened the brace around his neck. Then he put on the
wrist and ankle cuffs. The ankles were connected by chains to his wrists, which were connected to his neck. The chains were very loose, and clearly designed to be decorative rather than restrict movement.

There were more chains that ran from his ankles to a connection point shaped like an egg, which then had another single chain going to the back of his neck.

There was nothing else. He was dressed.

He stood silently for a minute in the large bedroom. Logic told him that if he called out, the King would come in, they would do whatever it was that he wanted, and then it would be over and Loki would be free to get up and read while the King slept.

So he should call out, get it started, because the sooner it started the sooner it would finish.

He stayed silent.

He had to do it. It was going to happen eventually anyway, and far better for the King to be happy than to be kept waiting and grow annoyed.

He said nothing.

He had to. There was no way out but forwards. Whatever it was, he’d survive it, for Thor.

Loki took a deep breath, and let it out again.

He had to do it.

He took another breath, and before he could lose his nerve he called out. “Husband?”

The door opened and King Dimcken walked in. He was naked, and his penis was already half hard. His eyes widened at the sight of Loki standing there and his mouth curled upwards into a sick grin.

“Oh my darling beauty.” He growled.

Loki swallowed nervously as King Dimcken approached.

“Darling, fetch me the oil in the drawer.” King Dimcken said.

He licked his lips as Loki went to the drawer and pulled out the oil. “Good boy. Now, give it here.”

Loki handed the bottle over and stood nervously as he watched King Dimcken pour some out onto his fingers.

“Turn around my love.” He said. Loki nervously turned and stood still as behind him, the King took a hold of the connector.

Loki had less than a second to realise why it had looked so strange, sort of egg shaped, with the three chains all connected to one loop at the wider end.

King Dimcken reached beneath the sheer fabric and pressed it, oiled up, into Loki’s anus.

Loki fought not to cry out as the King worked the egg into his body. It was painful, and he stretched open slowly as the King pushed harder and harder.

“That’s it, just a little more, good, good, let it in, ah.” King Dimcken muttered as he pushed.
With a sickening sensation, Loki’s body opened and the egg slide inside. He was left standing awkwardly, gasping for air as his body tried to adjust to the invasion.

“Turn around and kneel my darling.” King Dimcken said in his ear.

Trembling from the feelings forced upon his body, Loki turned and knelt, fighting to keep the expression of pain from his face. The chains behind him were shorter than the ones at the front, and he felt them tug at the egg inside of him if he moved too far in any direction. There were tears in his eyes as King Dimcken stepped forward and pressed the tip of his now hard penis against Loki’s lips.

Loki reluctantly let his lips part to allow the King access. King Dimcken pushed his penis forwards until it hit the back of Loki’s mouth.

“Good boy.” He murmured. “Just suck on it, good boy, get me nice and ready.”

Loki obeyed, hollowing his cheeks and working his tongue over the vein lines while desperately trying to think of something else. Thor. No. Not here. Not like this. The tea fields. Riding over the tea fields on Lightning. The wind in his hair, the smell of the tea.

The King was moaning somewhere above him. Suddenly Loki felt the King grab his hair in a fistful. He felt it pull at the roots as the King tightened his grip.

“Ooh yes, oooh yeeeesss, good boy. You look so good down there, on your knees. I just want to come down your throat.” He groaned.

As disgusting as that was, at least it would end it, and Loki found he was hoping the King would finish already so that he could have the egg removed.

But instead King Dimcken pulled back, moaning softly as he looked down lustily at Loki. “Get up and go to the vanity table.” He said, his voicing catching as he stared with a horrible intensity.

Loki struggled to his feet, the horrible egg shifted inside of him and he walked awkwardly to the vanity on the other side of the room. He tried not to limp, but knew that he was failing. He couldn’t stop a slight whimper as he bent painfully over the table. The egg was pulled back against his entrance by the movement, and he fought to keep from sobbing. The sheer panels fell neatly to either side, perfectly framing his buttocks and the thin chains that ran from his anus to his ankles.

He saw the King approach in the mirror. King Dimcken was rubbing his penis in an oiled hand, the bulbous red tip kept appearing and disappearing as he came closer. Loki could see the fear in his own eyes as he watched King Dimcken’s face. The man looked like a wolf.


Loki choked back a cry as the King’s penis pushed into his vagina. The egg inside of him was pressed upwards as space became restricted. He couldn’t quite hold in his sob.

“I fought your father for his kingdom. I cut him down and pursued you through your castle. I caught you in the throne room and took you on the floor.” King Dimcken said as he thrust slowly in and out, building up his fantasy with moans and gasps.

Loki just tried to keep breathing. It had to end soon, it just had to. The King couldn’t last much longer. King Dimcken leaned down until he could talk straight into Loki’s ear.

“You fought me you beautiful boy, you kicked and fought but I overcame you. I claimed you for my
own.” He gasped heavily into Loki’s ear.

But Loki barely heard him. All he knew was that by leaning forwards, the King had finally touched the one spot on his back that had so far remained clean. He could *feel* the inky stuff slipping over his skin, covering the spot completely.

“But I tamed you my darling. I thrust into your beautiful body and you *liked* it.” King Dimcken said, straightening up and taking Loki by the hips. “You couldn’t help yourself, you just pushed – ugh – right – ugh – back.” He started pulling Loki’s hips back as he thrust forward, forcing the chains to tug at the egg inside of him with every movement. The three chains tugged in different directions, pulling Loki’s entrance slightly open over and over as the egg pushed hard against his insides.

Loki chocked on his cries as they rocked together. He desperately tried to imagine himself somewhere else, *anywhere* else. Anywhere that wasn’t here, like this.

“You pushed back, didn’t you?” King Dimcken asked, breathing heavily.

Loki realised in horror that the King was expecting an answer. He buried his face in his arms, trying to ignore the pain inside of him.

“Didn’t you?” King Dimcken asked again, pulling and thrusting a little harder, making Loki go up onto his toes in response.

Loki forced himself to speak. “Yes.” He gasped.

“You moaned under me, didn’t you?”

Pull, thrust. “Yes.”

“You begged for it, didn’t you?”

Pull, thrust. “Yes.”

“You loved it.”

Pull, thrust. “Yes.”

“You wanted it.”

Pull, thrust. “Yes.”

“You wanted me.”

Pull, thrust.

“You wanted me.”

Loki was crying into his arms. He didn’t want to say it. Even though it was a fantasy, a sick horrid fantasy of King Dimcken’s that he had to play out, he didn’t want to say it.

“You want me!”

Pull, thrust.
He had to.

“Yes.” Loki gasped, utterly broken.

In the mirror he saw the King’s face change. King Dimcken’s cheeks turned red and he held himself hard inside Loki as he released his seed.

“Good boy.” King Dimcken moaned as he collapsed on top of Loki’s body, completely spent.

Afterwards he pulled Loki onto the bed and kissed him heavily for a few minutes, until his energy finally gave out and he fell asleep with his arm flung across Loki’s body.

Loki lay still under the King’s arm. He didn’t want to get up, he didn’t want to do anything except take the egg from his body, but he knew that if he did he would have to put it back again in the morning or the King would get mad. He couldn’t even face the thought of doing it to himself, so instead he lay there and tried not to move as the night drifted onwards.

He couldn’t sleep. He was in pain, and his mind *hurt*. He kept flashing to the memory of being bent over painfully as the King thrust. And now he lay here, so close to his tormenter and there was nothing he could do.

He lay still until the sun rose and the King woke, grinning in pleasure from the night before.

King Dimcken removed the egg himself, making Loki roll onto his stomach and gently tugging at the chains until he worked the egg out. He leaned forwards and kissed the puckered and bruised hole gently, before bestowing another kiss on each cheek.

“You were magnificent last night my sweet wife.” He said, reaching into the drawer by his side and taking out the key to Loki’s chains. He unlocked each one slowly, taking his time rubbing the soft flesh at Loki’s wrists and ankles. When he was done, Loki carefully rose and reached a trembling hand for his robe. The King’s words reached his tired mind and he fought not to sob right there. A response would be expected, but he didn’t have one.

“I thank you for… indulging my desires.” King Dimcken added.

Loki wanted to vomit, he could feel his stomach churning. As though he had the slightest bit of choice in the matter?! Even if he could refuse without causing trouble *or* mischief, he would certainly anger the King, and he dreaded what would happen to him then.

“It was your birthday.” Loki said, sticking to the facts. He pulled on his robe and bowed awkwardly, taking his leave.

Fosxyr was waiting for him in the outer room. Loki couldn’t walk properly, and he limped slowly out of the King’s chambers.

The journey back to his chambers was agony. Every step caused pain to shoot through him, and by the time he reached his chambers tears were rolling down his face. He was lucky that no one was about so early in the morning.

He limped slowly through his enormous rooms and into the bathing room. He ignored the steaming bath filled with scented water and went straight into the smaller room containing the toilet. He fell painfully to his knees and began to vomit, spilling out what was left in his stomach as he heaved and cried.

Fosxyr knelt beside him and carefully pulled Loki’s hair back from his face.
“Oh Your Grace.” He whispered softly as Loki heaved again and again.

He sat there as Loki’s heaves gave way to cries, his cries to sobs and his sobs to begging.

“I can’t.” He said between gasps and swallows. “I can’t. I thought I could but I can’t. He does thing to me. I can’t do it. I have to but I can’t. Make it stop, please, please, please make him stop.”

“I can’t Loki, I can’t.” Fosxyr said with tears in his eyes. “I wish I could but I can’t.”

“Please, please, *please* make him stop. Fosxyr, *please*.” Loki begged as he dissolved into sobs again.

He stayed there by the toilet for an hour, alternately sobbing, vomiting and begging. Fosxyr stayed with him the whole time, holding his hair back, holding him and rocking him back and forth gently as he fell apart.

When Loki had been silent for twenty minutes, clinging tightly to Fosxyr robe all the while, the servant gently roused him.

“Loki, come now, you must rise. Wraenyr will have kept the bath hot.” He said gently.

Loki shook his head. “I never want to move again.” He said. “It hurt so much.” He whispered into Fosxyr’s robe.

“I’m so sorry Your Grace. I am. I wish with all my heart that you did not have to endure such things. Please get up, and please don’t give up hope. You will not be here forever. Please Your Grace, please. Come and bathe.”

Loki gave a shuddering kind of breath and nodded. Fosxyr helped Loki to rise, wincing in sympathy at the look of pain that crossed Loki’s face. He helped Loki to limp painfully to the bath and gently removed his robe.

Loki stepped gingerly into the bath and lowered himself down into the water. He sat there in the heat silently as Fosxyr took a washcloth and carefully began to wipe it over Loki’s shoulders.

“How do you need a healer?” He asked gently.

Loki swallowed hard. “I don’t know. It hu-hurt so much, but nothing tore, nothing b-broke. Nothing but me.” He added quietly.

Fosxyr winced behind him. “I cannot begin to understand what you have to endure Your Grace.” He said.

“But you’ve seen it.” Loki said in a dull voice. “You saw her do it. Did she cry too? Did she vomit up everything because it disgusted her so much she just *had* to get it out?”

Fosxyr was silent for a long time.

“Yes.” He said at last. “And I could do nothing for her either.”

“You do something.” Loki said. “You do everything, I couldn’t survive without you.”

Fosxyr wiped the cloth down Loki’s back. “I wish I could have spared you from all of this.” He said. “There is a sickness in this palace, and we all have it. We all pretend that everything is fine when we all know it isn’t.”
Loki turned to look at him, although the movement made him hurt. “You didn’t send me here.” He said. “You didn’t make me marry him, or command me not to cause trouble. But you are always there when he’s done. Thank you Fosxyr.”

Fosxyr reached forwards and wiped the tears from Loki’s cheeks with the cloth. “Why are you unable to defy your father? Is it his power? Or is there something else that binds you?” He asked.

Loki looked away. “I have to do my duty.” He said quietly.

Fosxyr raised an eyebrow at the back of Loki’s head. “Well, when you’ve done your duty you can go home and tell your lover that they are luckier than all the men and maidens in Vanaheim, whoever they are.”

Loki whirled, then winced as the pain flared across his underside.

“You know?” He gasped.

“I am not so blind that I cannot see a boy in love.” Fosxyr said. “Tell me nothing, it is safer for you that way, but I hope very much that they are worthy of your sacrifice.”

“They are.” Loki said. “He is.”

Fosxyr smiled gently. “I did not hear that Your Grace, now sit out a bit so that I might wash your hair.” He said.
Loki's grandparents arrived the next day, and they were not alone. Haewkyr stepped out of the carriage and surveyed the palace grounds with a critical eye.

"I suppose it will do." He said dryly.

Lord Fallconyr waved him forwards. "Be polite boy, and help your grandmother with getting out of the coach."

"I need no help." Lord Eadgleyr said. "You are the one with the cane my dear."

"An old riding injury, it is nothing." Lord Fallconyr argued.

"How you got the injury is irrelevant my love, the fact is you need help far more than I do." His wife replied.

Haewkyr rolled his eyes and held out a hand for both of them. They both ignored him.

"Shall I go and see where Loki is?" He asked them instead.

"You can't." Lord Fallconyr said. "There is protocol, you must wash away the dust from your journey and then go to his chambers so that the servant may announce you to him."

Haewkyr stuck his tongue out. "Fine, I will make myself all clean and pretty for the court."

"As will we all." Lord Eadgleyr said with a slight edge of determination in his voice. "We will visit as a family."

Haewkyr bowed at them insolently. "I must do as my elders command." He said with a cheeky smile.

Lord Fallconyr rolled his eyes at him. "You watch yourself my boy, this is the palace and you are a noble, you are going to have to act like it."

Haewkyr's face turned serious. "I understand Grandfather. I will be careful." He said. "I just want to make sure that Loki is alright."

"As do we all." Lord Eadgleyr said, giving him a hug. "We're going to be spending a lot more time here for the foreseeable future."

Haewkyr turned to scan the windows of the palace. He saw nothing but a wall of glass, and yet the whole place still looked ominous.
Loki was sitting awkwardly on the softest chair in his chambers. Fosxyr had put another very soft cushion down for him as well, but he still couldn't get comfortable.

He had to go back to the Tower for magic lessons the next day and he was dreading it. He hadn't had the chance to speak to Shiarpa, Thainia or Daenceia since Rohundia's betrayal. They'd been her friend before they'd been his and he wasn't sure how they would react to what had happened.

And then there was Sheiftyr. As far as Loki knew she was still serving her sentence for being rude to him. He had to try and find a way to convince the King to lift it, but he had no idea how. Camtan had said very clearly that King Dimcken never changed his mind once he'd made a decision, a fact that Loki had seen months before when he'd tried to convince the King to pay for his magic lessons. It seemed like an impossible task. Maybe it was.

He resolved to try after he went back to his lessons, maybe he could claim that the guards were making it impossible to study. He may not be able to get the whole sentence lifted, but even part of it like the removal of the guards would be something.

He shifted again and winced as he felt a throb of pain. The healer had said that it was just bruising. ‘Just’ bruising. Her statement almost made him laugh out loud with bitterness. She had suggested a soothing cream, but he'd lied and said that it wasn't that bad. The truth was he couldn't stand the thought of letting anyone else touch him there, even if it was to help. Fosxyr had known, and suggested that the healer leave the cream in case Loki changed his mind. But for now he was waiting it out.

The very thought of King Dimcken made him shudder. He couldn't concentrate on his books, he was too aware of the minutes slipping by, one by one until it was time for dinner and he would have to sit beside his Husband once again.

Fosxyr had done his best. He'd picked out Loki's loosest and most comfortable robes to wear. He'd made him hot tea and brought him plain biscuits that wouldn't make his stomach roll. He'd wrapped a blanket around Loki once he was seated and placed his books within easy reach so that he didn't have to get up, and he'd offered, very quietly, to apply the cream if Loki felt he needed it.

Loki had declined, but he was grateful to him for everything.

He'd eventually fallen asleep in the chair as his exhaustion caught up with him, and he'd managed to sleep for a few hours before waking with a start, half expecting the King to be standing over him.

Camrryen appeared through the servant’s door.

“Your Grace, Lords Fallconyr and Eadgleyr are here, as is Sir Haewkyr.” He said.

Loki lowered his book slowly. He felt vulnerable, even with all they knew, he didn’t want to face them. He didn’t want them to know *this*.

Had Rohundia felt this way when she plied her trade on the streets before the resistance had found her? Trapped in a situation she’d been unable to escape, longing for everyone to know what she had to do while at the same time desperate for them never to find out. Wanting sympathy, but not pity?

No wonder she had joined the first cause to give her an escape. He even understood her anger, for all that he hated what she’d done to him.

But if he denied his grandparents now, then he would be denying some of the only allies he had.

“Let them in.” He said quietly.
Camrryen nodded and disappeared. A few minutes later the door opened and the group walked in.

Loki tried to put a smile on his face. He didn’t have to tell them. They could talk about other things, like the feast, or his present to the King.

Loki locked eyes with Lord Eadgleyr. The Lord’s expression turned worried. Loki bit his lip as his eyes started to water.

“Oh my baby what happened?” Lord Eadgleyr said stepping forward with his arms open.

Loki stayed seated and started to cry.

He told them all of it, every little detail spilled out as he sat there. Lord Eadgleyr sat on the arm of the chair and held him tightly, stroking his forehead as he cried. Lord Fallconyr sat opposite him with a face like thunder and Haewkyr paced in front of the fire angrily.

“He shouldn’t be allowed.” He hissed angrily. “I know he’s the King but he can’t do this. Can he?”

“I’m afraid he can.” Lord Fallconyr said quietly. “In the bedroom, he is both King and husband. Loki cannot disobey him.”

“I would never expect my future wife to do such depraved things.” He said.

“Lower your voice Haewkyr or I will send you home.” Lord Fallconyr said. “This is the palace, this is politics, and if you stand against the King he will execute you. We will do all we can, to the limits of our power, but you *must* mind your words.”

Haewkyr scowled but said nothing.

“We are here my baby.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “Just let yourself breath now.”

Loki pressed into his side and tried to relax. It took some time but eventually he was able to let the tension go from his shoulders.

Lord Fallconyr meanwhile had risen and written a short letter, which he gave to Camrryen to deliver to the King.

“What did you say?” Loki asked fearfully as the servant left the room.

“I asked him if he and his sons would consider having dinner with me, given that you are unwell.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Loki looked alarmed. “You lied to him? You told him I was sick? What if he sends the healer?”

“I did not lie, I said you were not able to leave your chambers at present which I feel must be down to the late night feasting, a fact which I will hopefully be able to bring up and discuss with him at dinner tonight.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Haewkyr raised an eyebrow. “You’re better at this than me.” He said.

“Of course I am, I’ve had far longer to practice.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Lord Eadgleyr, meanwhile, had turned his attention back to Loki.
“You said you had some cream?” He asked.

Loki turned his face away. “It hurts too much to twist around, and I don’t want anyone else touching me there.” He said quietly.

Lord Eadgleyr frowned at his words. “I am going to get tough with you Loki. Come on, stand up and we shall go to the bedroom. If you don’t want someone else to do it then you *will* do it yourself. You will feel better as soon as you do.”

Loki shook his head reluctantly, but Lord Eadgleyr was having none of it.

“Up you get my dear boy. Come on.” He said.

Loki rose slowly and followed his grandmother into the bedroom. He couldn’t hide his limp as he did, and the look on Haewkyr’s face promised a world of pain to the culprit.

Lord Eadgleyr helped him sit down on the bed and retrieved the cream.

“How I want you to use this Loki. I will take no arguments. You must do what you can to protect yourself.

Loki pulled his robes up slowly. Lord Eadgleyr turned around to give him privacy. When he was exposed he scooped up a little of the cream and tried to reach his anus from the front, so that he didn’t have to twist. He did have to bend, and whimpered as his body protested, but he managed to smear a little of the cream onto his entrance.

“I’m done.” He said a moment later.

Lord Eadgleyr turned and regarded him with a shrewd eye. “Is it working?” He asked.

It was on the surface, although there was so much swelling inside that it didn’t make much of a difference.

“A little.” Loki said.

“Did you get it inside as well?” Lord Eadgleyr asked.

Loki went quiet for a moment. “I couldn’t reach.” He admitted at last.

Lord Eadgleyr nodded slowly. “May I try?” he asked gently. “I know that I ask for a great deal of trust from you Loki but I know that this will help you, both in body and in mind.”

Loki frowned, but carefully lay down on his stomach so that his grandmother could reach him.

“I didn’t know you six months ago.” He tried to joke as Lord Eadgleyr pulled his skirts up.

“With thirteen children and a Husband, I’ve seen every kind of bottom in Vanheim.” Lord Eadgleyr said matter-of-factly. “I’ve been nursemaid to all of them at one time or another, although not always on their bottoms.”

He kept up the chatter as he scooped some more cream from the jar and carefully leaned forwards.

“Relax if you can Loki, I am going to touch you now.” He said gently.

Loki took a deep breath and told himself that this man most definitely did not want to hurt him.
The cream was cold and made him jump slightly, but he didn’t fight it as his grandmother gently applied it to his swollen and bruised anus.

It was over quickly, and Lord Eadgleyr straightened up. “There, all done. Do you feel better?”

“I do.” Loki said, rising. The pain was already a dull ache instead of a sharp pang. They walked into the bathing room to wash their hands. Loki noticed that his limping had reduced already.

“If you have trouble applying it again, I will help you.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “There is precious little I can do for you Loki, but I will be here for you from now on. I will not be going back to our lands unless you are coming with me.”

Loki shook his head. “No, no that is too great a sacrifice. You should come and go as you always did. I will be alright.”

He was lying and they both knew it.

“I will stay for you my baby. You need me.” Lord Eadgleyr said with warmth in his eyes.

Loki protested some more, but Lord Eadgleyr could not be swayed. Neither could Lord Fallconyr, who announced that his wife’s suggestion was a sensible one.

“You need protection, more than even I realised. We will stay here, perhaps our presence will remind him that you are not without family, or allies.” He said.

“I’m going to find a way to stop him, at least for a little while.” Haewkyr said.

Lord Fallconyr shushed him. “Don’t speak of things you cannot control.” He said. “You came for Loki, now stay here and talk to him. I have business I must take care of. The shipments are being held up at the Bifrost site and I need to sort out why.”

Haewkyr winked at Loki. “Yes Grandfather. Of course I shall give up my crazy ideas.” He said.

Loki felt cold at his daring. “Don’t do anything stupid.” He begged. “You are not our Grandfather, you will not be given the same consideration that he is.”

“Wise words Loki.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “You would do well to heed them.” He added to Haewkyr, who scowled.

“I only want to help.” He said.

“Help by being here.” Lord Eadgleyr said, a little sharply. “Do not get yourself into trouble Haewkyr, the very thought of it is enough to put me in my grave.”

“For you, dear Grandmother, I shall restrain myself.” Haewkyr said, his expression was a little more serious and Loki was able to relax slightly.
Forty Nine Steps

Chapter Summary

The Duality of the King

That night, Lords Fallconyr and Eadgleyr entertained the King to dinner as they had so many times in the past. The Princes sat politely the way they had as children and let their elders speak.

“How goes the tea business?” King Dimcken asked politely.

“Well, very well. The exports are strong and we’re almost ready to put our next tea on the market. It is flavoured with the fruits of summer.” Lord Fallconyr said.

“That sounds wonderful. I must say I am surprised to see you again so soon. You normally spend your summers at home.” King Dimcken replied.

“We decided to spend the season here instead. We used to spend so much time here when we were younger, and we have grandchildren who must be introduced to the wonders of the court.” Lord Fallconyr said pleasantly.

King Dimcken nodded. “That is fair; they will be the courtiers of the future after all.”

“I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Your Majesty, for allowing our grandson Loki to visit us. We really appreciate having the chance to bond with him, having grown up in Asgard we have not gotten a chance to know him the way we have with our other grandchildren.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

King Dimcken nodded magnanimously. “You are very welcome. He said he had a good time.”

Lord Eadgleyr nodded gently. “I would be very appreciative if you would allow him to visit again next year, although not so close to such an important occasion of course.”

King Dimcken looked wary. “Next year?” He asked.

“Just for a few weeks, you are more than welcome to come too of course Your Majesty.” Lord Fallconyr said smoothly.

King Dimcken smiled tightly. “I’m sure that will be just fine when the time comes.” He said. “We can discuss it further next year.”

“Of course Your Majesty.” Lord Eadgleyr said with a courtier’s smile.

“How was Loki this evening?” Musleen asked quietly.

King Dimcken shot him a look of irritation. “I’m sure he’s just tired, he’ll be fine after some rest.” He said.

“I am certain of it.” Lord Fallconyr said. “He was *very* tired though, such a lot of activity after a long journey must have worn him out.”
King Dimcken shot him a suspicious look. “Activity?” He asked.

“The feast, I heard it lasted almost all night.” Lord Fallconyr answered. “But a little sleep will do him right I’m sure.”

“Yes.” King Dimcken said, looking uncomfortable.

“I confess that I am surprised that he was so easily worn out, he’s so young, barely more than a child really, and you know how energetic they can be.” Lord Fallconyr continued.

“He’s still probably recovering from the attack by the resistance, he will be fine.” King Dimcken said, a little shortly.

“That is a shame, he was so relaxed with us that I thought him quite recovered, but of course such acts cannot be erased so easily, and he was so far from the palace where it all happened, it is only natural that here he should be facing the fear of it once more.” Lord Fallconyr said.

“Well, he will be well taken care of here.” King Dimcken said. “I will not let such a thing happen again.”

The heads of the three princes were turning back and forth from one to the other, watching a battle that was beyond their ability to fight. Haewkyr sat quietly and stared at his soup as he listened to his grandfather weave his net.

“Of that I have no doubt.” Lord Fallconyr said smoothly.

“I know your security is unbreakable, but still, I cannot help but worry that such an attack may happen again.” Lord Eadgelyr said, every inch the worried grandmother. “Is there anything that can be done to prevent his mind from being so horribly invaded?”

“Do not worry my dear wife.” Lord Fallconyr said, reaching out and taking Lord Eadgleyr’s hand lovingly. “Loki has mind magic, he told me himself. I’m sure that his Majesty has already arranged for Loki to learn how to shut his mind off from such attacks. After all, he is learning at the Tower, a few more lessons will be easy.”

King Dimcken scowled slightly. “It has not been arranged yet.” He said.

Lord Eadgleyr made a concerned noise.

“But then he has not returned to the Tower yet.” King Dimcken said hastily. “He will of course be trained in the art of mental protection. I will have Polweren himself teach him, Polweren is the most powerful of all the mind mages. Private lessons with him will teach Loki everything he needs to know.”

Lord Eadgleyr smiled then, looking relieved. “I am so glad that you are taking care of him. I worry about him, he just looks so young sometimes, so vulnerable.”

“Yes.” Muttered the King. “Although he *has* reached the age of manhood.”

“Oh yes, my wife knows that, but having raised thirteen children of our own, you learn to spot the ones who need a little more time to mature.” Lord Fallconyr said. “Loki has had a terrible time this past month, but it is reassuring to know how well you are taking care of him.”

King Dimcken’s mouth made a smile, although his eyes looked guilty. “I do try to. I gave him a horse of his own, did he enjoy riding it while he was away?”
“He did. Very much so. Haewkyr here made sure he was careful though.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Haewkyr bowed his head as the King looked at him. “He is riding fairly well for one who only started learning six months ago.” He said softly.

“Good, good.” King Dimcken said.

Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr spent the entire dinner carefully moving the topic of conversation from Loki to other things and back again. The final result of their dinner was that Loki would now be spending an extra day away from the palace while he learned to protect himself from mental attacks, he would increase his riding lessons so that he might improve as quickly as possible (to stop him trying to rush ahead, you know how impatient young people are!) and he would be taken out to see more of the fine capital city, (Camtan and Musleen immediately volunteered).

The King was not happy, but neither could he doubt the logic in their arguments. He was also feeling slightly guilty for once again failing to acknowledge Loki outside of the bedroom.

It was this last result that explained why Loki received a gift from the King the following morning.

“It’s a medallion.” Loki said, holding it up to the light.

“And a very fine one too Your Grace.” Fosxyr said.

“Why did he give me this?” Loki asked, worried.

“Chatter in the servant’s rooms indicate that he wishes to spoil you a little, after it was subtly pointed out to him that you have not been given that much attention.” Fosxyr explained with a small smile.

“I’ve had all the attention I could ever want.” Loki said, putting the medallion back into the fine wooden box that it had arrived in.

“Attention of a different kind.” Fosxyr said. “There are rumours, small at this stage, that he is using you more like a toy than a wife.”

Loki raised an eyebrow at him. “Hypothetical question Fosxyr. Is a rumour a rumour if it turns out to be true?” He asked.

“I cannot say Your Grace, I do not have a philosophical mind.” Fosxyr deadpanned. “But this rumour in particular is not a good one. The people like you very much, they think you are young and vibrant and rather enchanting. It worries them to think you may not be properly taken care of.”

Loki sighed. “I mustn’t worry the people.” He said.

Fosxyr gave him a quizzical look. “That they worry about you is a good sign. You’re disappearance from the palace so soon after the attack sparked concern that you may have been injured. And all the security in the nine realms couldn’t stop the knowledge that your father came to see you and His Majesty shortly after the attack from spilling out into the general populous. They think you were hurt, and they worry, if not for you yourself, for Vanaheim’s reputation as a peaceful realm.”

“They’re embarrassed?” Loki asked.

“Rather a lot. You are a visitor, for all that you have come to live at the palace. They do not wish for you to see the darker side of us, any more than you would want the less savoury places of Asgard to
be seen by them.” Fosxyr explained.

Loki thought it over. “It’s a little silly.” He said at last. “All the realms have things that are not perfect, that are dangerous or dark, and yet we do like to pretend that we don’t whenever we have visitors.”

Fosxyr nodded. “It is the way of things.” He said wisely.

Loki shot him a grin, the first one since the King’s latest attentions, and rose carefully to head to the bathing room.

“I’m glad the people like me.” He said. “At least I can say I have fulfilled that part of my mission here.” His face turned serious. “I will find out today whether my friends still do.”

Fosxyr helped him to remove his sleeping robe. “I’m sure they will not hold another’s acts against you Your Grace.” He said. “Shiarpia is not the type, certainly.”

“I cannot believe she did that to you.” Shiarpia said flatly as Loki walked into the classroom. “I thought I knew her better than that.”

“Hello Shiarpia, how are you today.” Loki said as he carefully sat down.

“*I’m* fine, *you* were attacked, and then you vanished, no one knew where you’d gone. And then puff, like magic you were back, sitting at the King’s side during his birthday feast like nothing had ever happened to you. Where *were* you Loks? I worried.”

Loki felt a smile creep onto his face. “I was in the country, getting some peace after everything that happened.” He said. “I am alright, I just needed a little time to heal.”

She pouted. “You should have told me. We’re friends aren’t we?”

“We are.” Loki said, relieved. “But I had no time, it was all arranged around me. Fosxyr went with me, why don’t you complain to him for not telling you anything?”

“Uncle Fosxyr never says a thing about what goes on in the palace. He’s impossible to crack, I’ve tried.” She said, resting her chin in her hand. “I’m sorry that you were hurt Loks. It upsetrs me to think of how little I really knew Rohundia.”

“It upsets us all.” Thainia said from behind him.

Loki fought to keep from wincing as he turned in his chair to face her. “I was worried you’d be angry at me.” He confessed. “After all, she was your friend first.”

“She attacked you and tried to kill our King.” Daenceia said. “That is treason. I cannot be friends with someone who has conducted treason. I will miss her though.”

“She died for her beliefs.” Shiarpia said. “I happen to disagree with both her beliefs and her methods, but she had conviction.”

Loki turned to face the front again as Sheiftyr walked in, flanked by her guards. “Yes.” He said, thinking of the circumstances that led to Rohundia’s convictions. “She did have that.”

Loki was approached at luncheon by Polweren, who wanted to sort out when he would be coming for his new lessons. He did not look overly happy about shuffling his entire schedule for Loki, but an
order from the King could not be disobeyed. He arranged to see Loki the following day for private study in the morning.

“My theory class is that afternoon.” He said. “Is Your Grace expected to attend?”

“Of course.” Loki said, a little puzzled on why he would ask. “You can’t properly understand the practice if you do not learn the theory.”

Polweren looked a little happier.

“I am glad that we are of one mind, Your Grace. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Please forgive me Loki, but while I would never wish to go through what you did, I am still jealous, you get to have *mind* magic lessons. Only a few students a year get to have such a privilege.” Daenceia said after Polweren had walked away.

“Why is that?” Loki asked.

“Mind magic can only be taught one on one, at least, the practical side of it. Polweren selects a new student only when one of the old ones graduates. He’s made time for you of course, but so many of us can never develop our natural talents, there just aren’t enough places in his class.” She explained.

“So you never get a chance to study it?” Loki asked. “Never?”

“There are books about it in the library, we can study those, in fact you have a better chance of getting a place if you’ve already shown a good head for the theory.” Shiarpia said. “I would love to be his student. There is so much you can *do* with mind magic, be a healer of the mind, a messenger for troop movements in battle, placing special enchantments on objects - ”

“At least you *have* mind magic.” Thainia said. “I have none, which is how most mages are. Mind magic is special.”

“Not special enough.” Shiarpia said pointedly.

“At least *you* didn’t get a visit from the palace guards after Rohundia’s attack.” Daenceia said to Thainia. “We were all interviewed for hours and hours. It was exhausting.”

“Speaking of exhausting, you look a lot better now than you did the last time I saw you.” Loki said. “You said you couldn’t sleep.”

Daenceia blushed lightly. “I was concerned about something, but it’s better now.” She said. “I cannot believe I did not spot Rohundia’s actions that day, she was right in front of me the whole time. I should have seen it.”

“No.” Loki said. “No one is to blame for any of it. She chose to do what she did. No guilt. Please.”

Daenceia shrugged. “If you say so, but I will still second guess myself, because that’s what I do.”

“And we wouldn’t have you any other way.” Shiarpia said, leaning over and giving her a one-armed hug.

Loki headed back to his afternoon classes feeling as though a weight had been lifted from his chest. His friends still liked him. He was going to be alright.

He sat and listened as Sheiftyr explained the properties behind transforming one type of object into a different kind. She demonstrated using a rotten leg of pork, which she turned into perfectly good leg
of beef.

“That’s disgusting.” Shiarpia said loudly.

“Thank you Shiarpia for your wise commentary.” Sheiftyr said dryly. “Perhaps you can think of a better way to feed the starving?”

“Give them the palace leftovers.” Shiarpia said bluntly. “Then they wouldn’t have to eat rotten food.”

Sheiftyr’s eyes flickered to the guards beside her. “There is nothing wrong with this food now that it has been transformed. You see all matter is made up of very small particles, so small you cannot see them with the naked eye.”

“Naked.” Muttered a girl toward the back with a giggle.

Sheiftyr stared at her until she turned bright red, then continued. “These particles are so small that they cannot go rotten. The ‘rotten’ part of our food is in fact due to a particular combination of particles that react badly with our insides, so by trans-mutating the food, by shifting the particles around into a new formation, we eliminate the problem of spoilage. How easy a transmutation depends on both the starting and finishing particles. If they are similar, and merely require reorganisation, then the spell will be easier than if you are trying to force them to be something that they are not. So pork into beef is fairly easy, but pork into gold is not.”

There was a collective groan from the class.

“One day you may achieve such great heights, but only if you practice. Your homework will be to turn a piece of rotten pork into a piece of good meat of any kind. The more different they are the higher your marks will be.” Sheiftyr said. “Now come and get your piece of meat.”

She had little pieces in jars for them to take away.

Loki rose slowly, his anus was starting to ache again, and made his way up to the front to collect his piece. “Thank you Lady Sheiftyr.” He said quietly.

“I am sorry Loki.” She replied, equally soft. “I should have known something was going on.”

Loki shook his head slightly in reply. “How could you have?” He asked. “I’m sorry too.” He added, for what they both knew.

The guards watched their interaction carefully, no doubt they would report on any attempt by Sheiftyr to make Loki uncomfortable.

It was strange, Loki thought to himself. King Dimcken caused him so much pain, and yet the mere thought of someone else doing half as much caused in him the greatest of furies. It was like he was divided into two. One half fusssed and bothered about Loki as though he were made of glass, not letting him ride a horse that could gallop, coddling and protecting him from everything, punishing excessively those who spoke ill of him. And then there was the other half, the fiend, who Loki did not even want to think about. He was trying to hide a limp today because of that other half. He would probably be hiding more in the future.

If he had to choose which King he would rather be married to, then he would take the fusspot. He would sit like a little doll and let things happen for him for three hundred years rather than take a single night with the fiend. Sadly, he had to have both.
Loki sat in Polweren's office and watched as the mage stacked book after book onto the desk between them.

"You need to gain an understanding of the fundamentals if you are to learn the magic of the mind *properly*." He said.

"I want to learn it properly." Loki assured him.

"In the meantime, I must still teach you to protect yourself." Polweren said. "Normally I would not begin practical lessons until I was certain that you understood the theory properly, but the King has commanded me to begin as soon as possible."

Loki sat a little straighter. "I will try to learn the theory as quickly as possible Sir." He said.

Polweren looked surprised and pleased. He had clearly been expecting Loki to be less than willing to do the hard work behind his new lessons.

"Well." He started, mollified a little. "The magic of the mind is varied in both scope and power. Mind control, for example, can be subtle, placing suggestions into someone's head, or it can be direct, which sadly is what Your Grace has experienced.

Loki nodded. "Please call me Loki here at the Tower, I am a student." he said. "How do you take control of someone's mind? It cannot be easy."

"No, it is very difficult. It requires physical access to the subject, or access to their hair or nail clippings. A direct attack can be made in a single blow, but that is the most difficult of attacks. It makes more sense to begin slowly, building up the power over the subject."

Loki nodded. "So Rohundia would have been increasing her influence for some weeks before she actually attacked?" Loki asked.

"Most likely. Did you experience any moments where you acted out of character, but did not know why?" Polweren asked. "Perhaps assumed that you were just tired?"

Loki made a show of thinking about it. "Not really." He said. "But I suppose if she was hiding her presence until she was strong enough, she wouldn't have done anything I would find odd."

"True." Polweren said. "Now. Stand up."

Loki stood.

"Sit down." Polweren said.

Loki sat.
"Stand up."
Loki stood again. "Why am I doing this?" He asked.

Polweren didn't answer him. "Sit down."

Loki sat. "Why?" He asked again.

"Stand up."

"No." Loki said even as he rose. His expression changed. "You're controlling me." He said.

"Sit down." Polweren said.

Loki sat. "Please stop." He whispered, suddenly afraid. He didn't like being so helpless.

Polweren nodded. "Do you see how easy it can be for the right person?" He asked. "Now, I am very powerful, far more so than the rebel. But even I could not have done this without a little help."

He pointed at the floor beneath Loki's chair. There was a rune drawn onto it. "I am not going to hurt you Loki." He said. "This is the same test I give to all my students when they first begin having lessons with me. I want you to try and break my influence."

Loki sat uncomfortably in his chair, the rapid sitting and standing had made the ache in his anus worse, it didn't help that the cream was wearing off. He didn't really want to be there.

But he had to be. That was the whole point.

"How will I know when I am free?" He asked.

Polweren leaned back in his chair. "You will walk out of the room and get to go until the afternoon theory lesson." He said.

Loki didn't move. He tried as hard as he could to rise from his seat but he just didn't. He felt the same way he did when he woke in the morning but could not be bothered to rise. He knew he had to but he just couldn't make himself. It was as though he couldn't be bothered, despite the panic running through him.

Polweren just sat there and watched him patiently.

Loki sat back and tried to think. It must be possible to break the spell, this was a test after all. He tried moving his arms and legs, they were working just fine. It was only when he tried to use them to rise that nothing happened.

He stopped moving and looked at Polweren with narrowed eyes. A test. To pass a test you need knowledge. Polweren knew Loki had not studied mind magic before, so what other knowledge could he use?

The rune. It was beneath his feet.

Loki moved his feet and shuffled them over the rune on the floor until it scuffed. Suddenly rising seemed more achievable, not automatic though, the spell was still working, it was just weaker. He gripped the arms of his chair and tried to rise. Polweren was still watching him calmly.

It wasn't working. He *wanted* to rise, but his body wouldn't obey. Loki scanned his surroundings, if Polweren used one rune, he might use another one, but he couldn't see it.
There! On the chair itself! Loki grabbed a bit of his sleeve and rubbed the second rune into a smear, then he tried again.

The spell shattered, he felt it lift as he rose. Polweren gave a slight grunt of surprise and straightened.

"There," Loki said, he was out of breath. Breaking the spell had taken more out of him than he'd first thought.

"That is incredible." Polweren said.

Loki felt a twinge of pride.

"You broke the spell faster than anyone else before." Polweren continued.

"Well, once I found the second rune it made it a lot easier." Loki said.

"Yes, but you still broke it without touching the last two." Polweren said.

Loki turned and looked at the chair again.

"There's one on the other arm and another on one of the legs." Polweren said.

Loki found them both. "Oh." He said.

"Loki you are very strong. Very strong. I thought that you broke through the rebel's spell because she was still a student and her spell was weak, but that may not be the case."

Loki scuffed the remaining runes and sat down again. "I just knew that I had to beat her." He said.

Polweren nodded. "A great deal of mind-spell breaking is determination. Ultimately your mind is your own, you have the power to take it back, but you have to break through the suggestion that you do not wish to."

"So will you just keep testing me until I can break a spell every time?" Loki asked.

"No, there will be tests, but I want you to learn how to prevent a spell from even being cast upon you." Polweren said. "Now, I said if you could break the spell that you could go for the morning. Take the books, I will ask you about their contents next week."

"Which chapters?" Loki asked as he gathered them up.

"All of them." Polweren said. "I expect you to get better each week."

"Yes Sir." Loki said, a little disturbed. He certainly had a lot of work ahead of him.

He took his books to one of the balcony gardens and opened them. After a few minutes of searching he found the Basic Theory for Beginners and started to read. He had the whole day here away from the palace and he was determined not to waste it. The sun was warm on his skin and the flowers filled the air with soft scents. He could hear birds tweeting somewhere in the bushes. It was perfect.

Loki eventually became so absorbed in his book that one of the maids had to rouse him in the afternoon to tell him that Polweren's class was beginning. He had to jog, which hurt, but he made it just in time.

There was a small crowd of students sitting in the classroom. They were mostly female, although
there was one boy among them. Loki looked around and found an empty seat.

They were watching him carefully, the same way Sheiftyr’s class had when he’d first started there. He wished that he could tell them that being the queen was not such a special job.

Polweren arrived a moment later and went to the front of the class.

“‘We have a new student. His name is Loki, he is your queen, don’t make a fuss.’ He said in a bored tone. ‘I hope you all read the section on item enchantment, if not you are going to be utterly humiliated very soon. Laizyen, what are the three main ways to enchant an item with mind magic for the purposes of communication?’”

Laizyen, the only boy in the room, started in his seat before relaxing again as he absorbed the question.

“One, subject contact. Every time the subject touches the item their thoughts will be sent directly to the enchanter. Two, caster contact, every time you touch an item previously enchanted with the subject’s hair or nails you will be able to read their thoughts of the moment, or look through memories if you are strong enough. Three, direct communication, every time you both touch one of a pair of item you will be able to have a mental conversation, thought to thought.”

“Not bad. What is the main purpose of this last one? Loki?”

Loki felt put on the spot, he’d only just started reading that day! But then the question sank in, and he realised that you didn’t need books to answer it, not if you were raised a prince.

“Spy communication, battlefield communication and emergency communication.” He said promptly.

“Good. Those are the main uses of direct communication in a military setting. Do you know of any others?”

Loki thought about it. “If you were working on something that required you to be far away, then you could talk to your family or colleagues, discuss your findings and get immediate feedback.” He suggested.

“Another good use. Well done.” Polweren said.

He moved on, talking about the different runes required to place such a spell on an item and how to lock it down to a single person.

“What about spying?” He asked suddenly. “Clearly interrupting a spy in the midst of his work is foolish, so how do we make sure that that doesn’t happen?”

Only a single hand went up.

“Yes Peitelyr?” Polweren asked.

“Delayed direct communication.” She said.

“Explain?” Polweren asked.

“You enchant an object so that when you touch it, it creates a link sometime after you have done so. That way they have a chance to get somewhere secure.”

“Not bad. Do you know the most common form of delayed direct communication spells?” Polweren asked.
She shook her head.

“Sleep.” Polweren said. “The link is made when you both sleep. It is the safest possible time to communicate. As you both look like you are dreaming, now, what are the disadvantages of this method?”

Loki sat and listened attentively as the class moved on. It was fascinating, and he was eager to get back to his books and catch up on what these students already knew.

Eventually though it had to come to an end, and Loki reluctantly headed to his carriage to be taken back to the palace.

There were freshly cut flower arrangements waiting for him in his chambers.

"The King had them cut." Fosxyr explained. "He thought you might like them."

Loki looked from one giant arrangement to another. "How lovely." He said. "I do love enormous bunches of flowers."

"Please don't be sassy Your Grace. He may well ask you about them.” Fosxyr said.

Loki sighed. "You're right of course, they are lovely, actually, although there are rather a lot of them."

"I will place some in the other room, you can tell him that you wanted to share their beauty with your visitors." Fosxyr suggested.

"Thank you Fosxyr." Loki said.

He applied a little more of the bruising cream, changed into a new robe for dinner, and placed his new medallion around his neck. Fosxyr combed his hair for him, muttering about how he would have to have it cut soon, and then he made his way to the King's chambers for dinner.

King Dimcken smothered him with a hard kiss the second he was through the door, letting his hands wander down over Loki's buttocks. Loki endured it and sat at the table where the three princes were all staring at their empty plates.

It would be funny if it weren't so horrible.

"How was your lesson today?” King Dimcken asked him.

"It went well." Loki said. "He said I had a lot to learn, but I am looking forward to it."

King Dimcken nodded as the first platter was placed on the table.

"Did you like the flowers?” He asked.

"Yes, they are lovely." Loki said, sounding perfectly sincere. "The scent is a perfect combination."

"I'm glad." King Dimcken said.

There was a moment of silence. Loki thought there was something familiar about this conversation,
but he wasn't sure why.

"You have another riding lesson tomorrow." King Dimcken said. "How do you like Lightning?"

"He's perfect." Loki said. "He's a magnificent creature."

Another silence, and Loki realised why this was so familiar. Back in Asgard he would sit through this exact same scenario whenever he found himself near the older Lords and Ladies and they tried to engage him in conversation. They knew only a few things about him, and so they asked him only about those few things. Usually whether he liked whatever it was they knew about. The King was doing the same thing, and for the same reason. He knew almost nothing about Loki, nothing at all.

"And how was your day today Husband?" He asked.

King Dimcken smiled a little more naturally. "Mostly good. I did the work of the realm for most of it, but it was a very productive day. But then I tripped on a cat that got under my feet and nearly toppled me, and then when I went outside a small flock of birds soiled themselves on my clothes."

Haewkyr. It had to be. Loki resolved to have a word with him about it, however funny he may find the thought of the King having bird crap rain down on him from up high.

Loki gave him the best sympathetic smile he could manage in response. "That's too bad, I'm glad it didn't spoil your day though." He said. "Camtan, how is Sofftia and little Roaseia?"

"They're doing well. Little Roa is a handful at night, but she is so beautiful, I spend hours just watching her sleep."

Loki's smile was warmer this time. "That's good." He said.

He felt a hand creep onto his thigh. "You should visit her." King Dimcken said. "In fact we both will. You are here in the palace tomorrow aren't you my dear?"

"Yes Husband." Loki said.

"Good, we shall visit tomorrow after lunch." King Dimcken said decisively.

Camtan shot Loki a quick, slightly embarrassed, smile.

Loki returned it. The King didn't see.

Loki's eyes flickered to Dorgen, who was watching his with the same glare as always. Loki resisted the urge to pull a face, he really didn't know why Dorgen hated him so much, but he didn't care much either. The only thing he wanted to know was whether Dorgen was still being controlled by the resistance. No one had told him anything about the investigation at all.

He resolved to ask Musleen as soon as he had the chance.

King Dimcken asked him to stay after dinner. Loki sat nervously in his chair after the others had gone, waiting for the command to head to the bedroom and disrobe.

King Dimcken sat down beside him and poured him a glass of wine.

"I am glad to hear that your new lesson went well." He said. "I want you to feel safe here."

Loki nodded. "I do, I have great faith in your security. It is no one's fault that they didn't see the attack coming, it was hardly an honourable deed."
Actually, Loki thought it was brilliant, but such sentiments were hardly going to placate the King.

"Yes, very. I just wanted to be sure." King Dimcken said. "We came so close to disaster."

Loki nodded seriously and took a sip of his wine. The King was actually talking to him, which was strange and awkward. Although nowhere near as bad as being taken to bed. He tried to think of something that would extend the conversation.

"Is Dorgen alright now?" He asked. "I wasn't told whether the guards had released him from his control."

King Dimcken looked startled. "Oh, my dear, you should have been told! How could we have been so careless?"

'Because you never think of me unless your dick is itchy.' Loki thought, surprising himself by his own vulgarity.

"Dorgen is not under a mind control, but he is being threatened in another way. He does not know that we are aware of it, and as soon as we can eliminate the threat we will tell him and he will be free. In the meantime, Musleen has him on a close watch, he is using Dorgen's movements to track more of the rebels." King Dimcken said.

Loki nodded in understanding. "How close are they to freeing him?" He asked.

"Musleen says it will be another month at least. They have the princes Loki, they have my grandsons. We all thought that they had decided to do another tour of duty at the border, it is not unusual, but in reality they were captured by the rebels and have been imprisoned for months. I am so glad that you did not ask Dorgen about his being controlled by them, it would have given away everything. They can listen to his speech, we know that much." King Dimcken said.

He looked worried and sad. Loki steeled himself inside, reached out a hand and placed it on King Dimcken's shoulder. The look on the King's face showed the strain of worrying, whatever he thought about his eldest son's wife, that feeling clearly did not extend to his two grandsons.

"They'll be alright." Loki said. "Musleen will free them soon."

King Dimcken nodded. "So he tells me, but I worry Loki, I worry for those boys, the youngest is only eight years older than you, he's just a boy."

Why could the King see a boy in his grandson who was eight years older than Loki, but not see a boy in *Loki* who he treated like a sex toy? Once again Loki felt as though the King was split down the middle, like two completely different men in one body. He thought he could see shades of the man that Lord Fallconyr had called a friend, but that wasn't enough to make Loki stop detesting him.

"They will be alright." Loki said again, trying to sound soothing. He wasn't really the sympathetic type normally. He was the one with the snark and the sarcasm. Even when he *did* feel sympathy for someone, he wasn't very good at expressing it.

King Dimcken didn't mind, he reached out both his hands and pulled at Loki's waist until Loki was sitting in his lap.

"I trust my son to free them." He said, rubbing a hand up and down Loki's thigh. "I trust him with my security, I am just an old man who worries."
Loki didn't say anything. What could he possibly say that he hadn't already? And what little sympathy he could summon for the King was no longer available. All he could think about was how sore he still was. King Dimcken was unlikely to take him in his anus, but even so the movement of his thrusting was going to cause Loki quite a bit of pain.

He sat on King Dimcken's lap and allowed himself to be kissed for ten minutes or so, slowly relaxing as time passed and it became more and more obvious that the King wasn't going to harden tonight. When King Dimcken finally pulled away and gave him a tired smile, Loki was able to return it without too much difficulty.

"Another night my dear and we will go further, but for now I would like to go to bed. Off you go, and I will see you for lunch tomorrow before we visit the baby." He said, giving Loki a little pat on his bottom. He often did that when sending Loki back to his chambers. Loki had mixed feeling about it. He hated the way it demeaned him, but took comfort from knowing his night had ended without being raped. Regardless, Loki bowed and left the King for the night.

His grandparents were waiting for him in his chambers. They rose as soon as he walked in and looked at him with identical worried expressions.

"I'm alright." Loki said, leading them into his private room. "It was just a bit of kissing."

Lord Fallconyr growled slightly under his breath but was shushed by his wife.

"And today at the Tower Loki? Today was your first lesson with Polweren wasn't it?" Lord Eadgleyr asked.

Loki nodded and sat down. "It went well." He said.

There was silence, but it wasn't awkward. Loki realised that his grandparents were waiting for him to tell them about it. He sat forward.

"I passed his test in record time, he was a bit impressed I think." He said.

"He gave you a *test*?" Lord Eadgleyr said. "But you haven't learnt anything yet."

"It's the same test he gives to all his new students, and I passed it faster than anyone else before, he said so himself." Loki said.

Lord Eadgleyr sat back with a grumpy expression. "I still don't see why you should have to take a test on your first day." He said. "What did it involve?"

Loki told them both about the runes, and finding two of them when he was meant to find four. He pulled out the book on beginner's theory and started to explain some of the concepts in an eager tone. They listened, asked questions, and made all the right noises. By the time they left to go to bed Loki was smiling easily, and more importantly, genuinely.

"That boy has one of the nicest smiles I've ever seen." Lord Eadgleyr said as they changed for bed. "When he's really happy, his whole face lights up and melts your heart."

"I know, he's a lovely boy underneath all that strain," Lord Fallconyr said. "She must have done a good job raising him."
He didn't say who 'she' was but they both knew who he was talking about.

"I'd love to meet the other one, Thor." Lord Eadgleyr said.

"Not in this realm." Lord Fallconyr said. "But maybe we could take a short trip to Asgard one day."

"You're still banned." Lord Eadgleyr reminded him gently. "You called Odin a nitwit in public."

"He is a nitwit. I know, I know." Lord Fallconyr said holding up his hands. "But all we really have to do is outlive him, then we can see Thor."

"Outlive him. A man half our age? You are a dreamer my love."

"Not him. The other one." Lord Fallconyr said. "Then Thor can come to us."

"Let us hope that we both have it in us." Lord Eadgleyr said with a soft smile.

He was nineteen years younger than the King, Lord Fallconyr was two years. It was possible, but unlikely that they would last longer than the man with the finest healers in the realm available to him, and if they did it would not be by much.
Over the next few months, Loki realised that King Dimcken had four main moods in the bedroom.

The first one, and Loki's favourite, was 'tired'. When the King was tired he would send Loki away with nothing more than a few kisses and a patronising pat on the bottom.

The second one was 'sex'. Surprisingly, Loki found this was his second most preferred of the four moods. Not because he found anything to enjoy about it himself, but, due to the King's limited stamina, when he wanted sex he started quickly and finished in only a few minutes. Then he would want to sleep, and so Loki could have the rest of the night to himself. Contrary to his earlier fears, King Dimcken would always sleep deeply after sex, and Loki was able to get up and spend whole hours curled up on a chair reading in the next room.

The Third one was 'amorous, but not aroused'. A lot of the time King Dimcken couldn't seem to harden, but that didn't mean he was ready to abandon his plans. Instead, Loki would find himself being touched and petted all over, eventually ending up with the King's fingers thrusting in and out of his vagina for twenty minutes or so as Loki lay there and tried to look, if not pleased, then not actually opposed to this treatment. The worst days were when the King wanted to continue after his arm got tired, and he would shift over to use the other hand for another fifteen minutes or so.

The final mood was 'kinky'. Loki hated kinky with a passion. It was the rarest of moods, but it was the one that saw him dressed in nothing but jewellery while parading for the King, or forced to take King Dimcken anally, or with horrible egg thing pressed inside of him. Kinky was for special occasions, like the King’s birthday or when there was a feast, or sometimes because it was a Wodensday, but *mostly* it was reserved for special occasions.

When the King was in that mood, there was nothing Loki could do but to ride it out. Any protest at all only served to make the King more determined.

The rest of the time, Loki only had to survive some lunches and most dinners with him. The lunches were often alone, but fairly brief, unless the King was in an aroused mood, and the dinners involved the three Princes as well as Princess Sofftia whenever the baby was with her nursemaid.

Loki found he had a lot of time away from his husband, and he was grateful for every minute. His seidr lessons at the Tower took place three days a week, his riding lessons took care of two mornings. Camtan insisted on his company at least one afternoon a week, whether to go fishing, riding or just walking in the gardens. He seemed determined to have a good relationship with his 'mother' and Loki was happy to let it happen. Loki’s friends at the Tower would also try to drag him out to the taverns to dance to The Thunder Boys, or to the marketplaces to see the wonders of the nine realms come to Vanheim.

The rest of the time Loki found himself at the centre of the King's court. He was visited regularly by nobles, some of whom he admitted immediately due to their status, others were made to wait for a while. They all wanted something, a favour, a word, money. Loki listened to them all and carefully
navigated his way through the complex web of nobility in Vanaheim.

His grandparents would visit almost daily, and he found himself introduced to a series of rotating relatives who had come up to see both them and him.

The one dark shadow that hung over the palace was that Musleen had been unable to find and save Dorgen’s sons. Dorgen himself, oblivious to the hard work Musleen and his men were doing, grew weary and snappish. His hatred of Loki began to become more and more obvious. Loki ignored it, he knew that Dorgen believed him to be an Asgard ‘slut’, and he knew that his dark behaviour was due partly to the worry over his sons, so he tried hard to let each little snide remark or veiled insult slide.

It wasn’t perfect, there was too much fear and trauma for it ever to be perfect, but in an imperfect way, Loki found himself settling in.

Until one day.

"Your Grace, I feel I should tell you that in one month your one year anniversary will occur." Fosxyr said gently.

Loki felt a strange kind of cold come over him.

"Oh." He said.

A year.

A whole year.

His first year.

And it was almost over.

That still left two hundred and ninety nine years to go. He felt tears prick his eyes as he thought of all he’d had to endure. It was nowhere near over.

The cold sunk in until it chilled him to the bone.

"His Majesty is most likely to hold a feast to celebrate." Fosxyr continued gently. "This morning he instructed the Master of Ceremonies to begin planning. The whole city is to be transformed."

Loki frowned. "Don't they mind the disruption?" He asked, knowing that it was a stupid question even as he did so.

"They will enjoy it Your Grace, food and wine will be plentiful and they will celebrate into the night."

Loki slumped in his chair. "I know." He said. "They'll love it."

"They love *you*, Your Grace. Opinion of you could not be higher, they think you are wonderful." Fosxyr said.

"Great." Loki said, dejected. A whole year. It seemed like such a long time, and yet it was so brief compared to how much longer he had to go.
"The rebels are having to tread very carefully around you, the populous will not stand for you to be hurt." Fosxyr continued.

Loki just nodded softly. "That is good news at least." He said.

In the months following the attack, opinion of the rebels had plummeted. Loki’s innocent young face had done more for the King than any piece of propaganda. The rebels were on the back foot and they knew it.

"You will be expected to give His Majesty a present." Fosxyr continued. "I was wondering if you could ask your family in Asgard to send something in particular."

"What?" Loki asked.

"He's always wanted one of those giant golden statues, only of himself, to put in the main garden." Fosxyr said.

Loki gave him Look.

"He would be very grateful." Fosxyr continued.

"Grateful enough to stay out of my bed?" Loki asked bluntly, then hastily clapped a hand over his mouth, eyes wide in sudden fear.

Fosxyr glanced about the room, but they close to the centre and there was no one else with them.

"Your Grace." He admonished.

Loki blushed. "I'm sorry, that was careless." He whispered.

"It was, I knew you would be upset about this news, but you cannot be so reckless," Fosxyr answered, keeping his voice equally low.

Loki flushed at the reprimand; he'd never really gotten one from Fosxyr before.

"I'm sorry." He murmured again. "I don't think that such a thing can be made in time."

Fosxyr frowned. "How long do you think they'll need?" He asked.

Loki shrugged. "I don't know, I've never asked."

"Perhaps another time." Fosxyr said. Loki got the feeling that the servant was deliberately not saying 'your ten year anniversary'.

"What else can I give him?" Loki asked, resigned to the inevitable.

"Some jewellery would probably be appreciated, something large and decorative." Fosxyr said. "Something he can wear to the feast. Or maybe a very fine sword?"

"I can arrange that." Loki said, "I know a few of the Asgard palace sword smiths, they can make him a fine one, in very light steel."

"Excellent, I can show you some of his favourite sculptures around the palace so that you can know what style he would prefer on the hilt." Fosxyr said.

"I've seen them." Loki said flatly, the King had once spent an afternoon with him in the private royal
gallery, Loki knew exactly what he liked. He also knew what sculptures the King preferred.

"I will sketch something for them to create." He said.

Loki spent more time than he meant to on the design. He knew what the King would like, over-the-top and ostentatious, but he also found his own sense of pride and taste refused to let him just draw *anything* on there.

After two days, he sent the design to Asgard, along with enough payment to cover the sword and the jewels. The master-craftsmen would ensure they would be very fine.

Loki hated this aspect of his life the most. He hated the King, hated what they did together, but outside of that, in the day to day activities of his life, he hated the way he had to act as though he cared about the King in any way whatsoever.

He forcibly pushed the thought out of his mind and tried to concentrate on other things, a plan that failed at dinner that evening, when the King made a general announcement about the celebrations.

He told his family at dinner that he had planned a great outdoor celebration with fireworks and entertainment. The whole city would be able to watch from the other side of the river. It would be the most amazing spectacle ever.

Loki tried hard to look pleased. He would be on display again, with makeup probably, and he would have to spend all evening sitting by the King’s side.

It was nothing he hadn’t done before, although the idea that the thought of his marriage made people *happy* made him feel ill.

A whole year.

It felt like a lifetime.
Fifty Two Steps

Chapter Summary

A Dangerous Night

Two weeks before the great anniversary celebrations were to begin, Musleen sent a servant to Loki asking if he would please come and see him.

Curious, Loki headed for Musleen’s chambers and was shown into his inner workroom by a servant, who, Loki noticed, stayed near the door instead of leaving.

“You wanted to see me?” Loki asked him.

Musleen shot the servant a look. The servant scowled and left them alone.

“I’m sorry Loki, they worry about me.” He said, gesturing for Loki to sit.

Loki did so with a small smile. “It is good to know how loyal they are to you.” He said.

“Even so, you are yourself now, they should trust you.” He replied.

There was a moment of silence in which Loki found himself wondering what could be going on.

“I have located the two princes.” Musleen said, leaning forwards slightly.

Loki’s eyes widened. “That’s brilliant.” He said. “Have you planned their rescue?”

Musleen pulled a face. “We have a plan, but it relies on something rather specific to work.” He said. “You.”

Loki blinked. “Me?” He asked. “What do you need of me?”

“I asked Horrseen who was the strongest illusion mage in the Tower, he said it was Sheiftyr. However when I asked her for her help, but she said she could not cast an illusion of a person she had only had a single glimpse of, but she also said that you were better than her when it comes to creating illusions, even though you are still learning other things.”

Loki’s eyes widened again. Sheiftyr thought that of him? She’d certainly never said so, but then she wasn’t the type.

“I can cast quite realistically.” He said.

“Can you create people?” Musleen asked. “People who you have only seen once, right then? If not then our plan will not succeed.”

Loki pointed at the door. The servant was back, standing silently in the shadows. The servant jumped in surprise as Musleen turned to look, and then looked guilty.

“Danggeryr, I told you to leave us.” Musleen said, rising and going to the door.
Dangceryr disappeared into thin air as he approached. Musleen turned and stared at Loki.

“You did that?” He asked.

Loki nodded. “I did.” He said. “What do you need me to do?”

The plan was simple. The princes were no longer near the border and were in fact being kept in a house on the far side of the river in the capital. It was a grand place with a fine, well maintained garden, not at all like the slum area where the majority of the King’s forces were looking for rebels.

The mages that Musleen had working for him had walked the city, looking for signs of concealment. His regular men had interrogated those likely to have ties to the rebels, and his special forces had been slowly pieced together the princes' last known movements, a difficult task considering that they had vanished over a year ago and on the remote borders of the realm.

As the pieces slowly came together, Musleen had a stroke of good luck. During one of the interrogations, he had found a young rebel who had cracked under the strain. Much like Rohundia, this rebel had been young, poor, and struggling to survive. The rebels had taken them both in, but now, faced with the true horror of what the rebels were doing, and being frustrated at their circumstances rather than anti-royal, the young rebel had turned informant. It was this informant’s information that provided Musleen with information on the interior of the Prince’s prison.

They were in the cellar, which was guarded by three men at any one time. There was a spell on the door and the barred window, which allowed them to see out, but made it look to the outside world as though the cellar was empty. There the two princes were chained to their beds, only able to go as far as the bucket in the corner, placed there for their waste, and the small table in the centre of the room, onto which their food would be placed. The beds were welded to the floor, the mattresses merely blankets hung from the frame via straps, with no covering or pillow. There was nothing the princes could use to try and escape.

On the ground floor there were more rebels, those who had been discovered as such and were in hiding, mainly. At last count there was nine of them.

There was also a very powerful sorcerer. She was thought to be one of the main ringleaders, and her magic was keeping the princes confined. She would be a difficult one to get by.

“If we attack, they will no doubt kill the princes, they have no love for any of us. They even use that threat to keep them in line, after all, they only need one, so if one were to try and escape, it would be the other one’s head that they would remove.” Musleen said. “We need to sneak them away, and only when we are completely clear will we send in the guards, with mages to help subdue the witch.”

Loki nodded. “You want to remove them and replace them with an illusion.”

“For as long as possible. Hopefully that will give us enough time to remove any enchantments that may be upon them.” Musleen said. “They are fed once a day. If we take them just after the tray has been removed, then you cast an illusion of them lying on their beds, then that should be enough. From what the informant says, they spend most of their time either lying still or doing training exercises together. Hopefully the guards will believe that they are despondent and not be suspicious when they glance inside to check on them.”
“This is a high risk.” Loki said.

“We have considered our other options, but if we kill the witch first then the rebels will kill the princes, and if we attack the guards, then the witch will do it. They must be completely free of them both.”

“How do we get to them?” Loki asked.

“We have begun digging a tunnel into their room. Our engineers are confident that they will come up beneath one of the beds, which of course is welded to the floor and covered by a blanket, no one should see us.” Musleen said. “We are almost ready, can you help us?”

Loki nodded, then hesitated. “What will the King say?” He asked.

Musleen pressed his lips into a thin line. “I will have to find out.” He said.

King Dimcken was horrified that Musleen would want to use Loki in that way. He declared it far too dangerous, too risky, what if the witch sensed him? She would attack and kill him. No, Loki could not help.

“Then my nephews are dead.” Musleen said bluntly. “We know where they are but extracting them is impossible without Loki.”

King Dimcken hesitated. “It’s not safe.” He said.

“For anyone.” Musleen replied. “But Loki will be safer than most. I will assign a full squad of guards to watch him, he will only come close once the room is secure, and I will personally escort him back here to you when we are done.”

King Dimcken pouted. “You are certain that this is the only way?” He asked.

Musleen nodded. “I would not have even considered it if I thought there was any other.” He said.

“Then he may help, but I want you to promise me that he will be watched every moment.”

“I promise Father.”

“Bring my grandsons home to me.”

“Yes Father.”

Loki was excited as he stood in the training grounds. Musleen had insisted that he be taken through some common self-defense techniques before they made their attempt to rescue the princes. The tunnel would be finished the next day, so Loki had a single day to learn.

Loki was looking forward to the look on Musleen’s face when Loki dumped him on his bottom.

It had to be the clothes, Loki thought as he stretched. They made him look weak and helpless.
Although, everyone else wore them too, so maybe it was simply the fact that, as the King’s Consort, Loki did not enter the training grounds.

Musleen arrived and started stretching.

“Are you already warmed up?” He asked.

Loki nodded innocently.

“Good, I’ll take you through a few of the easier ones, you shouldn’t need them, but just in case things go badly you should have *something*, even if it’s just to keep you safe until someone can get to you. Truthfully, if we get into a fight, I want you to run as far as you can. Keep yourself safe.”

“I’m sure I won’t need to do that.” Loki said, giving his neck one final stretch.

Musleen finished stretching and stood opposite him. “Right,” he said. “Attack me.”

Loki began moving sideways, walking carefully while he kept his guard up. Musleen recognised the movement and raised an eyebrow.

Loki struck, twisting under Musleen’s arm and jabbing him painfully in the pit, then whirling away and striking out with his leg, dumping Musleen, as predicted, on his bottom.

“How was that?” Loki asked, still all innocence.

Musleen was giving him a puzzled look. “That was training.” He said. “Real training, where were you taught that?”

“Asgard.” Loki said. “I was the second prince of Asgard, I was taught to be a warrior, now, come and give me a challenge, Vanir.”

Musleen’s mouth twitched and he climbed to his feet. “I apologise Loki, it seems I have fallen into the trap of underestimating you, as so many others have done. Let me see what you can really do.”

The next hour was filled with the sounds of two well-trained men trying to best one another. At some point they moved to staves, then swords, and finally, blunted knives. The final score was Loki: 7, Musleen: 8. But, as Musleen pointed out while trying to catch his breath, Loki had not trained for a whole year.

“I think if I had faced you a year ago I should have been very afraid.” He said.

Loki grinned at him. The sparring felt good, really good. He was out of breath, but the blood was flowing in his veins and he felt freer than he’d done for a long time.

“When this is over, I should like to see you in the training grounds.” Musleen said. “There is no reason why you cannot keep up with your sparring skills, I will face you, even though the rest of the men would not.”

“Would they not because of the King?” Loki asked. “He does not like me to do things that are risky.”

“Let’s not tell him and see how long it takes for him to notice.” Musleen said calmly. “Unless he strictly forbids you, there is no reason why you cannot train, you are male as well as female, and that ought to be respected.”

Loki smiled. He like Musleen, the man was serious, practical, and sensible. He was not one for loud
displays or louder voices. He liked reading and using his brain, he was the second prince of his realm and he and Loki had a lot more in common than it had first appeared.

“I won’t tell if you don’t.” Loki said.

The tunnel was completed on schedule, and Loki had the private thrill of pulling on dark grey pants and a matching shirt for the rescue.

“We can move better in these.” Musleen explained.

Loki just nodded. He wasn’t about to argue with it, not at all.

The travelled by foot, concealed by their mages, and reached the house in the next street where they had made their tunnel. Musleen disappeared down into it first, then whistled softly to signal that Loki was to follow.

Loki took a breath to steel his nerves and lowered himself into the darkness.

The tunnel was narrow and dark, made in a hurry, it was propped up only as much as it had to be, and Loki found it difficult to creep down its length to the cellar at the far end.

He arrived though, followed by a guard assigned to protect him, and waited as Musleen and a mage carefully removed the final bricks.

From where he stood, Loki watched them glance up into the cellar, then Musleen waved. The Princes must have heard the bricks being removed and came over to investigate.

The mage climbed up first followed by Musleen. A moment later, he reached back into the hole and gestured for Loki to come forwards as well.

It was easier for Loki to climb out. Once the princes realised what was happening, they removed the blanket from the bed, enabling Loki to be pulled up more easily. The room was small and dirty. The mage had taken a station by the door and was concentrating on blocking their presence from the witch.

Musleen pulled out a set of picks and set to work on the chains that bound his nephews.

“Stand still and let him look you over.” Musleen instructed them, gesturing to Loki as he did so.

The princes obeyed, watching Loki curiously as he circled them, taking in their features, their clothes, stance and the grime that was stuck to them.

They were both tall and fairly well built for Vanir. One of them looked like a younger copy of their father, the other looked more like his mother, although on him the large square jaw and hooked nose looked rugged and manly.

Loki concentrated, and a copy of each of the princes was now in the room. He focussed harder, and fixed the spell to two crystals that he had brought. They had been given to him by Sheiftyr for that exact purpose.

He placed one of the crystals on the intact bed and made the image lie down, and then he turned to where the group stood.
“Get into the hole.” He said quietly as Musleen unlocked the final chain. “I will fix the bed and complete the illusion.”

Musleen made the princes climb down, where they were met by Loki’s guard. They were both looking a little dazed and confused, although Loki assumed that was natural after such a long imprisonment.

Musleen fixed the bed and Loki completed his spell.

“Time to go.” Musleen said softly. “Our information says they will check them through the door hatch soon.”

Loki crawled under the bed and dropped down into the tunnel. He was caught by his guard, who steadied him and then led him away back down the tunnel. He heard the almost silent sound of Musleen and the mage following.

The mood on the other side of the tunnel was serious. They did not know how long it would take for the rebels to notice that the princes were no longer in their cell, they had to move quickly to ensure that they were enchantment free.

“Then we can finally help Dorgen.” Musleen said as the group climbed into a waiting carriage.

They travelled, not to the palace, but to another house in the city, there they left the carriage and walked inside, disguised by the mage as a group of party-goers. But once inside, everything began moving faster.

Both princes were made to drink a cleansing potion, brewed in preparation by Polweren, who was standing by with two of his former students.

Loki sat himself down in a quiet corner. His job was done, but he didn’t want anyone to realise that and send him back to the palace before the night ended.

Both princes cried out in pain as they drank the potion. Polweren then examined them carefully.

“A caster contact spell. The connection is now broken, so if the caster tried to see what they are doing they will not be able to, but they will also know that the spell has been broken.”

Musleen nodded seriously. “Anything else?” He asked.

Polweren and his former students sifted through the smoke of their casting. Loki leaned forward in his seat to see better.

“There is something.” Polweren said at last. “It’s very faint, almost like a delayed spell.”

“I see it.” Said one of the former students. “It’s a killing spell.”

At his words the room became alarmed.

“Is it broken?” Musleen asked.

“Not yet.” The former student replied.

“Break it now. If they realise that they’re gone then they will activate it, break it right now.” Musleen commanded.

Polweren scowled. “I can’t get to it, it’s twisting under my power.”
The others were all trying too, Loki could see the magic in the air as they struggled to reach the heart of the spell and unravel it. He bit his lip and turned his attention to the spell itself. It was impossible to see properly. It seemed to move against his magic, turning and twisting away. He felt panic rise within him. If his illusions failed, then both princes would die.

He felt a flair of power rise within him and the spell *froze* in mid cycle.

Polweren looked up at him sharply. Loki shook his head and shrugged in confusion. He didn’t know how he’d done it, but it was done.

The former student who first recognised the spell gave a cry of delight and shattered it. The others, not having magic, were still looking at them all anxiously.

“It is done, they are safe.” Polweren said.

“We must find Dorgen and check him immediately.” Musleen said seriously. Their work was not over for the night.

Now they headed back to the palace, although the two princes were staying in the safe house for the night. Loki rode beside Musleen with Polweren opposite him.

“You froze the spell.” The sorcerer said.

Loki nodded. “I know, but I don’t know how. I’ve never done that before.” He said.

“Spells are put into a state of flux to make them harder to break, you have to get your magic twisting in time with it to reach the heart and break it.” Polweren said. “Freezing a spell is impossible for Vanir, and for Aesir for that matter. There is only one race that can do it, although their sorcerers are said to be very rare indeed.”

“Who’s that?” Loki asked.


Loki’s eyes widened. “Oh, Father’s mother was Jotun. I do not know if she was a sorcerer, but perhaps it was in the bloodline.”

“That is a truly fortunate gift to have inherited.” Polweren said. “It is a shame that none here know how to teach you to develop it.”

“I doubt that the Jotnar will be very willing to teach me either.” Loki said as the carriage rattled into the palace yard. “I will have to develop it on my own.”

Polweren nodded. “I will try to find what books I have on the subject, you should develop it, it is a magnificent skill, and there are many mages who would long for it.”

Musleen opened the carriage door and they climbed out.

“He’ll be in bed.” Musleen said. “Come on.”

He led them through the palace corridors and to Dorgens’ chambers.

They were bigger than Musleen’s, fit for a crown prince, and everywhere there were touches of family life. Loki felt a little strange passing from the public reception room to the private one. There was portraits of the princes on the walls, and a half finished pair of knitted socks sitting on the table. The books were on the shelves, but not placed as neatly as they would have been in a library.
Dorgen’s slippers had been left by the fire.

A servant appeared, brandishing a sword. Musleen held his hands up to show that he was unarmed. The servant took in his face, then nodded.

“Shall I wake His Grace, Your Grace?” He asked quietly.

“We will do it, we have a purpose tonight.” Musleen replied.

The servant fell into step behind him and went with them through the rooms. Musleen did not stop, heading into the bedroom with a determined look in his eye.

He went straight to the bed and lit the candle beside it, rousing Dorgen and Mulmyr from their slumber. Loki saw the alarm go over Mulmyr’s face as she saw the crowd and ran to her side.

“It’s alright.” He said. “Everything will be alright.”

“What is going on?” She asked, as Musleen calmly grabbed his brother’s head and forced him to drink the cleansing potion.

Mulmyr let out a cry of alarm as Dorgen struggled with the pain. Polweren was already searching for signs of a killing spell.

“Trust us.” Loki pleaded. “You’re sons are in the city, they are safe.”

Her eyes widened. “What has happened to my sons?” She whispered in a horrified tone.

“Loki come here, I need your help.” Polweren said. His voice was strained, and his former students were sweating. “There’s one on him.”

He didn’t have to say what. Loki ran to his side and tried to concentrate, hoping that he could repeat the feat he’d managed by accident half an hour earlier. He saw the spell, a twisting, nasty little thing, once again he felt the power rise, it was cold and icy, and made him shudder as it lanced out and froze the spell in place.

“In theory that spell cannot be activated now.” Polweren said. “At least until your influence has worn off, but we must break it quickly anyhow, with your talents underdeveloped as they are, there is no telling when it may unfreeze.

This time it was the other mage who let out a cry of triumph, and Dorgen sagged back in his bed, looking at them all with horror in his eyes.

“My sons, they’ll know you did this! The rebels will know!” He started to say.

Musleen placed a hand in his shoulder and squeezed it tightly. “Your sons are safe. We have them.” He said, getting right to the heart of the matter, to the one thing that a parent would want to know above all others. “They are *safe*, Dorgen.”

Dorgen’s head fell back against the pillows in relief.

“How long have you known?” He asked in an exhausted voice. “They watched me all the time, I tried so hard to find a way to fight them, but they said they’d kill Lyrren or Octtopusir if I did.”

“Almost six months.” Musleen told him as the others were shepherded to the door by the servant. Their job was done and judging by his face, he felt his master and mistress deserved some privacy. “We’ve been trying to find them ever since the attack on the King, that’s when we first realised that
the conspiracy went deeper.”

Mulmyr was looking from one to the other with a worried look. “You will tell me everything right now Musleen.” She said, sounding scared and angry. Loki sat down next to her and tried to look inconspicuous.

Musleen told them both everything that he had been doing over the last six months, Loki filled in a little about his attack at the beginning, and Dorgen told his own tale of how they got close to him. Mulmyr’s expression was not one that Loki ever wanted aimed at him.

“You didn’t tell me.” She said bluntly to Musleen. “My own children and you didn’t tell me. I got their letters. I thought they were in the far lands on another tour of duty. I thought they were *safe*!”

Musleen looked down. “You are Dorgen’s wife. We did not want to risk anyone giving anything away to the rebels as they watched him. I am sorry Mulmyr, but our successful result must count for something, and they are safe now. They will be here in the morning.”

“I want them now.” She said, rising from her bed. “I will go to them if you do not bring them.”

“We both will.” Dorgen said, fighting to pull back his covers as Musleen was sitting on them.

Musleen rose and held out his hands. “I will have them brought to you.” He said. “Right now. Stay here and please stay calm. Polweren will have delivered the message to begin the raid on the rebel house, Dorgen is no longer at risk, we can bring them both home.”

He left to arrange it, leaving Loki in the room. Loki bowed awkwardly to them both. “I’ll let you be.” He said and followed Musleen out.

There was a guard waiting for him, as per the King’s instructions, and Loki allowed himself to be escorted back to his chambers where he would wait for Musleen to come and personally escort him to the King. His part in the night was over, no doubt he would hear about it all from Musleen later anyway, and in the morning, or maybe the next day, he would properly meet his grandchildren. His grown-up, slightly-older-than-him, grandchildren.

He hoped that they would come through their ordeal intact. A year was a long time to be imprisoned.

His thought caught up with him and he fought not to give a bitter laugh. A year *was* a long time, he’d begun his imprisonment at almost the same time as they had, but his sentence was far from over.
Chapter Summary

... and Then the Rain Fell

“Ow!” Camtan yelled, hopping madly.

“What?” Loki asked, halting his steps toward the Bifrost site and turning to face the hopping prince.

“Stubbed my toe.” Camtan said with a grimace.

“It’s the loose flagstone, it’s been that way for a while.” Dorgen said. “I’ll get it fixed soon, I promise.”

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Thor sat by the campfire and tried to figure out the code on the parchment that he, Sif and the Warriors Three had liberated from the ancient tombs of the Elven Kings of Svartalfheim. They had lain there undisturbed since before the last war, and the noise of Thor’s arrival had echoed strangely in halls not used to sound.

They had almost been killed in an ancient trap, one of magic and cunning and, as Fandral had said without thinking, one that Loki would have seen.

But despite the absence of Thor’s brother and soul-mate, they had managed to escape at the last second, before the high stone roof came crashing down in an attempt to crush them all.

They had begun their quest on the day of Loki’s leaving, traveling to realm after realm in order to find the Emerald of the Lost Seer. Thor could remember every detail of his decision, of how he’d heard the expression years ago, used by one of Frigga’s ladies to mean that her husband had gone adventuring. He’d wondered then whether it had ever been a real gem, with a real purpose.

With Loki trapped spending two months learning about Vanaheim, Thor had done something far unlike him. He had visited the library, not once, but many times. He had a number of things he had to do, and without Loki, the knowledge to do them would have to be learned for himself.

While he was there he had researched the Emerald, enough to realise that it may not be as fictional as those living today believed. It was said that when someone held the Emerald, then they had the chance to change their own fate, to speak directly to the Norns themselves and ask for a chance to change one thing.

Thor wanted it so that he might ask them to change Loki’s fate, to make it so that he never married the Vanir King at all, and instead stayed in Asgard where he belonged.

If only Thor could find it.

But that meant deciphering the parchment, which was said to contain instructions on where the
Emerald last lay.

Of course the scrolls before that, and the sorceress before *that* were meant to know the same thing, but slowly, slowly, Thor was inching closer to his goal.

There was a noise behind him and he turned, half expecting to see Loki as he had done now and again in his dreams. It was Sif, and he tried not to look disappointed.

She saw anyway and gave him a soft smile. “I imagine that you wish to be alone tonight, but at the same time I do not think you should be.” She said. “A whole year since Loki was married, and we have been home only once, and that in the dark of night.”

A year.

A whole year.

How could he have forgotten?

But then every day was such agony away from his love, every moment no less painful than the one before, so to mark an anniversary would be to cheapen the other days, and yet…

Above them, the rain began to fall, gently at first, like a lovers kiss upon their cheeks, but it grew in power and force, drenching them completely and putting out the fire.

No one yelled at him. Not one of them said a word, just came closer to him, wrapped their arms around him or clapped him on the shoulder, and held him as the rain fell down.

In less than an hour Svartalheim was entirely covered in rain, ash and dust mixed into a muddy mess which coated everything that dared to step out into the open.

It rained on Alfheim, causing the light elves to run for cover and watch from their windows as the clouds came and conquered their sunny day.

It rained on Midgard, terrifying the local mortals who saw no end to such a phenomenon, for it seemed to be raining across the whole of the world. Those who had them even took to their boats, believing that their gods wished the wicked to drown.

It rained in Muspelheim, falling water turning into steam before it ever reached the ground, which did nothing for the panic below as the demons watched as the water just kept falling.

On Jotunheim the rain became hail which stung the skin of the young as it fell, building up into drifts that the larger and less patient giants kicked their way through.

It rained in Hel, falling on the dead who looked up in surprise at the sudden, unexplained change in the unchangeable.

On Nidavellir there was no panic, it was only a little rain after all, and it was the season for it. It was only when it had gone on for days that the dwarves laid down their tools and went to stare out at the drowning landscape in wonder and fear.

In Asgard, the rain subdued an already solemn realm. The crown prince was gone who knows where, his brother far away in Vanaheim, the Queen had been sad for a year as she missed them, and the King sat silently on his throne and stared at nothing, his face lined with something far more weighty than mere years.
On Vanaheim, the rain caused a hasty change to the celebrations, which could not be held out of doors. The streets flooded with water and the streams rose until they burst their banks. Children played in the giant puddles as their parents yelled at them to come inside, and the King sat furiously on his throne as he watched his grand vision disappear into a haze of falling water.

****

“Are you alright?” Loki asked.

“I’m fine.” Camtan said, putting his foot down. “It was just me losing my foot to a devastating injury.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Everything’s a drama for you isn’t it?” He asked with a smile as they resumed their walk to the Bifrost site.
Loki stood next to King Dimcken and tried to look calm. Foreign dignitaries from all over the nine realms had been arriving all morning for the upcoming celebrations and he was worn out from greeting them all.

But the last one was due any minute, and he was understandably nervous. His parents were about to arrive, he was going to see his mother for the first time in a year.

The rain was still pouring outside. It had been raining for five straight days now, sometimes lightly, sometimes hard, but never truly stopping. Loki had stood by the enormous windows of his chambers and watched it with a sad expression and a torn heart. He ached to know that Thor was hurting, but was comforted to know that Thor still loved him.

“Send me rain.” He had whispered to the glass beneath his hand. “Every year, send me rain.”

Maybe Thor would hear him.

But for now, Loki straightened. The Bifrost site had lit up.

A moment later the glow faded to reveal King Odin Allfather of Asgard, and the much more welcome sight of Queen Frigga, mother.

Loki almost stepped forwards to embrace her, but checked himself at the last minute. There was public protocol after all.

“Greetings Allfather, Allmother. Welcome to Vanaheim.” King Dimcken said warmly.

His grip on Loki’s arm had tightened slightly. What did he think they were going to do? Drag Loki away from him? Odin clearly had no such plans, and Frigga could not go against him.

“We thank you for the invitation Your Majesty, we are happy to be here to celebrate with you.” Odin said formally.

Frigga had not taken her eyes off Loki. It was as though they were both waiting for a barrier to fall down so that they might rush together.

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“It was ridiculous, they were mother and son, they should be allowed to *speak* to one another. But
it would have to wait for the feast, there were too many nobles here for such a private meeting.

Speaking of nobles, where were-?

Loki turned his head and spotted his grandparents. Lord Eadgleyr was clutching Lord Fallconyr’s arm so tightly the man was wincing from the force of it, and they both gazed at the scene before them with longing in their eyes.

Maybe she would talk to them, Loki thought. Maybe he could help them mend their rift.

Frigga caught where his eyes were looking and turned automatically. Her face changed at the sight of her parents. She grew pale and Loki saw her almost bite her lip, but she smoothed her features at the last minute. It would not do for the Queen of Asgard to look so disturbed.

She looked back at him as the servants began to show Odin the way to the guest chambers where they might relax until the feast. Loki gave her a hint of a smile, a hint of encouragement. ‘They’re your parents, and they did as you asked, they came here for me.’ He tried to tell her silently.

He thought he saw a hint of relief in her eyes as she turned away.

Loki managed to extract himself from his husband’s side by the simple method of telling him he had to get ready for the feast.

King Dimcken was in a cheerful mood and chuckled as he kissed Loki goodbye.

“You Queens and Consorts always take so much time, but the effect is most impressive I assure you.” He said, giving Loki a final squeeze.

Loki forced a smile and nodded. “I will see you soon Husband.” He said, and left for his chambers.

Lords Eadgleyr and Fallconyr were waiting for him.

“How are you dear?” Lord Eadgelyr asked immediately.

“How are you?” Loki countered. “I saw you there, and I know you saw her.”

“We were, and we did. I do not know if she wishes to speak to us.” Lord Fallconyr said. “If you get a chance to talk to her Loki please ask her to speak to her mother, even if she does not wish to speak to me. *I* am the one who fought with her, *I* am the one she swore never to speak to again. Eadi doesn’t deserve to be so shut out.”

“On the contrary, you are *not* the only one who told her that she was making a mistake.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “I played my part, although I would dearly love to ask her if she is alright. Oh, and I apologise for implying that you were a mistake dear, that was not my intention.”

“I know.” Loki said, sitting down and waving at Femtchyr to bring some tea. “If I get the chance, I will tell her how you have helped me, and how you did not ignore her letter.”

They smiled softly.

“She did look well.” Lord Eadgleyr said fondly. “Older, of course, in my mind she has always been that whip-like girl who carried a shield, despite knowing that she must have changed over the years I still found it a shock to see lines on her face.”
“She probably feels the same about us.” Lord Fallconyr said with a sad kind of smile.

Fosxyr appeared at the door.

“Your Grace. Her Majesty, the Queen of Asgard is here.”

They all straightened in their seats. “Send her in.” Loki said, then paused. “Wait. Do you want to be here?” He asked them both. “If things don’t go well-“

“Then we will be no different than the last time things didn’t go well.” Lord Eadgleyr said, he was almost bouncing in his seat. “I will stay.”

“I won’t.” Lord Fallconyr said.

“Husband.”

“No my love. You mend your broken bridge today, I will try tomorrow, at least that way if one of us fails the other might not.” He said and kissed Lord Eadgleyr deeply. “Good luck.” He whispered, and slipped out through the servant’s corridor.

Loki nodded to Fosxyr, who disappeared for a moment before returning with Frigga in tow.

She started to smile at Loki, and then stopped when she saw Lord Eadgleyr.

“Mother.” She said, sounding nervous.

Lord Eadgleyr rose slowly and stood there. For a moment they just stared at one another.

“My baby.” Lord Eadgleyr said and started to cry.

“Mother!” Frigga responded as she wrapped her arms around him, holding on tightly. “Oh Mother.”

“Oh my baby girl, I have missed you so much.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

Loki sat and watched them as they fell into the chair, still hugging and with tears pouring down their faces. He felt sad that Lord Fallconyr wasn’t here, but perhaps it was best that these things be done separately.

Frigga looked up then and held an arm out. “Loki come here.” She said. “Let me see you, let me hold you, oh my boy.”

Loki allowed himself to be drawn into their hug, enjoying the warmth they surrounded him.

“I’ve missed you Mother.” He said. “I’ve read each of your letters a hundred times I am sure of it.”

“I’ve missed you too. I have worried about you every day, *every* day. Are you well Loki? Are you alright here?” She asked, looking him over with concern.

Such a difficult question. Lord Eadgleyr already knew the answer, but he stayed silent, letting Loki decide what to tell his mother.

But what to say? What could he really say that wouldn’t worry her further? Especially as she had no way of helping him.

“I am well.” He said at last, sticking to a simple reply. “There is much here that is different, but I am used to it now.”
She stared sadly into his eyes. “Liar.” She whispered.

Loki bit his lip as he struggled not to break down. “I have to get ready for the feast.” He said, but was stopped by Lord Eadgleyr’s hand.

“I will see you both later.” He said. “I hope, very much my baby girl, to speak to you tonight *properly* if I may, but for now I think you should take this fleeting chance to talk. Believe me, not talking is a curse we cast upon ourselves.”

He rose and, with a gentle hand to both their cheeks, wished them farewell.

Loki was left alone with his mother. They were both still squashed into the chair together. They realised it at the same time and shared an embarrassed smile.

“I’ll shift.” Loki said, making to rise.

“Let us both sit on the couch; I am not ready to let you go.” Frigga said.

They sat down in a more comfortable manner and regarded one another again.

“He has not been home since you left.” Frigga said softly. “I was horrified by the thought of losing one son, I did not think I would lose the other as well, but I have, and I miss you both like there is a hole in my heart.”

Loki hugged her. “You can visit now.” He said in her ear. “Please visit now.”

Frigga looked at him sadly. “I will do so as often as I can, but Loki, your father is being truly stubborn, he does not like to feel he is in the wrong.” She said softly.

Loki sighed and looked at the floor. “Then he should be wrong less often.” He said.

The corner of Frigga’s mouth twitched. “Indeed.” She said.

“Does he write to you?” Loki asked, his voice almost low enough to be a whisper.

“No. He is not one for writing normally, and right now he is angry with me, for not fighting harder for you both, I believe. I know that you must have… mixed feelings about my actions.”

“You cannot go against Father.” Loki said. “Any more than I may defy my Husband and King.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “I’m glad that my mother has come to see you. I saw my father too, is he well?”

“They came because of your letter.” Loki said. “They normally spend their time on their lands, but they wanted to be here, for me and for you, and yes, Grandfather is well. He is a very determined sort of a man.”

Frigga smiled properly then. “So I remember.” She said. “I fought him bitterly, I was so certain I was right. I was so young.”

“You were not wrong for a very long time.” Loki said. “That’s got to count for something.”

“Perhaps. I do not know if he can ever forgive me for the words I said, the curses I threw at his feet. Thankfully I did not add magic to them, although I remember that I was so close, so *angry*.” She said.
She turned to Loki and regarded him seriously. “I have been told tales of the King of Vanaheim by some of my ladies, who saw firsthand his treatment of the last queen. Does he threaten you Loki? Has he hurt you?”

Her eyes were dark then, a lioness preparing to strike. But what could she do, really? What could she say to the King of this realm? If Odin was not going to interfere, then Frigga could not.

“He is active.” Loki said. “My grandparents are here when I need them. There is nothing much further to say.”

Frigga’s eyes narrowed. “I will force Heimdall to tell Odin everything he sees, everything. If he must condemn you to this marriage then he will hear the results of his actions.”

He voice held such menace in that moment, far more than Loki had ever heard, and yet all he could do was smile because in that moment, he could see her father in her.

“I will survive Mother.” He said softly. “I will come home to him, and to you.”

Frigga had to leave soon after so that they might both make ready for the feast. Loki bathed and put on yet another fine collection of robes. He wondered if he had managed to wear anything twice yet, it certainly didn’t seem like it. Fosxyr adorned him in a brace and matching cuffs. They had been gifts from the King for his birthday.

Looking rather decorated and like an ornament, Loki made his way down to the doorway before the throne room where his Husband stood waiting.

“Loki you look beautiful.” King Dimkcen said. “I do love the way that brace sets off your features.”

“Thank you Husband, it is the one you gave me.” Loki said.

“Is it? Oh yes, I’m so glad you like it.”

Loki smiled blandly. This was a farce, a scripted play that they were both conducting. A little flattery, a statement that looked to be a compliment to anyone vain enough to see it, all he wanted was to run to his mother’s arms, and yet he must stay by the King’s side.

Dorgen and Mulmyr were standing behind the King, their children, the Princes Lyrren and Occtopusir (Octir, to his friends) were by their side. They had spent the last few days in the healers wing, recovering both their strength and their will. After such a long imprisonment, they were skittish and nervous at times, although their warrior training had helped them retain a sense of self. Loki hoped that Thor never got himself captured under such circumstances. He hated the very idea of anything that could make Thor skittish.

They greeted him with a bow and a low “grandmother”. Loki smiled at them warmly.

“Just Loki, please, your father and uncles all call me Loki, I would very much like for you to do so as well.”

King Dimcken beamed at them all as he took in the scene. Despite having his grand vision ruined, he was in a good mood for the celebrations that night. He had his grandsons safe, his son no longer under rebel control, and a pretty wife whose appeal had not even begun to fade. He had everything
Camtan and Soffitia arrived, looking a little frazzled. “Sorry Father, Roessia was fussing, but we got her to sleep and the nanny is watching.” Camtan said.

“It is of no matter.” King Dimcken said. “You are here now and we will celebrate. Musleen, my boy, tonight I want you to find a wife, there are plenty of them out there and I do not wish for you to be alone.”

Was it Loki’s imagination, or did the tips of Musleen’s ears turn pink?

“I will try Father, but I make no promises, for my future wife must be ideal, elsewise I will turn bitter.” He said.

King Dimcken nodded. “Fair, fair.” He said as he gestured to the servants to open the doors. “Let us celebrate.” He said, holding his arm out to Loki to lead him into the hall.
Fifty Four Steps

Chapter Summary

A Battle Won, A War Lost

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Hall had been transformed.

Glittering silver decorations were everywhere, shimmering in the light of the enormous chandeliers. Loki’s gaze moved slowly from the crystal carvings on each table, to the thin chains crisscrossing the ceiling, upon which hung thousands of delicate droplet-shaped ornaments, each at its own height. The tables were covered in white clothes with sparkling silver edges, and even the plates were gleaming, a silver set from the palace stores.

It looked like what winter *should* be, for all that it was halfway through spring.

Small waterfall sculptures had been set up in the corners, and the floor had been carefully covered in a fine layer of silver-leaf. It must have taken a month.

Except it couldn’t have, because only six days ago King Dimcken had still expected to celebrate outside.

“How did they do this?” Loki asked as King Dimcken led him to the high table.

“I asked Horrseen to arrange some mages, they sped the whole thing up.” He said. “Do you like it Loki? I wanted to surprise you.”

“I do.” Loki said quickly, putting a smile onto his face. “It’s beautiful, extraordinary. Like something out of a dream.”

King Dimcken grinned broadly. “I knew you’d like it. There is something about winter that suits you. I loved seeing you in your winter furs.”

Loki carefully kept from flinching. King Dimcken had been very *attentive* to Loki during winter, especially when he’d come in with chilled cheeks and cold hands. He never wanted to hear the phrase ‘let me warm you up’ ever again.

They reached the table and King Dimcken held Loki’s seat out for him. Loki sat with the best smile of gratitude that he could muster and mentally calmed himself. This was just one more thing he had to get through.

He was sitting with Odin on his left, and Frigga just beyond. His grandparents sat on the nearest table. Lord Eadgleyr was watching Frigga, no doubt hoping for more time together. Lord Falconyr was watching Odin, his expression unreadable.

“My people! My Friends! Honoured guests of the Realms! I greet you tonight with a happy heart!” King Dimcken announced. “For one year ago today I wed the most beautiful, charming, wonderful
wife I could ever hope for. My Loki, you have made this year one of great joy, and I thank all of you for being here to celebrate with us! Let us feast and be merry until the sun rises. Enjoy yourselves!"

The King sat as the crowd cheered. Loki forced his mouth into a slightly wider smile, as behind him the servants approached with the first of the food.

A platter each, once again. Loki picked up his fork and began to eat each bite as the larger serving bowls were placed on the table. He spotted one of Odin’s favourite dishes on his tray, and in a small act of defiance, resolved to eat it last. Let the bastard wait for it.

He ate each bite in turn, remembering to eat the cool minty salad right after the hot red-sauced beef, drinking each of the wines with the best dish for it.

He was halfway through when he realised that he knew the names of every dish, and when to eat them for the best overall result. The thought made his hand stop in place for a second, before he remembered that he was on display and could not stop.

It was such a little thing, but caused such pain. Vanheim was not a foreign land anymore, it wasn’t home, but it wasn’t foreign. It had been months since he last wished for pants, and even then only because he’d been using the leather rub on his one surviving pair from Asgard.

He pushed through the thought determinedly, now was not the time, fall apart later, in bed, alone. He was a King’s Consort and they do not hurt, worry, pull faces, cry, scream or do anything at all that would embarrass themselves or the realms they represented.

He knew that lesson well, and because he knew it, he could see it elsewhere.

Frigga was the prime example. After such a brief reunion earlier there would only be one desire on her mind, and that would be to speak to her mother further. The queen of Alfheim was a picture of charming elegance, even as her husband drank his second cup of wine in less than ten minutes. All over the court Loki could see the grace, the charm, the *lie*. Most of the wives were playing a part, so few were completely themselves.

Lord Eadgleyr was even guilty of it. If he had his way he would be by Frigga’s side right now, catching up on everything, apologising for the past, receiving one in return. Instead he sat calmly and ate an acceptable portion for an old man at a feast. Lord Fallconyr was less bothered by decorum, and was alternating between watching King Dimcken, watching Loki, watching his daughter, and silently murdering Odin with his thoughts.

Loki felt the slightest stab of fear. He really hoped that there was no trouble tonight. He did not want to upset the King. King Dimcken had a habit of taking out his frustrations on anyone without sufficient protection.

At last there was only one bite left. Odin had served himself about three quarters of a plateful, but had left room in preparation. Loki took a sip of water.

Odin had a small bite of his food.

Loki finished the last of the red wine.

Odin took a sip of his wine as well.

Loki found a piece of salad he hadn’t finished and ate it.

Odin had another small bite.
Decorum. Odin could not just turn to his son and demand that he finish his food. In this realm, Odin was a foreign King, not a father. They were in public, and he could do nothing.

Loki wondered how far he could push it before it became ‘trouble’ or ‘mischief’. Maybe ten more seconds, after all, he may just not like the dish, it’s not as though Odin had ever paid enough attention to Loki’s eating habits to refute the claim.

Loki had a quick sip of water, then picked up his fork. He scooped the little mouthful up and held it in front of him.

“Husband? How did they get the lights to sparkle like that?” Loki asked Dimcken, holding the mouthful tantalisingly close to his mouth.

“It’s all magic, I’m sure Horrseen could explain it to you later if you are interested.” King Dimcken said. “It is a lovely effect is it not?”

“Beautiful.” Loki said. “I cannot believe that this was the same Hall.”

His fork was hovering, moving down slightly as he spoke, coming up slightly when King Dimcken responded, but never quite reaching his mouth.

Beside him, Odin had another small mouthful and shifted a little in frustration.

Loki smiled as King Dimcken finished explaining what had prompted his vision of the Hall for the night. This smile was natural, because Loki’s mind was only partially on the King, and primarily on the other King behind him.

“Well I think it’s wonderful.” He said and popped the last mouthful into his mouth.

He was facing away from Odin on purpose. Odin still hadn’t seen what Loki had done, which dragged it out even longer. Slowly, Loki turned back to the front and put his fork down.

Loki *heard* the sigh of relief from his left as Odin reached forwards to serve himself his favourite dish.

Fosxyr appeared at Loki’s side as if by magic to take his order. Loki rattled off a few of his favourite dishes and then sat back as the servant poured him some more wine. It was only a little thing, a tiny irritation for Odin in response to a much bigger terror for Loki, but Loki felt a small measure of satisfaction nonetheless.

After the feasting came the entertainment. A singer with a beautiful voice was followed by a troupe of dancers who moved to fast music. Loki was watching attentively when he saw Daenceia in the back, moving like a bird in flight.

He sat up straighter, astonished. He’d never even known that she performed.

The music changed and she came to the front. Loki leaned forwards to get a better view. He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and saw that Musleen had leaned forwards too, the Prince’s face was serious, with a slight frown of concentration.

Daenceia moved with incredible grace. As the music played she spun and twirled, making the crowd gasp in delight. After a moment, coloured light began to flow from her hands, twisting around her and complimenting the way she moved.

Loki knew now why she was studying illusions at the Tower. With her gift for magic and
movement, she created a world of fantasy around her that drew everyone in. She was magnificent.

The dance ended and the crowd sighed, half the young men were in love with her, as evidenced by the way they almost fell out of their seats trying to catch a glimpse as she returned to her background position. The finale of the dance was spectacular, with flips and twirls and impossible moves between two or even three dancers at the time, but nothing truly topped Daenceia’s solo. She had created something beautiful.

Loki sat back as the next performers began. They were jugglers, and they were unfortunate to have followed such a brilliant performance. The crowd was more interested in their wine than watching the balls and sticks fly.

Musleen gave his father a brief smile before rising.

“Where are you going my boy?” King Dimcken asked.

“I just need to check on something, it is nothing important, but it must be done.” Musleen replied. “I will be back before you know it Father, enjoy yourself.”

King Dimcken frowned slightly as he left. “That boy never stops working.” He said. “Surely his men can handle things for a night?”

Loki laid a hand on the King’s arm, as a good wife would do when her husband looked out of sorts in public. “He is the best, and he cares about you. His men will give him their reports and he will be back in a moment, with no harm done.” He said.

King Dimcken smiled at him, the King *knew* that Loki was more pleasing in public and he liked to take advantage of it. “You are right of course my dear wife.” He said, taking Loki’s hand and holding it, entwining their fingers together lovingly. “I will put it out of my mind, after all, there is no sense changing the boy, he will always be my watchful one.”

Loki turned his attention back to the jugglers, who were giving it their all. He waited patiently until they were finished, then pulled his hand from the King’s so that he might applaud their efforts. It was going to be a long night.

After the entertainment came the desserts, and Loki was surprised to see the wonders of sugar and cream that were brought to the tables. The cooks had done a magnificent job, each dessert had been sculpted as best it could be, given its nature, into beautiful animals, or buildings from around the Vanir capital.

The masterpiece was placed on the royal table, a cake made in a perfect replica of the palace. Loki did his best to look delighted at it all as King Dimcken cut the first piece and served it to him.

Loki thanked him, forcing a smile on his face, and the servants took care of the rest.

Loki had to bite the inside of his cheek when he saw the Odin’s favourite dessert was sitting on Lord Fallconyr’s table. In theory, once the entertainment began again Odin could go down there and help himself. But he wouldn’t. Loki knew that he wouldn’t.

The entertainment that followed dessert was dancing. Loki immediately found a presence at his shoulder, he turned, expecting to see Camtan, but found instead that he was looking at Musleen.

“Mother?” Musleen said with a perfectly blank expression on his face.

Loki smiled and turned to King Dimcken, who waved him away cheerfully.
Camtan was dancing with Sofftia, taking advantage of their night together. Instead Loki lined up with his second stepson and together they moved to the music.

“What was it that bothered you about the dancers?” Loki asked him after a moment.

Musleen smiled his usual reserved smile. “It wasn’t the dancers.” He said. “There was something going on behind, but do not worry, it is taken care of.” He said.

Loki nodded and smiled. Now was not the time for such conversations, perhaps they could talk about it later in the training yards, they had already arranged to start sparring once the celebrations were over.

Frigga was sitting with her mother; they were both talking at the same time, transferring information from one another and back again in a way peculiar to mothers everywhere. Frigga was smiling, although her eyes still looked faintly strained. Loki was probably one of only a few people who would notice such a thing.

Lord Fallconyr had disappeared.

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Odin had been inching closer to the table where his favourite dessert sat. Frigga had gone over there already, but he was reluctant to join her. Things had been strained between them for over a year now, and the fact that Loki was healthy had not seemed to help matters.

His announcement all those months ago, that Loki would be marrying the King of Vanaheim had caused a minor upset in the Queen’s rooms. For one thing he was no longer allowed inside. Frigga had spent days in there with her ladies as they dissected the decision from every angle. The discovery that Thor and Loki were in love and wished to wed had made things even worse, and he’s barely had a word out of her for the two months leading up to Loki’s departure. Barely, but not totally.

“YOU SOLD OUR BABY TO THAT MONSTER! AND FOR WHAT? PEACE?! WE HAVE PEACE! REBELS CAN BE DEALT WITH IN MANY, MANY WAYS! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!?”

Her voice still echoed in his head. She had insisted that King Dimcken was a monster, and that all her Vanir ladies were grateful to be away from his court where he could not reach them. Lady Praettyia and Lady Louvelyia had stood there behind Frigga with pale faces, and Lady Visxena looked as though she wanted to vomit.

Odin had dismissed their claims. King Dimcken was old, not the middle-aged man he’d been when they had left for Asgard, he may have been something of a rogue in his younger years but he was hardly going to be so now. Loki would be fine.

“He touches me everywhere, he puts his hands *everywhere*, and… other things, *everywhere*.”

Loki’s voice came back into Odin’s head suddenly. The memory was so clear that Odin had to blink and glance quickly across the room to where his son was dancing just to be sure that he hadn’t heard it out loud.

Of course with Loki’s magic, who really knew?
Anyway, Loki was just fine. He looked healthy, he handled himself with composure, and from what Odin had seen, had calmed down a lot from his younger, more mischievous ways. Surely that meant Vanheim had been good for him?

“You seem troubled Allfather, I do hope there is nothing on your mind.” Said the last voice Odin ever wanted to hear again.

He turned, and saw Lord Fallconyr standing in the recess of one of the Hall windows. He was leaning with his back against the wall and his cane in front of him.

“You’ve aged,” Odin said bluntly.

“So have you, but I carry it better.” Lord Fallconyr replied.

“What do you want?” Odin asked, letting a little bit of an annoyed tone creep into his voice.

Frigga’s father had not only opposed their marriage, he’d publically called Odin a young, arrogant, foolish, nitwit with nothing but his throne to recommend him. It had stung then and the memory stung now, but Odin had won in the end.

“I want to have a quiet conversation about your latest stuff-up.” Lord Fallconyr said calmly. “You’re an idiot.”

Odin smiled at him. “If you recall this ‘idiot’ took your daughter as his wife, and she never looked back.”

“Until now.” Lord Fallconyr said, still infuriatingly calm. “Look at her, you silly boy, does she look unhappy here? Where do you think she would like to be right now? With her child who is suffering, or with the man who made him suffer? You haven’t changed Odin, you’ve grown old but you haven’t grown up.”

Odin scowled, he hadn’t felt so much like a boy in centuries. Lord Fallconyr was everything he hated in a man. “I won that battle a long time ago you old fool.” He hissed.

Lord Fallconyr smiled like a snake. Odin found he was disturbingly reminded of Loki, which was impossible, and yet the expression, both in the smile and behind the eyes, was the same. Was it possible for learned behaviour to skip a generation the way hair and eyes would?

“Ah yes, and I conceded that battle an equally long time ago.” Lord Fallconyr said. “But this is not that battle Odin, this is a new battle, with new weapons, and new people to fight for and to lose. The latest battle in a much longer war and, do you know? I’m certain that I am going to win, because even if you take Frigga home, even if you convince her to stay in Asgard with you, you have already lost your son, and from what I hear, where he goes the other will follow. You have lost everything Odin Allfather, I need do nothing but wait.”

Odin looked back at where Loki was dancing, he was laughing as he skipped down the row of clapping people in a dance Odin did not recognise. It was a very different image to the one he’d seen when he was here last.

“He touches me everywhere, he puts his hands *everywhere*, and… other things, *everywhere*.”

That sentence kept coming back to him, kept intruding into his thoughts…

Odin shook his head angrily. “I will not be lectured on my own family.” He snapped.
Lord Fallconyr grinned then, a proper grin of proper mirth. “I said that, once.” He said with his eyes sparkling. “Please let me know how well that turned out for me.”

Odin turned and walked to the table, dessert forgotten as he approached his wife.

“Frigga.” He said, drawing close.

She turned from her mother and regarded him with a perfect, social smile.

“Husband?” She said. “Do you remember my mother? Lord Eadgleyr.”

Odin looked across to where Lord Eadgleyr sat. The Lord raised an eyebrow at him. “Allfather, it is my honour to meet you once again. How is you eldest son?”

Odin gritted his teeth. “Thor is away on a quest.” He said.

Lord Eadgleyr smiled yet another court-approved, perfect smile. Everyone here was wearing them, everyone, even Loki.

Odin stood there awkwardly for a few minutes, but neither one of them said anything further to him. They were talking about Frigga’s brothers and sisters, only some of whom Odin had met and none of whom he remembered. He took his leave and made his way back to the royal table, where King Dimcken sat cheerfully watching the dancing.

King Dimcken was old enough to be Odin’s grandfather, and in the whole Hall, he and Odin were the only ones still in their assigned seats.

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Loki danced until he was exhausted. The younger members of the court were cutting loose and making merry with enthusiasm. Loki still had to remember to maintain a certain level of decorum, but he was enjoying himself down on the dance floor far more than he had been sitting between two powerful kings.

He stayed away from Frigga as she spoke to her mother. He didn’t want to interrupt the delicate process of healing that had begun between them.

Instead he threw himself into the music, letting the nobles who asked have one dance each and generally just burning off the tension he’d been feeling for days.

Outside, there was a mighty clap of thunder, as the rain continued to fall. Loki turned his face skyward along with some of the other guests.

“Prince Thor must be upset.” One of them commented. “Didn’t you invite him?”

They laughed at the joke, and Loki forced himself to laugh with them. “Not every storm is my brother.” He said. “It is spring, rain is to be expected.”

They moved on to other topics, but as Loki talked and danced and laughed his way through the evening, he found himself wishing that he could send a message back to Thor somehow to tell him that he was also missed, that Loki’s pain at their parting was never ending, and that Loki loved him too.
'Stop now my love.’ Loki thought to the sky. ‘Dry your tears and stay strong, as I will for you. One day I will see you again and the worlds will shine with the signs of our love.’

If only he could send it.

Lord Fallconyr asked him to dance. It was the first time Loki had ever seen his grandfather on the dance floor, and he had clearly chosen a slower song on purpose. Loki smiled and said yes, lining up and making himself ready for the start of the song.

They moved a little awkwardly, but Loki couldn’t help but enjoy it, Lord Fallconyr provided brilliant snarky commentary on the current fashion among the young toward clashing colours (fancy-looking birds, the lot of them) and on the dance floor itself (silver leaf? Really? I could make a candelabrum with the amount sticking to my shoes). He kept Loki in a fit a giggles until the end, when he gave the whole crowd of them a bow, thanked them kindly for indulging such an old man, and promised not to tell the parents of two of them about their kissing while using the group as cover.

Up on the royal table, Odin was listening politely to Dimcken as the old King talked about setting up the room, but his eyes were on the dance floor, where they watched enviously as Lord Fallconyr walked away.

Loki had yet to speak to his father once.

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After the dancing came the boring part of the evening, the giving of presents. Loki sat beside King Dimcken and tried to look pleased as the King heaped yet more praise onto him, finishing with a kiss to his lips (did some of the younger courtiers pull a face?) and presenting him with a beautiful, extremely detailed, golden brace.

It would go brilliantly with the beautiful, extremely detailed, golden crown that King Dimcken had given Loki for his birthday.

Then it was Loki’s turn. He stood, thanked his husband for the fine gift, praised the King’s strength, his generosity, his care and his dedication. Then he presented King Dimcken with the sword, which had arrived the week before and was studded with jewels. There was engraving along the blade as well, the symbols of Vanahem carved down its length.

King Dimcken actually looked as though he was going to cry with happiness. He admired the sword from every angle, then pulled Loki in for another, slightly longer, kiss. It was still nothing compared to what he usually did, after all Loki’s parents were sitting right next to him. Loki endured it, and forced a smile onto his face immediately afterwards as the crowd cheered.

More music, more dancing, a lot more wine, and finally the sun began to rise, bathing the Hall in yellow light. The nobles and foreign visitors alike began to drift away to their bedrooms. Frigga gave Loki a hug and promised to see him again the next day before she had to leave. Odin gave him a hug too, but felt no warmth in it. Loki had turned cold towards his father, for all that he smiled so naturally.

Then at last King Dimcken took Loki’s hand and led him to the King’s chambers.

“We have had quite a night.” King Dimcken said as they reached the bedroom. “I had a nap earlier,
because I wanted to be sure of bedding you.”

Loki almost choked on the sudden fear that gripped him. That was the one thing he *hadn’t* been expecting. King Dimcken never had the energy to celebrate all night and still have sex.

But he had done so. One year ago on their wedding night. Clearly it could be done, it just required a little extra planning on the part of the King.

Loki forced himself to turn towards the bed.

King Dimcken was already on it, in fact, he was standing on it.

“Come up here Loki.” He said, using the headboard to stay balanced.

Loki slipped off his shoes and climbed nervously up beside King Dimcken. The King was unhooking a thin rope from a hook on the wall.

There was three of them all together fixed at the point just below the ceiling. The white one fell down the centre and was not tied, the red one was tied to a hook on the right hand side and the green one to the left.

Loki heart started pounding. He’d seen those ropes before, but they had looked like a decorative wall piece, now he was terrified that King Dimcken was going to use them for a much more terrible purpose.

King Dimcken smiled at him as he took the white rope and held it out. “Just tie this one to the left hook, good boy.” He said as he let the green rope go so that it fell straight.

Loki obeyed, still nervous.

“You look puzzled my darling wife, do they not have marriage ropes in Asgard?” King Dimcken asked.

Loki looked at him. “No Husband, what is a marriage rope?”

‘Please let it be something good.’ He begged silently.

King Dimcken smiled. “When two people marry, they hang a marriage rope on the wall above their bed. Every year they exchange two ropes like we have just done, slowly, over time this creates a weaving of the colours, symbolising their lives together.” He explained.

Loki looked up at the ceiling, the crossing of the white and green ropes had caused a slight twist to appear. “That’s a beautiful idea.” He said, wondering what his grandparents’ rope must look like after so long together.

“We Vanir have so many of those.” King Dimcken said in his ear. “Now, let us have our private celebration.”

Loki lay beneath the King and stared at the painted frescoes on the ceiling above the bed as he was thrust into. He held on to King Dimcken when he was asked to and endured the man’s slow thrusts. It seemed that despite his nap, King Dimcken was not up for much, a fact for which Loki was extremely grateful.

Afterwards, Loki lay on his side and faced away from where his Husband was lying, snoring loudly. He turned to look over his shoulder for a moment. King Dimcken was on his back and unconscious.
Loki pushed the covers off himself and grabbed his robe. He pulled it on and went to the glass door that was set into the enormous windows either side of the bed. Loki pulled the door open and stepped out onto the balcony of the King’s chambers.

The air was cold and wet as the rain continued to fall. Loki stood beneath the shelter and watched the city as it woke up. It was hard to see any people from where he stood, but then perhaps most of them were sleeping off celebrations of their own. Just because the outdoor celebration was cancelled did not mean the free food had been. The people had rejoiced.

Loki stepped up to the railing and laid his hands onto the dripping metal. The rain could just reach his wrists, and he smiled as he felt it wash over his skin.

He raised a hand and turned it, catching the droplets as they fell. He could feel Thor in every one, touching his skin, washing it clean, washing…it…clean…

He watched as the inky stuff *dripped* away, carried by a water scented with nothing but love. Was it really possible? Could Thor really remove such a horrible filth from Loki’s skin? Loki didn’t know, not for certain, but right now it *felt* like he could and that was enough for Loki. He let the water wash his hands clean, let it touch his face and neck, then went back inside to sleep.

As he lay there on the bed, Loki had to keep himself from continuously glancing down, because in his mind he was sure that his hands were glowing.

Chapter End Notes

Did I scare you with the ropes? Did I? Aww, go on, say yes. :P
The following day Loki woke early, he slipped away while King Dimcken was still sleeping, which drew a look of censure from Fosxyr, but he was willing to risk it. Frigga would be returning home later that day and he didn’t want to miss a moment of her company more than he had to.

He washed and dressed in record time before heading for the guest chambers.

“What if she’s still sleeping?” Fosxyr asked him as they walked there.

“She won’t be.” Loki said confidently. “Our brief time together is too important.”

Frigga was up and dressed, and sitting at the breakfast table when Loki arrived. She was alone. Odin was still sleeping in the room beyond.

“Loki.” She said with a smile as she rose to hug him. “You were wonderful last night.”

“So were you.” Loki said. “New dress?”

“Yes, we have to show all the people from the other realms how fine Asgard is.” She said with a playful smile. “I saw your brace, very fine.”

Loki stuck his tongue out. “Indeed.” He said.

They sat and ate breakfast together. Frigga told Loki about the goings on in Asgard, and about everyone in the court. Loki meanwhile, told her about his magic lessons, the summer hunts, riding Lightning, riding Lightning at a gallop when the King wasn’t watching, and his visit to the lands of Lord Fallconyr.

“I can’t believe you grew up there. It’s a paradise.” Loki said.

“It was hard work.” Frigga said. “From morning until night, and we all helped.”

“Even hard work can be paradise.” Loki insisted. “If it’s in the right setting.”

She smiled at that. “I would love to see it again.” She said.

“Do it.” Loki said, suddenly earnest. “Go and visit, they’re your family, you do have the right to visit.”

Frigga looked sad. “Loki, my boy, I know you wish for me to reconcile with my parents, but I don’t believe it’s possible.”

“You have already mended things with your mother.” Loki insisted.

“I fought with my mother because he stood by my father.” Frigga said. “But to father I said things in anger that no daughter should ever say. I went too far to ever go back.”
“No.” Loki insisted. “He loves you, he *said* so. He was in the room when you came to see me yesterday, but he left to give you a chance to speak to your mother.”

“He left because he doesn’t want to see me.” Frigga said.

“No.” Loki said, more forcefully. “Trust me mother, please. He wants so badly to make things right with you. Did you know that it was your letter that brought him here to the palace? He used to spend his days on his lands, he’d long since left the court behind him, but he came back because *you* needed him to. You knew I’d need someone, and you set aside your pride to ask him, he set aside his to respond to your call. All I’m asking you to do is to try. Please. He’s your father, and despite everything that happened, I know he loves you.”

Frigga still looked uncertain. “I don’t know.” She said softly.

“I do.” Loki responded, his mouth set. “If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for me.”

Frigga looked at him for a long time, before she slowly began to nod. “For you Loki, I will try.” She said at last.

Loki smiled. “We’ll have to find him.” He said, turning in his chair to look at Fosxyr.

Fosxyr caught the look and bowed slightly. “I will inquire as to the current whereabouts and state of his Lordsir.” He said and departed.

Frigga was trying not to smile. “He’s a character.” She said.

“He’s indispensable.” Loki responded.

Frigga’s brow creased slightly. “He reminds me of someone but I cannot think who, that’s going to puzzle me all day.”

A few minutes later Fosxyr was back, Lord Fallconyr was in the west garden, he was alone, and he was willing to speak to his daughter.

“Why didn’t he come here?” Loki asked as they rose.

“Odin.” Frigga said simply, and they made their way down to the gardens.

Lord Fallconyr was sitting on one of the stone benches in the rain, although the rain itself was the feather-light kind that sat on the top of clothing like snow rather than soak in. His cane was resting next to him, and he looked up with a serious face as Fosxyr opened the gate and allowed Loki and Frigga to enter.

Loki looked between them, from one serious, uncertain face to the other.

“I will stay here.” He said. “Call out when you want me.”

“Loki no.” Frigga whispered. “I can’t.”

“You can. He’s here mother, if he cared nothing for you he would never have told us where to find him, please.” Loki said. “You *can* do this.”

She nodded nervously, and walked slowly over to her father, looking nothing like the queen of the nine realms and everything like a trembling child. Loki sat down on one of the sheltered stone seats and tried to admire the flowers.
Many years ago…

Frigga was just a child, and she was in a lot of trouble. She had snuck out when she’d been told to stay in, she’d taken her pony across the fields when she wasn’t allowed to ride alone yet, and she pushed over the old rotten style, which, her mother had told her in a terrified tone, could have fallen on her and left her badly hurt.

But it hadn’t, which is why being sent to see her father was so *unfair*.

She reached the door to his workroom and knocked as softly as possible, if he didn’t hear her, he couldn’t-

“Come in.” Her father’s voice sounded form the other side of the door.

Frigga reluctantly pulled the handle down and pushed the door open.

“Father.” She said once she was inside, putting her hands behind her back in the way her tutor had instructed.

“How were your lessons today?” He asked as he looked up from his workbench. “Have you learnt any new letters?”

“I can write my whole name.” Frigga said.

Maybe, if she was lucky, they would talk about her lessons and then she could go and tell mother that she had indeed spoken to father, just not about sneaking out. She didn’t have to tell her mother that last part.

“Your whole name? I am very impressed, come here and show me.” He said, reaching out for her.

She ran to his arms and let herself be lifted high up to the stool by the table. He fetched her a parchment and a quill and stood patiently as she wrote her name perfectly.

“Well done, my little Frigga is growing up so fast.” He said.

She grinned at him.

“So fast in fact that she is fixing fences by herself.” He added.

Her smile fell.

“The men were talking at breakfast, they said the post was rotten and if they didn’t replace it then someone would step on it and fall and get hurt, but then they all went to do other things.” She protested.

“So my little Frigga decided to do it all by herself.” Her father finished.

“I just pushed it over so that no one would be fooled into thinking that it was good.” She said. “I would have fixed it, but I’m not big enough yet.”

“So you are working within your limits?” He asked with a twinkle in his eye.

She nodded seriously. “I was Father, I was.” She assured him.

“You may have fallen off Stomper.” He pointed out.
“But I didn’t.” She countered.

“You may have gotten lost.” He said. The corner of his mouth was definitely twitching, Frigga could *see* it.

“I would never.” She said huffily.

“You may have cause the post to fall on you, then you would have been hurt far from home, and no one would know where to find you.” He said, a little more seriously.

She looked down. “But I was careful.” She protested in a small voice.

“Perhaps, next time you decide that something must be fixed right away, you would consider speaking to me first? Maybe we can do it together, at least until you are big enough to do it by yourself.” He said.

Frigga looked up at him, up at the man who could do anything, anything at all in the whole realm.

“Alright.” She said. “You can come next time.”

“I am most grateful.” He said.

The smile was back, pulling at the corner of his mouth. Frigga reached up and touched it with her finger.

“You’re not angry at me.” She said.

“I was worried, Frigga. Independence is a fine thing, but you can have too much of it.” He said. “Just promise me that you will not worry me *or* your mother like that again. It is not nice to cause others worry.”

“I’m sorry.” She said.

“And I forgive you.” He said.

“Promise?” She asked.

“Always.” He said.

****

Many years later…

“Father.” Frigga said, standing before him.

“Frigga.” He responded stiffly.

There was silence in the garden, a difficult, painful, heart-wrenching silence. Even the rain was the light, wispy kind that made no sound as it reached the earth.

“Thank you, for coming for Loki.” Frigga said awkwardly.

Lord Fallconyr looked at her with eyes that glistened slightly in the morning sunlight.

“I stayed for Loki.” He said simply. “But I came for you.”

Tears began to roll down Frigga’s cheeks, she had to close her eyes for a moment to compose
“I wasn’t sure if you would, after what I said.” She said. “But there was no one else, no one with the power, and after what I heard about the King I was so scared.” She confessed.

“I will always come when you need me.” He said.

“Even after what I said. Father I was so horrible to you.” She cried.

“And I was horrible right back. It is only because we loved one another so much that we could inflict such pain.” He said.

He was crying now too, his tears were getting caught up in the lines around his eyes.

“I called you a stupid, heartless, old man.” She said.

“I called you a stupid, thoughtless young girl.” He countered.

“I was wrong.”

“I wasn’t.”

She glared at him, but there was no anger behind it.

“You weren’t wrong either.” He conceded quietly. “I have been told by my grandson that you have been more happy than sad over the course of your marriage, so I suppose you did know what you were doing after all.”

“I don’t know anymore.” She said. “After what he did to Loki, I do not know if my choice was right.”

“You have Loki.” Lord Falconyr pointed out. “And Thor, who I hear is a perfect specimen of an Aesir.”

“Your source is bias.” Frigga pointed out. “But his faults are those of his age, not his character.”

“I would very much like to meet him one day.” Lord Falconyr said. “If it is possible.”

“I hope so.” Frigga said softly. “Father?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I, I forgive you.”

“Promise?”

“I already did.”

Loki pretended not to watch as Lord Falconyr and Frigga reached forward into a hug. They were both crying, but maybe they needed to. Certainly they hadn’t stormed away from one another, which was a bonus.

Around them, the rain suddenly stopped. As Loki watched, it expanded outwards in a circle until it
spread further than his vision, out into the city and beyond.

“Thor’s grief must be wearing him out.” Lord Fallconyr commented as he held his daughter close. “I couldn’t make a dent in it before.”

“He’s very strong.” Frigga said. “And very sad, but yes, even he cannot make it rain forever.”

“I am also very happy.” Lord Fallconyr said, resting his cheek on the top of her head. “And I do not care what those ‘experts’ at the Tower say, love is stronger than rage, when it comes to magic.”

“And everything else as well, from what I have seen.” Frigga said, not moving an inch. She had not been held by her father since she was Loki’s age, there was no way that she was letting go now.

Eventually they did call Loki over, and, with a specialised magic that only servants seem to have, Fosxyr appeared with a picnic rug and a basket of hot scones with jam and cream. The three generations sat on the rug and talked about everything from family to the latest fashion craze (fancy-looking birds!) to inter-realm relations to trade to history. They took the whole morning for themselves as they sat surrounded by the scent of the garden.

Lord Eadgleyr arrived with one of Frigga’s brothers, who had been working at the family trading post in the city, and another reunion was had. It was a moment of perfection in the middle of chaos, and Loki savoured every last moment.

That afternoon, the King and Queen of Asgard bid farewell to the King and King’s Consort of Vanheim, and Loki was once again left in the hands of his husband. But he took comfort in the knowledge that his mother was no longer prevented from seeing him. And he took joy from the memory of the garden.

“Thank you Loki.” Lord Fallconyr said to him quietly in the days that followed. “Thank you for my second chance.”

“Everyone deserves one.” Loki replied.
Two days after the anniversary celebrations King Dimcken was in a kinky mood.

He often was after major events, the night of the event itself being too tiring for him to indulge himself. Loki had been expecting it, and had been walking through the last two days with a constant feeling of dread.

It was obvious that night. King Dimcken could not sit still at dinner, his hand kept straying to Loki’s thigh under the table. Loki sat and ate his dinner with growing fear in the pit of his stomach. It could be anything. It would be humiliating definitely, painful, almost a certainty. It didn’t matter how many times it happened, he never got used to it.

Prince Lyrren and Prince Octir had joined them, they were still skittish after their imprisonment, but Dorgen, Mulmyr and especially Musleen had been encouraging them to re-enter the training yards, speak to old friends and gradually start to relax again.

It was obvious from their faces what they thought of their grandfather’s behaviour. Dorgen shot them more than one warning look over the course of the meal. His meaning was clear. No one could protest the King’s behaviour, not even close family.

Loki wondered if they would come to share their father’s hatred of him, or if they would pity him in his situation. Dorgen had thanked him for helping to save his sons, but still refused to show him any further regard. In fact Loki’s actions had almost seemed to make him angrier than he had been previously.

Musleen had explained a few days ago at the first of their training sessions. “He owes you more than his life, he owes you the lives of his sons. Convinced as he is that you are here to tie Vanaheim into less than favourable contracts with Asgard where we will have to give away too much, this does not sit well with him. He’s a good man, he even knows how to laugh, I’ve seen it, but he has a lot of responsibility on his shoulders. Let him be Loki, avoid him when you can and you’ll be fine.”

Loki found himself hoping that the sons would not take after their father in their dealings with him. One member of the royal family hating him was bad enough.

Dinner came to a close, and King Dimcken wished his sons and grandsons a fond goodnight. Loki managed to echo the sentiments in a calm voice, but could not hide the faint look of panic in his eyes as they left him alone with the King.
“Come to the bedroom my darling.” King Dimcken said, leading the way.

Loki reluctantly followed.

There was nothing on the bed waiting for him. No costumes or jewellery, no sign of anything special. Somehow that served to make him even more nervous.

King Dimcken sat on the end of the bed and looked over at him.

“You’ve been very naughty Loki.” He said seriously.

Loki felt a flood of panic. What had he done?! He’d been perfect! What could the King possibly have objected to?!

“You need punishing.” King Dimcken continued with a stern look.

Loki stood frozen where he was. What on Vanaheim could he have done? Was it leaving before the King woke up so as to spend time with Frigga? Would King Dimcken really be angry about such a thing?

Of course he would. Loki was in trouble, he’d messed up.

“I didn’t mean to upset you Husband.” He said nervously.

King Dimcken smiled at the words. “I know you didn’t mean it, you never mean it, but you always wind up causing trouble. Come here Loki, you’ve been very naughty and I need to spank you.” He said.

Wait, spank?

It was a game.

Loki realised with a mixture of relief and terror that this was one of King Dimcken’s fantasies. The King had been expecting him to play along, which he had sort of done by accident. He took a nervous step closer to the King.

“I’m sorry.” Loki said, trying to console himself. Spanking couldn’t be so bad, could it?

“You always are.” King Dimcken said, shaking his head slowly. “Now come on, the sooner we get started the sooner we’ll finish. There is no sense in delaying your punishment.”

Truer words had never been spoken, although Loki had never expected them to come out of King Dimcken’s mouth. He reluctantly crossed the remaining distance and allowed the King to draw him in close.

“Good boy.” King Dimcken said with a smile. “Now, lift up your skirts and lie across me. I don’t like doing this you know.”

‘Bullshit you disgusting old goat.’ Loki thought as he pulled his skirt up to his waist and lay down across King Dimcken’s lap. He took a deep breath to stay calm as the skirt of his robe fell over his head. At least that meant he couldn’t see, or be seen, by the King as they played out this hideous spectacle.

It also meant that he had no warning and the first strike, which was really more of a pat, caught him by surprise.
King Dimcken chuckled as Loki jumped. “Nervous are we darling? You shouldn’t have been such a bad boy then.”

He rested his bony hand on the soft, smooth mounds of Loki’s buttocks and rubbed gently back and forth. “You need a good spanking, don’t you?”

Loki didn’t answer, he was too busy trying not to jump up and run away from it all. The next strike was harder, and made a slapping sound as it connected with his skin.

“Don’t you?” King Dimcken asked again, stroking the soft mounds.

“Yes Husband.” Loki said through gritted teeth.

The third slap was right over the second and it stung, causing him to cry out.

“Oh yes, a very bad boy. What are you?”

“A very bad boy.” Loki repeated reluctantly.

SLAP

“What are you?”

“A very bad boy.”

SLAP

“What are you?”

Loki draw a huge lungful of air, the slaps were hard and he kept crying out with each one despite promising himself each time that he wouldn’t.

“A very bad boy.” He repeated.

SLAP

“You need to be punished.”

SLAP

“Don’t you?”

“Yes Husband.”

SLAP

“What do you need?”

SLAP

“I…I need to be punished.”

SLAP

“Why?”

SLAP
“Because-“
SLAP

“Ah! Because I’m a very bad boy.”
SLAP

“Are you sorry?”
SLAP

“Yes!”
SLAP

“Really?”
SLAP

“Yes yes yes.”
SLAP

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, please.”
SLAP

“AH!”
SLAP

“Please.”
SLAP

“Stop!”
SLAP

“I can’t stop yet, you need to understand Loki, how bad you’ve been.” King Dimcken said, a little
breathlessly. He was putting all of his efforts into each slap, and Loki’s bottom had turned bright red
in response.

There was another reaction too. Loki could feel King Dimcken’s erection pushing against him where
he lay.
SLAP

“You are a bad, bad boy Loki.”
SLAP

“A very bad boy.”
SLAP
“So bad.”

SLAP

“So beautiful.”

SLAP *squeeze*

SLAP

SLAP

SLAP *squeeze*

“You.”

SLAP

“Are.”

SLAP

“Very.”

SLAP

“Bad.”

Loki was gasping for air, his fingers were twisting the edge of his robe as it fell before him in an effort not to cry.

SLAP

“Are.”

SLAP

“You.”

SLAP

“Sorry?”

SLAP

“YES! Yes I’m sorry!” Loki gasped. “Please stop I’m sorry.”

Kind Dimcken lowered his hand and gently began stroking Loki’s tormented buttocks again.

“Very well, I believe you.” He said. “You may get up.”

Loki climbed to his feet and stood there, red faced from the blood that had rushed to his head, in pain from his throbbing bottom, and knowing that it wasn’t over yet, not even close.

King Dimcken was smiling broadly, his erection was making an obvious bulge in his robes.

“Undress my naughty boy.” He said, tugging at his own robes.
Loki pulled his robes off carefully, the skin on his bottom was still stinging. He had no idea that King Dimcken could hit that hard.

“Come and lie on the bed, face down, good boy.” King Dimcken said.

He positioned Loki on his knees, with his head resting on the pillows. Then the King reached forwards and stuck his tongue into Loki’s exposed vagina.

Loki bit the pillow and tried to think of something else. The King’s tongue was slimy and horrible, and it kept pushing in and out, making Loki twitch with each little sensation. The top of King Dimcken’s head kept getting dangerously close to the bottom of Loki’s sore buttocks, and the King’s wispy white hair kept brushing against the skin in a very special form of torture.

After a few minutes, King Dimcken replaced his tongue with his fingers, rubbing in and out in an attempt to get Loki to slicken. Loki just kept breathing. He just had to get through it, just like every other time. He would survive, he would be alright. Fosxyr would run him a nice bath in the morning and his grandparents would be there to hug him and fuss over him. He just had to make through this.

Fingers were replaced by a penis, and the King thrust home sharply, pressing his hips against Loki’s sore buttocks.

Loki could not help the cry that escaped him, but in this mood that only served to encourage the King.

“Naughty boy.” He moaned and thrust again.

Loki tried not to cry out again but it was impossible. The pain was too fresh, too raw and he moaned into the pillows as the King thrust.

A few minutes later, King Dimcken thrust hard, held himself inside and released his seed with a moan of contentment. He rolled off Loki and onto the bed beside him.

“Don’t do it again.” King Dimcken said in a playful tone and swatted Loki’s bottom lightly with an exhausted hand.

“I won’t Husband.” Loki said in an exhausted tone.

He carefully shifted so that he was lying flat in his stomach. King Dimcken’s breathing was already beginning to even out.

Loki lay there until he was certain the King was asleep before he rose, pulled on a robe, and walked painfully into the next room.

He couldn’t sit. It was too painful. Instead he lay down on his stomach in front of the fire and read one of his books that Hieddenyr fetched for him from his chambers. He drank some tea and tried not to think about what had just happened.

He wanted his bruising cream, which the head healer kept restocking in a jar in the second drawer of his nightstand, but he had no doubt that King Dimcken would want to see his handiwork in the morning. It would have to wait until after then.

It was hard to ignore, and eventually Loki asked for some sleep-tea, as he couldn’t concentrate on his book and he was unlikely to sleep that night without help.

He drank it all and then made his way back into the bedroom. The sleep-tea started working not long
after, and Loki found that he was dreaming. In his dreams a bony monster kept trying to swat him as he scrambled to reach the top of an enormous tower of steps, the colours of which alternated between green, white and red.

The following morning, King Dimcken woke Loki up by swatting him on the bottom, just to see how sensitive he was.
Chapter Summary

Changes and Paranoia

There were changes happening at the Tower. The year's studies were over and the interviews for the following year had begun. Loki had joined the classes a little late the previous year, so he was about to face his first interview period.

"What are they?" He asked Shiarpia as they sat with Daenceia and Thainia in the corridor outside Sheiftyr's office.

They had agreed to meet there in time for Shiarpia's interview, which was first, and then wait as each of them saw her in turn. Loki had smeared the bruise cream liberally over his buttocks for the last two days, which was good, because there were no seats in the corridor.

"She's going to tell you whether you've reached the end of your studies." Shiarpia said. Despite her confident tone, Loki saw worry in her eyes. "If you have reached your full potential, they tell you and you can't come back. If you have learnt all you can in the first class but have a ways to go, then you get to go to the second class, then the third and so on right up to the tenth. Then if you are really good, you can stay and do your own study."

"So what happens if you haven't reached your potential, but aren't good enough for the next class?" Loki asked.

Daenceia offered him her bag of chocolate-covered biscuit pieces, he took a few and passed the bag to Shiarpia.

"You can repeat the year's class over again if you have the money. If not, then you have to leave." Shiarpia said.

Loki frowned. Just the thought of being made to redo the last year was humiliating, he couldn't imagine showing his face here again if he'd failed.

He thought about his essay scores and cringed.

"Shiarpia?" Sheiftyr called from the door. Her eyebrows went up when she saw them all sitting there, but she didn't comment as Shiarpia got up and entered the room.

Loki sat with the other two and ate the biscuit pieces. He was starting to get nervous. He knew that he was good at illusions, too good for the first class even when he had started, but his transmutation efforts had been less impressive, and his essays, they had been improving over the year, but he still had so far to go.

To take his mind off his upcoming interview Loki turned to Daenceia and asked her about her performance.

"I know that you said you danced, but you never told me that you were a part of a troop!" He said.
She blushed at his words. "My family are all dancers and acrobats." She said. "They sent me to the Tower to learn how to use my gift. Our bookings have increased since I started learning to add the colours."

"You were magnificent." Loki said. "You should have told me about it."

"I'm sorry!" She giggled, "I didn't think you would be interested in my dancing."

"Why would you think that?" He asked her. "We're friends! Of course I am interested."

She shook her head. "We mostly talk magic or the Thunder Boys, I guess it just never came up, besides, you never tell us about the palace."

"You have a point." Loki said. "But I didn't want you to think I was bragging."

'That and I'd rather gargle horse piss than talk about King Dimcken.' He thought.

Daenceia shook her head playfully. "We would never think that."

"No." Thainia added. "We know you too well by now. So tell is what your chambers are like. I've read that the Queen’s Chambers are covered in murals painted by the great Dervinciyr."

Loki smiled. "I read that in a book I found in the King's Chambers." He said. "Then I went and looked at them more closely, they are truly beautiful."

"I'd love to see them one day." Thainia said with a smile. "I love old buildings, the great public halls, the central market buildings, I would give anything to be able to explore the old cellars and things. Could you imagine the kind of lost treasures that may lie undiscovered?"

Loki grinned as Daenceia wrinkled her nose. "You'll find rats." She said. "Lots of rats."

"Besides rats." Thainia said with a laugh.

The door opened and they all sobered. Shiarpia came out and gave them all a big grin.

"I'm moving up!" She shrieked and threw herself into their laps.

Loki struggles not to wince as the impact caused him to be pressed into the floor more firmly.

“Congratulations.” He said instead with a smile.

"Shiarpia. You are a young lady, act like it." Sheiftyr admonished from the door.

Shiarpia rolled off them as Sheiftyr looked at Loki and held the door slightly wider in an invitation.

Loki climbed to his feet and walked like a condemned man into the room beyond.

"How are you today Loki?" Sheiftyr asked him as they sat down.

Her guards were at the far end of the room, reading. Loki had been unsuccessful in convincing King Dimcken to remove them, or indeed alter any part of Sheiftyr's sentence, but things had improved for her when Musleen quietly replaced the King's guards with his own.

"Loki. I will be brief. Your overall grade is 78 percent. Your illusion abilities are exceptional, if you were only studying them then I would have you in the seventh year class right now where you can start learning to add sound to your creations, perhaps even making clones of yourself that you can
use to visit others in different rooms."

Loki sat slightly straighter at her words, the idea that he could use his magic in such a way had always appealed to him.

Sheiftyr continued. "You have done well in transmutation, you have improved a great deal, although your essays still leave much to be desired, I can see that you have received help in reordering your paragraph structure, and I would be happy to see you in the second year class."

Loki grinned at her words.

"However the first half of the year is about illusions. You may find yourself very bored." She added.

Loki shook his head. "I won't, there's all the theory and history that I never really read when I was practising."

"Alright then." Sheiftyr said. "I will add your name to my class list. No playing up because you are restless, if you need extra work, come and see me."

Loki smiled, a weight that he didn't realise had been there lifted from his chest. Apparently his essays had not been as bad as he'd thought.

He rose and left the room. The others all looked up expectedly and he gave them a wide grin. Shiarpia reached out and pulled him down to the floor with them as Sheiftyr rolled her eyes and called out. "Thainia."

Thainia glanced back at them sadly as she entered the room beyond. Daenceia looked serious.

"Her family isn't sure if they can afford another year." She said to them quietly. "But her father promised her that if she got 100 percent he'd find a way to send her."

"One hundred percent." Loki repeated. "How often does that happen?"

"Not often." Shiarpia said, sounding worried. "Oh poor Thainia, she didn't tell me."

"She's been stressing for a month, but between all the end of year testing and Loki's anniversary celebrations, well, she didn't want to mention it. I'm not even meant to have told you, but she may need a hug when she gets out, and I'll be in there." Daenceia said.

Shiarpia nodded sadly. "We'll take care of her until you get out. Are you coming back?"

"If I pass, yes, if not, father won't pay for me to repeat, but my grades all year have been fairly good, I'm pretty sure I'll pass, and the class is not so big that Sheiftyr needs to cull the numbers." Daenceia said.

The door opened and Thainia walked out. She was crying.

They all rose and pulled her into a hug.

"I tried so hard." She sobbed. "I really, really tried!"

"Oh Thainia, what did you get?" Daenceia asked, wiping Thainia's tears away from her cheeks.

"Ninety eight." Thainia sobbed.

Loki glanced up over the heads of the other to where Sheiftyr stood. The teacher looked sympathetic,
but unmoved. Loki frowned at her and she sighed and turned away.

He slipped from the group hug and stepped in after her. "She only needed two more points." He said the second the door was closed behind him.

"I know, and I am sorry, perhaps her father can be convinced that ninety eight percent is enough, but I will not compromise my grading system for any student, it is cheating and unfair on all the others." She said seriously.

Loki scowled at her.

"It’s not fair!" He said. "She’s really talented, *Rohundia* was really talented. But if you don’t have the money then that’s it, no appeal?"

"You may hate me for it Loki, but I will not play favourites." Sheiftyr said. "Go and support your friend."

Loki stepped out.

"Daenceia? Come in now." Sheiftyr called out.

Daenceia gave Thainia a quick hug. "I'll be right back." She promised, and stepped through to the office.

Shiarpia took over as the shoulder to cry on as Loki stood by, helpless.

He hated feeling helpless. He had enough of that when he was with the King.

"Perhaps your father can be convinced?" He said, echoing Sheiftyr's suggestion.

Thainia shook her head. "He didn't really want to do it, but mother pleaded, so he made me a deal. He will pat my shoulder and tell it's for the best, but inside he will not be sorry. We don't really have the money for it, not when my brother is about to enter the army. He will need armour and weapons, and a saddle and- so many things!"

Loki reached out an arm and drew her into a hug. "What does he want you to do now?" He asked cautiously.

"Get married probably." Thainia sniffed. "He's a labour-man and an ex-soldier, mother runs our household. I was going to study magic and hopefully get work as nanny or a child-carer. I could use the illusions to cheer them during play and if I passed the second year I could have branched out into healing magic." Her face crumpled again and Shiarpia drew her back into a hug.

"You can still be a nanny." Shiarpia said. "You can save your coin and come back one day. Lots of people to that."

"Many don't." Thainia said. "They get caught up in life and never return, and those that do often struggle after being away for so long."

Loki was standing apart from them with his arms crossed, his expression was thoughtful.

"So your father has no plans for you? He would have you at a loose end from now on?" He asked.

Shiarpia's eyes narrowed at him in warning as Thainia started to cry again.

Behind Loki the door opened and Daenceia walked out. "I'm staying." She said quietly.
"So is Thainia." Loki said. "I will pay for you to attend the Tower."

Thainia's eyes went so wide that Loki could see the whites all the way around. She gripped Shiarpia's arm so hard the other girl winced in pain.

"Loki, you can do that?" She asked.

"I get an allowance every year that is mine to do as I please." Loki said. "I can afford both of our fees."

He was attacked from behind by Daenceia, who threw herself onto his back. A second later Thainia was wrapped around him and Shiarpia was hooked onto his neck.

"Thank you." Thainia whispered into his ear, she was struggling to speak through fresh, happier tears. "Thank you Loki, thank you, I will never forget this. Never, I promise."

Loki smiled broadly. "Ninety eight percent is too high to waste. So don't."

"I won't." Thainia promised. "I won't Loki, thank you."

Loki turned his head to look over at where Sheiftyr leaned against the doorway. The older mage was smiling at him, and he thought he could see pride in her eyes.

"Well done." She mimed and turned away.

Loki grinned.

Loki left the Tower with his new schedule written down and an extracted promise to come out to the Rolled Oat in three days to dance to the Thunder Boys again. They were making a rare appearance. These days they were in high demand at events and private parties. There was even talk of a tour to Asgard. The Rolled Oat was going to be packed.

Loki rode into the palace yard and came to a halt. King Dimcken was waiting for him.

"Husband?" He said, confused.

"Loki, my sweet wife, dismount and come with me at once." King Dimcken said.

Loki did as he was bid, following King Dimcken through the corridors until they reached the King's chambers. The rest of the royal family were there, looking concerned. Even Mulmyr was present, Dorgen had his arm around her. Sofftía was cradling baby Roeseia tightly in her arms, she was pale and crying. Beside her, Camtan looked faintly ill.

"Someone got into the nursery and left a note in the crib, right on top of Roeseia as she slept." Musleen said seriously. "They wanted to show that they can get to us, the most vulnerable of us. They succeeded."

Loki looked over at Sofftía. "Is she alright?" He asked.

"They never touched a hair on her head." Sofftía said. "But they could have, they could have killed her."
Camtan put his arm around her and hugged her tightly. "We'll find them." He said, his voice uncharacteristically hard. "We'll find them and kill them."

Musleen nodded. "My men are working on things as we speak. I will go and see how the investigation is going, and we will bring them to justice. They cannot break into the palace and expect no response."

King Dimcken pulled a chair out for Loki. Loki sat where he was bid. "Thank you Husband." He said politely.

King Dimcken sat down beside him. "I cannot allow anyone out of the palace until they have been caught." He said. "We must all stay here under guard."

Loki bit his lip but did not argue, now was not the time.

"I will be back soon." Musleen said and left them.

King Dimcken took Loki’s hand and held it tightly. The others sat quietly and kept their thoughts to themselves.

It took two hours for Musleen to return.

"We have him." He said, sitting down. "It was a servant, a cleaning boy. He snuck in through the servant’s corridor and left the note there on his way to his next task."

"He will hang." King Dimcken said, tightening his grip on Loki’s hand.

"He was threatened." Musleen said. "I started the interrogation and he broke immediately. He wasn’t a rebel himself, but they had his family hostage."

"That is no excuse." King Dimcken snapped. "He should have shown loyalty to the crown."

"They were watching him with a spell." Musleen continued. "The moment he told us what had happened they knew, and they killed his parents. By the time we got to the house they were long gone."

"He will have a public trial and then he will hang. Everyone must know the price of helping the rebels." King Dimcken said.

"He has paid it." Musleen said quietly. "I did not realise that they were using these tactics, I thought he must have been working for them willingly, I used the strong tactics, if I had been more cautious then we may have been able to save them."

"It wasn’t your fault." Loki said.

"He will have paid his debt when he hangs." King Dimcken said angrily. His grip on Loki’s hand had turned painful.

"He’s a child, barely begun puberty." Musleen protested. "If we play this right we can turn the public against the rebels."

"He will HANG." King Dimcken shouted. "Arrange the trial and the execution, or is my own blood to disobey me too?"

Musleen lowered his eyes. "I will arrange it." He said quietly.
“We must be safe.” King Dimcken said. His grip on Loki’s hand was putting intense pressure on the knuckles.

The King was more frightening in this moment than he had ever been as he turned to look at Loki. Loki fought to keep his expression calm as he looked into that gaze. Dancing in the King’s eyes was a flicker of madness.

“I will keep you safe.” King Dimcken promised, as one of the knuckles in Loki’s hand snapped.

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said, fighting to keep his voice even as the King’s horrified relations looked on.
Fifty Eight Steps

Chapter Summary

The Power of Guilt

It was Dorgen who reacted first.

“Loki! Your hand isbroken!”

King Dimcken retracted his hand at once, looking down at Loki’s swelling knuckle with alarm.

“I…I didn’t realise.” He stammered as Musleen called for the servant to fetch the head healer. “Loki? Are you alright? I didn’t know your hands were so delicate.”

Loki winced as he lifted his hand from the arm of the chair and held it gingerly in front of him.

“It was an accident.” He whispered softly, unable to hide the fear in his voice.

“Yes.” King Dimcken said, leaning forward again. “I promise it was an accident.”

That didn’t stop Loki from jerking away from him slightly, then looking afraid as he checked the King’s reaction.

King Dimcken looked guilty.

The head healer arrived and fixed the bone with gentle hands and equally gentle magic. Then she applied some bruising cream for the swelling and bandaged Loki’s hand up firmly.

“You will have to be very careful for a few days until the healing spell has worked all the way through the bone. It will be very tender until then, so keep it wrapped.” She instructed.

King Dimcken spent the healer’s time there with his arm around Loki’s shoulders, murmuring how he was so *sorry*, and he didn’t *realise*, and he didn’t *mean* it.

Loki just nodded at him and tried to hide the fear in his eyes. In truth the pain wasn’t so bad. He’d had far worse while practising in the training yards as he’d grown up. What he found scary was how strong the King had been when angered, and how easily he’d forgotten his ‘love’ for Loki in the heat of the moment. He’d been looking right at Loki, professing his desire to keep him safe while *breaking his hand*. The King was mad. Really, truly, mad. The thought was terrifying.

But for now at least King Dimcken felt guilty. He apologised over and over, he sent for all of Loki’s favourite dishes for dinner, he didn’t send Mulmyr away when they arrived, necessitating a frantic search for an extra chair by the servants. He didn’t try to touch him or kiss him, even when he said good night, and the next morning he sent over several huge bunches of flowers, some fresh exotic berries that had been a gift for the King from the Queen of Alfheim, and that afternoon an assortment of fine jewellery from the palace treasury, they were to be Loki’s personally from now on.

Loki didn’t care. What he did care about was the trial that was occurring in two days. As the King’s Consort he would have to attend, which meant that the decision made by the King would look as
though it had Loki’s approval as well. A child was going to be put to death and Loki was going to have his name stamped on to the decision. The thought made him feel sick.

Three magnificent sets of robes arrived for him the following day. The poor seamstresses and tailors would have had to have worked around the clock to make them so quickly. Fosxyr put them with the others.

Loki also received a set of books on the history of Vanaheim, beautifully written and wonderfully bound in leather with gold leaf decorations throughout. They would be the pride of any book collection.

He dutifully put them on the shelves and sent Femtchyr to deliver a hand written thank you letter to the King. Inside he felt nothing but disgust.

The morning of the trial was fresh and clear. Loki glared at the sky as though it had offended him. How dare such a tragedy occur on such a beautiful day? Everything was wrong. Everything.

He dressed in one of his fine new robes, put on some of the new Jewellery and let Wraenyr paint his face. Fosxyr gently removed the bandage from his hand and applied some more bruising cream, then Wraenyr carefully dusted some powder over the bruise to hide it. It would not look good for the King’s Consort to show an injury in public.

Loki walked down to the carriage with a sad look in his eyes. He tried to hide it from King Dimcken when he arrived but he knew that he was failing slightly. King Dimcken loudly admired him in his new robes, asked him if he was feeling alright and sat in the carriage with his arm protectively wrapped around Loki’s waist.

Musleen sat opposite them and looked out of the window with a face like a thundercloud. He’d tried multiple times over the last few days to convince King Dimcken to change his mind, but he had been unsuccessful, and now father and son were barely on speaking terms.

Loki just stared straight ahead and tried not to give in to the desire to wrench the door of the moving carriage open and jump to the cobblestones below.

The courtroom was packed. Such a crime was serious indeed, and there were many people there who wanted to see the result. Loki sat beside King Dimcken and tried to keep a neutral expression.

“Bring in the traitor.” King Dimcken called out loudly.

Loki winced, and quickly tried to cover it. This was supposed to be a trial, but the boy was already condemned.

And it was a boy, barely begun puberty was a good description. He was small, blond, and crying helplessly as he was half carried, half dragged into the courtroom to face the King.

He fell to his knees as soon as he was released and began openly begging.
“Please, please, please Your Majesty, please, I didn’t want to do it but they had my parents, they said they’re kill them, they did it, they did it, they killed them, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry—”

“Silence.” King Dimcken interrupted. “You worked with the rebels. You betrayed the crown. You are a traitor and I sentence you to be hanged until dead, and your body left for the wolves.”

The boy collapsed completely. His wretched sobs filled the hall and he pissed himself in fear.

“Take him away.” King Dimcken said. “Hang him tonight.”

Loki had to look away, he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t sit there and look neutral at such a farce of justice. He turned his head so that the King could not see the look of horror that crossed his face.

“Loki?” King Dimcken said.

He reached out and took Loki’s hand, his still-healing hand.

Loki jerked his hand out of King Dimcken’s in fear. Then immediately flushed when he realised what he had done and tentatively put it back.

Guilt flashed in King Dimcken’s eyes and he didn’t try to hold it again. Instead he gently laid his hand on top of Loki’s as it rested on the arm of the throne.

“Wait!” King Dimcken called out, still looking at Loki.

The guards stopped with the boy between them. They had almost reached the door at the far end.

“My Consort believes that this boy can be taught the error of his ways. I suppose he is young, and mistakes are… something we can all make. You boy! You will serve in the barracks as a cleaning servant until you reach your majority. If you do so without incident, you will be a free man.”

All at once Fosxyr’s words from so long ago came back to Loki.

“You are the softness to his iron fist, the tranquil sea to his raging storm.”

Had the King planned this on purpose? To show his strength and will, but still allow the boy to escape death due to the compassion of his Consort? Or had he truly changed his mind on a whim because he felt guilty about hurting Loki, and Loki was so clearly unhappy with the decision? Loki had no idea.

The child started sobbing again, but this time in relief.

King Dimcken looked back at Loki, who forced a grateful smile onto his face.

“Thank you Husband.” He said.

King Dimcken smiled at him. “I want you to be happy Loki, I promise you that.” He said, slowly, and with great care taking Loki’s hand back into his. His grip was very gentle.

Loki lowered his gaze respectfully, he was in public after all. “This has made me very happy Husband.” He said.

Behind the King, Musleen sagged in relief. Loki didn’t know whether the King had always planned this, or if he truly had decided to spare the boy at the last minute, but whatever had motivated him Musleen had not known about it.
Back at the palace, Loki asked King Dimcken very softly if he might go and see the Thunder Boys that night at the Rolled Oat. King Dimcken had agreed provided of course that Loki was accompanied by Musleen and Camtan.

Camtan had been reluctant for the first time ever. The knowledge that the rebels could have so easily gotten to his child had shaken him badly, but Sofftia shooed him out of the door and told him to go and blow off some steam.

“You can’t let Loki miss out. He cannot come and go as he pleases the way you can, you know that. Go with him and have some fun, Musleen has posted more guards than I can count in the corridors and even in the rooms. Roaseia will be safe.”

Decision made, the three of them headed for the Rolled Oat.

It was packed with people, mostly girls, although Loki saw a few boys in the crowd trying to see the stage, and the room was already hot from the sheer number of bodies.

“This place is far too packed.” Musleen shouted, frowning as he looked around. “One little problem and there will be people getting crushed in a stampede.”

“Stop being yourself.” Camtan shouted back. “Try having a drink!”

Musleen rolled his eyes and marked the exits, just in case. Then he had a drink.

Shiarpia appeared from the seething masses and grabbed Loki by the arm. Musleen was *there* in an instant, but relaxed when he saw who it was.

“I’m sorry.” He shouted. “I am on edge tonight!”

He spun faster than a dancer and caught Daenceia as she tried to sneak past behind him.

She looked up at him from where she was being held in his arms. The tips of Musleen’s ears turned red in embarrassment and he released her. “Stop doing that!” He shouted at them as Thainia appeared and went to hug Loki. Thankfully this time Musleen saw her face before she got too close and allowed her through.

“Relax Musleen!” Loki shouted. “We have guards, trained by you. You do not have to babysit everyone!”

Musleen looked flustered. He was clearly unhappy about the crowd, and the location, but he settled slightly and looked for a seat at the little drinks bar beside them.

“Let’s dance Loki!” Shiarpia shouted.

Musleen immediately rose in alarm. Loki grinned at him.

“If you want to keep an eye on me, you’ll have to dance too!” He shouted and they headed for the dance floor.

Musleen actually came. He actually stood on the actual dance floor and moved, awkwardly, to the Thunder Boys’ music.
After a minute, Daenceia took pity on him and showed him a few moves. He repeated them obediently as the music played.

Loki thought it was hilarious that someone so skilled in the art of movement could look so awkward when they had no steps to follow. But then freestyle fighting still had the goal of defeating your enemy, freestyle dancing had the goal of moving in time to the beat while not looking like a twat. Of the two it was a lot harder.

The night was a good one, and they stayed until the final song. Of course so did everyone else and the crush to get out at the end was incredible.

“This place is a death-trap waiting to happen.” Musleen said as the guards kept people from crushing their group. “They should never have let so many people in at the same time.”

“It’s the Thunder Boys.” Daenceia said. “So many people want to see them that if they restricted entry they’d have a riot on their hands.”

“Then they should play in a bigger venue.” Musleen grumbled.

Loki and Daenceia shared a smile. Musleen was only a little bit older than them and yet he sounded like a grandfather.

“You need a woman in your life.” Camtan said loudly, throwing an arm around Musleen’s shoulders. “Then you’ll loosen up.”

Was it Loki’s imagination or did the tips of Musleen’s ears turn red again? Possibly not, it was hard to tell in the darkness of the streets.
Chapter Notes

Okay. Not only am I warning for more non con, I am also warning for some seriously messed up psychological crap. I have had some comments before saying that just when Dimcken couldn't get any worse, he goes and does something even more shocking, well I found this bit shocking and I wrote it, be warned. If you don't want to kill him by the end of this chapter then I've written it wrong, and he doesn't even leave a mark.

Loki sat quietly in one of the huge chairs in his chambers and brooded. He had a lot to think about recently. The one thing at the forefront of his mind was the way King Dimcken had snapped his knuckle, apparently without meaning to. It had been so sudden and unexpected that he didn’t know how to react. He’d been trying to avoid the King as much as possible ever since.

Unfortunately, King Dimcken now felt guilty, which meant that he was trying to spend as much time as possible with Loki to show how sorry he was.

This wasn’t good. It was only a matter of time before King Dimcken became angry at how Loki still shied away from him in fear. When that day came there was a good chance that Loki would get hurt again, and there was no telling how badly that would be.

Loki glanced up at the room. Fosxyr was quietly dusting the bookshelves in the corner, but otherwise Loki was alone.

He rose and fetched Thor’s knife from its box. At the last minute he also took the other one, so as to allay suspicion.

He held Thor’s one in his hand and played his fingers along the hilt. It was a beautiful piece of weaponry, and he longed to throw it again the way he used to.

“I’m going to the training yards.” Loki said.

Fosxyr looked up.

“Would you like me to accompany you Your Grace?” He offered.

“No thank you, I know the way. I’m just going to practice my throwing.” Loki said as he rose.

He made his way down to the yard, where he saw several warriors going through their paces. He set himself up at the far end away from everyone and turned to face the target. Two lightning fast flicks of his wrist and the knives were buried in the centre of the target. He had not lost his touch, a fact for which he was grateful.
Loki retrieved the knives and tried again, and again, and again. He was starting to feel good. His blood was pumping and he felt more relaxed than he had done in ages.

Until he saw Fosxyr appear in the distance.

Fear and dread warred inside of him. Fosxyr must have been sent, but why? Was it the King? Did he want to see Loki?

By the time Fosxyr was close enough to talk Loki was struggling to keep his hands from shaking.

“He Majesty requests your presence Your Grace.” Fosxyr said.

The sympathetic look in his eye was small comfort. Loki retrieved his knives and followed the servant to the King’s Chambers.

He was at the door before he realised that he was still holding his knives.

“Fosxyr, can you take-?” He started to ask, but then King Dimcken was *there* in front of him. Loki managed not to jump or flinch, but it was a close thing.

“Loki my darling, come inside, come inside I wanted to see you.” He said, sliding a hand around Loki’s waist and shutting the door in Fosxyr’s face. Loki fought to keep his breathing calm as he was led further inside. He carefully slid the knives into his belt as King Dimcken escorted him all the way into the bedroom.

“How is your hand?” King Dimcken asked him with concern in his voice.

“It’s better today Husband.” Loki said. “Just a little bruising left.”

“I am very sorry my darling.” King Dimcken said. “I said I was sorry.”

“I know you are.” Loki said hurriedly. “It was an accident.” He added nervously.

“Yes, an accident. You know that I would never hurt you.” King Dimcken said in the face of all the evidence.

Loki nodded quickly. “I know Husband.” He said, hoping desperately that the King never got that angry in his presence again.

“You haven’t said that you have forgiven me.” King Dimcken said, looking at him pointedly.

Loki swallowed nervously. “Of course I forgive you Husband, I did not realise that I need say it, it was an accident.”

King Dimcken was still watching him carefully. “Of course you need say it.” He said, a little brashly. “How else am I to know that all is well? I see you jump when I am near, you are afraid of me.”

“No, not at all Husband, you are very kind to me. I forgive you. I am sorry I did not say it sooner.” Loki said, internally marvelling at how *vain* the King was, and how frightening. He had broken Loki’s hand and now Loki was apologising to him for not forgiving him fast enough. But right now he would do whatever worked.

“I let that boy live for you.” King Dimcken said, sounding a little sulky. “I did it because I care for you.”

“I know Husband, I am very grateful.” Loki said. “You made me happy.” He added, hoping that it
would help.

“You are certain you have forgiven me?” King Dimcken asked.

“Of course.” Loki said.

“And you are not afraid of me?”

Loki shook his head. “No Husband, you are very strong, but I know your strength was not turned onto me deliberately.”

“Prove it.”

The words were like a slap in the face. Prove the he was unafraid of the King when in reality he was terrified. How?

Loki forced himself to step forwards towards King Dimcken.

“See.” He said, fighting to keep the tremble from his voice. “I’m not afraid.”

King Dimcken reached out and pulled Loki into a hug, he pressed his lips against Loki’s and gave him a gentle kiss.

“Are you sure?” He asked softly.

“Yes Husband.” Loki said, lying right into the King’s eyes.

“Kneel then. Kneel before me, and show me you are not afraid.” King Dimcken said.

Loki lowered himself to his knees with the best blank expression that he could muster. The King pulled his robe up high enough to press his penis against Loki’s face. Loki took a breath to steel himself and took the tip into his mouth.

He sucked carefully on the end while rubbing the rapidly filling shaft with his hands. King Dimcken dropped his robe again over Loki’s head, leaving him in mostly darkness as he worked on bringing the King to climax.

As soon as King Dimcken was hard he began making small thrusts into Loki’s mouth. Loki braced himself for what he knew would eventually be commanded of him. Only a few moments later he was proven right.

“Take me all.” King Dimcken gasped from above him.

Loki sucked in a large breath through his nose and obeyed, swallowing down King Dimcken’s penis until his nose hit the crinkly curls surrounding the base. He stayed there for a moment as his throat worked frantically to keep him from vomiting, then pulled back so that he could breathe.

“Mmmm, more.” King Dimcken moaned through the fabric. Loki obeyed.

He had barely gotten the King down a second time when he felt the King’s hands grip his head through the robe and pull his back again, then down again, then back.

Loki felt panic rise within him as he struggled to breathe, but then the King released him with a moaned “Like that.”

Loki gasped a quick breath and did as the King commanded, taking him in deeply over and over
again while trying to snatch in air whenever he could. The result made him feel lightheaded, but King Dimcken was moaning in pleasure which was all that mattered right now. He had to please the King, convince him that all really was forgiven, because that simmering anger was not far away.

The hands were back, pulling his head back and letting the tip of the penis fall from his lips. King Dimcken gave one final groan and came in Loki’s face.

Loki held still and endured it. It was humiliating, but what part of his time with King Dimcken wasn’t? It was just another thing that he would have to try and survive.

King Dimcken was leaning on Loki’s head as he got his breath back. Loki allowed himself a single disgusted facial expression while he was still underneath the King’s robes, and then the weight of the King was gone and the robes were pulled up and away, exposing him to the light.

Loki blinked up at King Dimcken from where he knelt. The look on King Dimcken’s face was lusty.

“You look beautiful.” He said. “Now come and bath with me, I am all sweaty.”

Loki obediently rose and followed King Dimcken into the King’s bathing room. He undressed at the King’s command and sank into the water prepared by Hieddenyr.

“Come and help me wash Loki darling.” King Dimcken said.

Loki moved over to him and took the offered cloth. He wiped it along the King’s back and shoulders as King Dimcken reached for another one. King Dimcken then turned and began wiping away his come from Loki’s face. Loki washed the King’s chest and tried not to look afraid.

“Sit up on the corner there darling.” King Dimcken said. “I want to touch you.”

Loki climbed up out of the bath and sat in the corner with his back against one of the decorative pillars. King Dimcken waded through the water with a smile and a predatory look.

“Spread your legs wide my dear, I want to be inside you.” He said, his voice low.

Loki did as he was asked, propping his legs up as best he could on the sill of the bath.

“Good boy.” King Dimcken said and rubbed his fingers around the edge of Loki’s vagina. “You’re always so tight.” He said, trying to dip his fingers inside. “I have to work to loosen you up. Relax now and let me play.”

In the end Loki put his head back. It effectively gave the impression that he was being pleasured while half-hiding his actual expression from the gaze of the King. King Dimcken slowly worked him open, using his fingers to stretch and widen Loki’s entrance.

“I think you’re ready now.” King Dimcken said softly after he’d managed to slip three fingers in and out without any resistance.

Loki looked down in time to see King Dimcken retrieve a glass object from the nearby shelf.

“Ready for what Husband.” He asked nervously.

“You aren’t afraid of me are you Loki.” King Dimcken said.

Loki forced himself to shake his head.

“So you trust me?”
Loki made himself nod.

“Good boy, it’s not going to hurt, I just want to hear you moan.” King Dimcken said as he pressed the tip of the glass object to Loki’s entrance. It was shaped like a penis, thankfully not a very big one, no bigger than King Dimcken at least.

Loki forced himself to relax. There was no way to prevent this, he just had to survive it.

The glass was cold at first, but King Dimcken pressed it slowly and firmly inside Loki’s body, which soon warmed it up. The tip he left protruding from Loki’s vagina. It had two thinner pieces that stuck out either side and created a kind of hand-hold, which the King used to thrust the object back and forth.

Loki whimpered and moaned as King Dimcken worked the object steadily inside of him. It was like what he’d done in the past with his fingers, except bigger and far more invasive. He kept it going until his arm got tired, which unfortunately was twenty-five minutes later.

At last the object was removed and King Dimcken allowed Loki to sink back into the water. They then kissed for what seemed like an age, before finally leaving the bath and drying off. King Dimcken made Loki dry him, once again forcing Loki to his knees as he rubbed the towel over the King’s legs and buttocks.

Even if it was subconscious, it still reaffirmed to Loki what he was here, despite the pretty title.

“I will see you at dinner.” King Dimcken said, pulling Loki in for a final kiss. “Thank you my darling, for your forgiveness.”

Loki forced a weak smile and left.

He had another bath the second he was back in his chambers, scrubbing madly at his face and vagina until Fosxyr made him get out.

“I need my grandparents.” Loki said, fighting tears. “He scares me so much, I need to see them.”

“I will fetch them right now Your Grace.” Fosxyr promised. “Here, sit by the fire and I will be back soon.”

Loki sat down and watched as Fosxyr left through the servant’s door. He tried hard not to think about King Dimcken’s touch, or the demeaning things he asked of Loki.

Would Thor want him to do such things? Surely not. Thor loved him, Thor respected him, Thor wouldn’t want Loki to suck on his penis, or play with objects, Thor-

Thor’s knife was still in the King’s Chambers. Loki had taken them out of his belt when he undressed for the bath with King Dimcken, and he’d been so distracted by what he’d been forced to do that he hadn’t picked them up again.

Loki felt panic rise within him. Thor’s knife! *Thor’s* knife. No, no no nonononono.

“Loki?” Came Lord Fallconyr’s voice from the doorway.

Loki turned to look at his grandparents in a panic.

“I left Thor’s knife in the King’s Chambers!” He blurted out.

Lord Fallconyr looked at him calmly as Lord Eadgleyr stepped inside the room.
“Then we’ll just have to get it back.” He said.
Sixty Steps

Chapter Summary

A Very Wise Investment

“I will go and retrieve *them*.” Fosxyr said pointedly to Loki as Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgelyr sat themselves down by the fire. “I will ask Hieddenyr if he has picked them up.”

Loki nodded nervously. “I need them.” He said.

Lord Fallconyr rolled his eyes. “We all know, you included Fosxyr, that there is only one that matters and why. You may pretend that you don’t know but you’re not stupid.”

“I would prefer to remain stupid however Your Lordsir.” Fosxyr said with a bow. “It is better that way.”

Lord Fallconyr pulled a face, but nodded in agreement. “Very well then, I know that you are the best at what you do.” He conceded.

Fosxyr left them alone.

“I know that Thor’s knife is important to you Loki, but you are not normally prone to such panic, tell us what happened.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Loki told them about the King breaking his hand, the gifts that followed and the confrontation that followed that. Lord Eadgleyr asked him if he needed a healer but Loki shook his head. The object had not been too big and King Dimcken had not been too rough.

“I wish there was a healer for my mind.” Loki confessed. “I feel as though I am going mad.”

“That sounds like a perfectly reasonable reaction to what you are going through.” Lord Fallconyr said. His expression had been dark since Loki had first started talking.

Lord Eadgleyr wrapped an arm around Loki’s shoulders and held him close. “You just try to relax now.” He said. “We’re here, and we won’t go anywhere.”

Loki slumped slightly in his chair. “He wants to see me for dinner. I don’t want to go, but I can’t refuse him, he knows he didn’t leave me too sore to move about.”

The confession was a hard one to make. Loki’s body had been invaded so often now that such activities were no longer painful.

‘They should be.’ Loki thought angrily. Rape should *hurt*. It shouldn’t leave you sitting there without a mark on you. There should be some sign that you were forced. Some mark that told the world that you didn’t want to.

But there wasn’t. If he wanted to, Loki could have gotten up and gone riding without any trouble, or taking to the sparing ring, anything. The pain he felt had no reflection on his body, which made him feel as though it was betraying him.
“We could try and have him to dinner again.” Lord Fallconyr said. “You cannot get out of it but you wouldn’t have to face him alone.”

“Try it my dear, it may work.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

Lord Fallconyr wrote an invitation and had Femtchyr deliver it.

“We’ll see.” He said as the servant disappeared.

Loki nodded. He was starting to feel a lot better with the two of them there. It was a reminder that he was not alone in this, even though the horrors he faced were traumatising.

“I heard that you passed your first year at the Tower.” Lord Eadgleyr said to him, giving him a squeeze. “Well done.”

“And I heard that you sponsored one of your classmates so that she could attend the next year.” Lord Fallconyr supplied. “Well done for that too.”

Loki smiled, pleased with the praise. “She couldn’t just not come back.” He said. “She got ninety eight percent. That’s an amazing score.”

“And what did you get?” Lord Fallconyr asked.

Loki sank a little in his seat. “Seventy eight.” He mumbled.

“That’s wonderful, I knew you’d do well.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Loki straightened a little. “I was thinking though. There must be more people like Thainia, or… or Rohundia, people who have talent but cannot afford to study at the Tower. I was thinking that maybe I could set up a scholarship, where if you are good enough then I will pay for your studies.”

“That is a worthy cause.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

Loki’s smile widened. “But I cannot just pay for it out of my allowance, it’s big, but not unlimited. So I thought maybe if I invested some of it in trade, I could make some profit and use that instead.”

“Trade in what?” Lord Fallconyr asked, leaning forward.

“Heterwart.” Loki said immediately. “It’s far too expensive here, you can get it in Asgard for a fraction of the cost, so there must be a way to import it here for less and make a nice profit.”

“You sound like your grandfather.” Lord Eadgleyr said warmly.

Lord Fallconyr was thinking it through. “I have never really looked at the seidr trade before.” He said. “My own magic was always from nature and always fairly mild, but I see your point. I’m sure that something can be set up.”

“You stopped Thor’s rain.” Loki said.

“It was almost stopped by then anyway, I merely made a gap in it.” Lord Fallconyr said. “I have always had a little influence over the rain.”

“I didn’t get any nature magic.” Loki said.

“It doesn’t lend itself well to learning regular seidr, so perhaps that is for the best, unless you don’t like your current studies?” Lord Fallconyr asked.
“I love them.” Loki insisted. “It’s just that Thor got the weather, and Haewkyr got animal healing.”

“You should see your cousin Coackyr, *he* got fertility.” Lord Fallconyr said dryly. “And doesn’t he know it.”

Loki had to laugh at that. Slowly, inch by inch, he was able to leave the horror of his latest session with the King behind him. It was the way things had been all year. King Dimcken would do something terrible, Loki would fight to keep from screaming, and then Lords Fallconyr and Eadgleyr would calm him down and comfort him until he felt better.

At least until Fosxyr returned empty-handed.

“His Majesty saw them not long after you left. He has been admiring them ever since.” He reported. “Hieddenyr said that he may ask for them as a present.”

Loki’s blood ran cold.

“No.” He said, his voice strangely flat. “Not that. Never.”

Lord Eadgleyr exchanged a glance with his wife. “I will go and talk to him.” He said. “I need to see him anyway about the new tariff changes he has planned. I will see if I can convince him to relinquish them.”

Lord Eadgleyr reached out and caught his hand. “Be careful.” He said. “I hate it when you wind up in the dungeons.”

"You say that like I *always* wind up in the dungeons, I do not *always* wind up in the dungeons." Lord Fallconyr said to him, but gave his hand a loving squeeze anyway.

Lord Eadgleyr kissed the back of Lord Fallconyr's hand lovingly, then released it and watched his husband go.

“You two love each other so much.” Loki said softly.

“He has held my heart for longer than I care to think about.” Lord Eadgleyr said with a smile. “Without him I am not whole.”

Loki bit his lip nervously. There was something he wanted to ask, but he wasn’t sure how.

“Fosxyr, could you make us some tea? I would dearly love a cup.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

The moment Fosxyr’s back was turned he looked Loki in the eye.

“What is it?” He asked.

Loki shook his head. “Nothing.” He said, embarrassed at having been read so easily.

“Nonsense. I can see you thinking behind those emeralds you call eyes. What is it?”

Loki squirmed a little, but Lord Eadgleyr just waited patiently.

“How can you do it?” Loki asked at last. “How can you… have so many children when it’s so disgusting. I know you love him and he loves you but…”

“My poor, sweet grandson.” Lord Eadgleyr said sadly. “We had so many because it was too fun to stop.”
“Too fun to stop.” Loki repeated blankly. “Don’t tease me, I can’t handle it, not from you.”

“I do not tease Loki. I know that right now you cannot believe me, and I do not expect you to. What you endure and what lovers do are two very *different* things. I truly hope one day that you will be able to understand why I say that, though I fear that you may not.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

“Did you… did you do more than just…” Loki couldn’t finish the sentence. He wanted to know whether lovers sucked on one another, or spilled on each other’s faces, or took one another anally, or if all that was just what perverts did.

Lord Eadgleyr thanked Fosxyr for the tea as the servant put the tray down, then turned back to Loki.

“My dear boy, I will tell you this in confidence, as I can assure you none of my other grandchildren know or have ever asked, but there is not a thing that you have described to me that my husband and I have not tried in our long marriage together, some things more than once. When you love someone, and when you trust that they will never hurt you, you find yourself capable of giving more of yourself than you ever imagined. And you do enjoy it, because of the look on their face, and because of the moment when you are *theirs* and the whole realm vanishes in comparison. That is love Loki, which is something you do not have with the King. In your life beyond this one you will choose what you do and who you do it with, and I wish with all my heart that one day you will be able to give yourself freely, and without fear.”

Loki blinked hard as he felt tears sting his eyes. He did not know if he could *ever* enjoy such things, but the way his grandmother’s eyes sparkled when he spoke of love, maybe it was worth finding out one day.

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Lord Fallconyr was shown in to the King’s chambers quite promptly, a perk of being so powerful in the realm. He bowed stiffly to King Dimcken and accepted both the invitation to sit and a glass of wine with good grace.

“I received your invitation to dinner not ten minutes ago.” King Dimcken said. “Surely you could have spoken to me then?”

“I am grateful to hear of your acceptance.” Lord Fallconyr said smoothly. “But I would not wish to disrupt your dinner with talk of tariffs and trade.”

“Fair point, fair point. I am not changing my mind on the new tariff rate, if that’s why you have come.” King Dimcken said.

“On the contrary, the tariff is for the re-cobbling of the city roads, as someone whose bones rattle every time he travels through the city, I can think of no finer use for the money.” Lord Fallconyr said.

King Dimcken laughed at that. “You would be the first one to say so.” He said. “But it is a temporary thing, a year’s worth of trade and the roads will be paid for. Some people think that just because you have a treasury that it must be full of treasure. We may not be struggling, but major works do not happen without a little help.”

“True, very true Your Majesty. Although I was wondering if you might consider a small
“Oh yes here we go, I knew there would be something.” King Dimcken said. He was smiling though, having played this game many times over the years. “On your biggest crop I’ve no doubt.”

“Of course not Your Majesty, I would never ask for such a thing. I was going to ask that the new tea, which we are still trying to establish, might be considered exempt. And as I am aware of the fine cause to which you are putting the revenue, in exchange for this exemption I would pay for the tea market lanes to be re-cobbled, eliminating the cost to the palace for the area.”

King Dimcken pressed his lips together in thought. “That is a decent expense to you.” He said.

“But if the new teas become established in their crucial first year I will make it back by their fifth.” Lord Falconyr pointed out. “Whereas if they fail due to the higher prices I will lose more over time.”

“You have convinced me, my old friend. I will have the estimated cost of re-cobbling the tea market lanes sent to you, I wish all my Lords could be so accommodating, then I wouldn’t have to raise the tariffs at all.” King Dimcken said.

Lord Falconyr smiled and raised his glass. “To the new streets.” He said.

King Dimcken copied him. “To the new streets.” He echoed.

Lord Falconyr allowed his eyes to wander to the table by the King’s side.

“Are those Loki’s knives?” He asked, spotting them.

King Dimcken looked over at them. “He left them here. They are very fine are they not?”

“Very. They were a gift from his father you know.” Lord Falconyr said.

“Oh?” King Dimcken said, there was just the slightest hint of nerves in his tone.

“Oh yes, he told me himself. His father gifted them to him at his coming of age. They are his favourites. King Odin designed them himself.” Lord Falconyr said. “So as to make sure that they were unique for his son.”

King Dimcken looked guilty for about a tenth of a second before hiding it.

“I will give them back to him at dinner tonight.” He said.

“I was thinking of asking Loki to speak to the blademaster who made them, to see if he might also make me a set, with a different styled handle of course. They are very fine and would look perfect in my belt.” Lord Falconyr said.

King Dimcken picked one of them up. “Indeed.” He said. “I too wouldn’t mind a set of blades. They are *very* fine.”

“We may even start a new fashion for them at court.” Lord Falconyr said. “When was the last time we did that?”

“Eight hundred years ago, the sock thing.” King Dimcken said immediately.

“Oh yes the sock thing! I still can’t believe that worked. Never wager with me when I’m drunk, because apparently I cannot lose even the stupidest of challenges.”
“Eight years people were wearing one sock that matched their under-robe and one that matched their over-robe, and all underneath their slippers! I still find myself laughing.” King Dimcken said with a chuckle.

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That night Lord Fallconyr and his wife entertained the Royal family to dinner. They ate the King’s favourite foods and the elder members of the party reminisced about old times.

King Dimcken gave Loki his knives back over dessert.

“You must tell me who made them.” He said. “I want a set of my own.”

“If you have a design in mind I can send it to the blademaster directly.” Loki said, resisting the urge to clutch his prized blades to his chest in relief.

On the other side of the table, Lord Fallconyr winked at him, lightning fast.

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King Dimcken seemed to calm down after Loki’s ‘forgiveness’, and he returned to his old, confident, prideful self. He did seem to keep a better hold on his temper, at least for a while, and palace life returned to its normal routine.

Except for Dorgen. He had never liked Loki, although he had been grateful to him for his part in rescuing the two princes. After that event, Dorgen had stopped glaring so openly at Loki at the dinner table and settled for pretending he didn’t exist unless forced to acknowledge otherwise.

After the incident with Loki’s hand, his demeanour changed again, and not for the good.

It was back to hostile glares and snide remarks, all things that angered King Dimcken when he heard them.

“You will treat Loki with respect.” He commanded one night with narrowed eyes. “He is your Queen, now apologise.”

Dorgen turned to look at where Loki sat on the other side of the table. “I am sorry for offending you, *mother*.” He sneered.

Loki looked down and mumbled. “It’s alright, I wasn’t offended.”

“It’s not alright. You are my wife and Consort, he should know his place.” King Dimcken snapped as he glared at his eldest son. “Norbleen would never have spoken to his stepmother like that.”

“We’ll never know.” Snapped Dorgen.

King Dimcken’s face turned an ugly shade of purple.
“Get. Out.” He said in a low, dangerous, voice.

Dorgen left, stalking from the room as the others sat at the table and tried to pretend that they hadn’t just witnessed the entire thing.

Later on, Loki found himself confronted by Dorgen in his own chambers. The eldest prince came alone and waved the servants, Fosxyr included, to the far end of the room.

“I do not know what you and Odin are planning.” He said quietly, sounding eerily like his father. “But I promise you whatever you convince him to do I will reverse. Vanaheim is not a vassal state of Asgard, it is not a playground for you and your kind.”

Loki stared at him, utterly confused. “What are you talking about?” He demanded. “I am not here to convince the King to do anything.”

“Oh really? So why did you not react when he *broke* your *hand*? Did you think we would all just miss that? What were you working on? Did I ruin it by pointing out what happened? Or did you change tactics and *guilt* him into something?” Dorgen asked, his face ugly. “You have everyone here wrapped around your pretty fingers but I am not fooled *Aesir*, I see you acting like being married to an old man is the best thing you could possibly imagine, but it *is* an act, he may not listen to me but I *will* undo the damage you cause.”

“What damage would that be?” Loki snapped back at him, furious at having his fear and pain, and the desperate attempts to hide them, turned into something so sinister.

Dorgen sneered. “You have time yet to play the long game, I am watching child. I will see what you do for Odin, I never realised that the second prince of Asgard was such a well-trained whore.”

Loki flinched and turned his head away.

“Leave.” He said. “Leave me alone. You have no idea what is going on, LEAVE!”

The servants came forward at his shout and escorted a fuming Dorgen from the room. To Loki’s surprise it was Femtchyr who offered him tea to sooth his nerves. Fosxyr had left with Dorgen and had not yet returned. Loki wondered how well the servant knew the oldest Prince. They were about the same age, and if Dorgen had taken an interest in his younger brothers after Fosxyr was put in charge of raising them then they may have gotten to know one another quite well.

He didn’t ask when Fosxyr returned, even servants were allowed a little privacy.

“Why does he hate me?” Loki asked instead.

“You are too good at hiding Your Grace.” Fosxyr said quietly. “He sees the smiles and not the tears. He loves Vanaheim fiercely, and the thought that you may bring it to ruin to further Asgard’s influence enrages him.”

“I would never.” Loki said softly.

“He will come around. You saved his sons, for which he *is* grateful, at least, on a personal level. He will do nothing for Asgard but if you personally needed his help he would grant it, however begrudgingly.” Fosxyr said. “He will also see, in time, that you mean no harm here. When that day comes I promise you will know, because he will apologise to you, and quite humbly too. I’ve seen him do it in the past.”

Loki gave Fosxyr a weak smile. “I suppose I will just have to wait him out then.” He said resignedly.
Red over white: Loki passed his second year at the Tower with ninety one percent. Thainia got ninety nine percent and branched into healing magic for her third year.

Green over red: Loki’s first profits from the heterwart trade came in. He announced the creation of the Consort’s scholarship, open to those of a commoner background with enough talent to be taught at the Tower. The first recipient was a young girl who had been working as a whore. Her arrival caused a minor stir, but by the end of the year her talent was undeniable.

White over green: Loki joined the summer hunt on horseback for the first time. The rebels planned a major attack during the summer celebrations that would have caused massive deaths, but Musleen foiled it thanks to his informant. Eighteen rebels were caught and executed, but the ringleaders remained at large.

Red over white: Loki was finally able to visit Lord Fallconyr’s lands again for another holiday. He spent two whole weeks away from the palace while Fosxyr definitely did not enjoy helping in the gardens, no, not even a little, what kitchen woman? Oh that kitchen woman, she’s just a friend, no really, hated every minute of the whole thing, *not* a garden kind of a servant *thank you*.

Every year to the day it rained. Of course, as the Asgard year was five days shorter than the Vanheim one, the rain came earlier each time. Loki didn’t mind, he knew when it was due and every year, without fail, Thor reached out from across Yggdrasil and bathed Loki in his love.

Green over red: And Loki had a big problem to face.
Sixty One Steps

Chapter Summary

Fertile

Chapter Notes

More non con after the party. I forgot to put the warning up before, sorry!

It was the spring time of his sixth year of marriage and Loki was almost fertile. He was very regular in his cycle, which was a relief because it meant that he could begin drinking Lord Eadgleyr’s special tea a few days before his body became fertile without worrying about it starting early. A month earlier he’d had a quiet word to his grandmother, who had written a letter home, which explained the arrival of Haewkyr on the next coach.

Haewkyr gave the palace the once-over, sneered a little because he could, and headed inside to wash the dust of his journey away before seeking out his grandparents, and through them, Loki.

The packet of tea was discretely placed in Loki’s top drawer, with some more at the serving table for immediate use, and Loki had his first cup that night.

“You’ll feel a little warm down there.” Lord Eadgleyr said to him quietly. “When the heat fades, then it’s wearing off and you need to drink more. It tricks your body into thinking you are suffering an infection, so it creates defences to fight it off. These defences kill the seed of the man before it can get to your womb.”

“Is it foolproof?” Loki asked nervously.

“Nothing is foolproof my darling, but it is better than anything else we have. The whores swear by it and there are not a lot of whores with children these days. I have never known of anyone who drank it and still got with child.” He said.

Haewkyr winked at him. “I heard that the King took a kick from a horse an hour ago.” He said. “Right in his sinner’s paradise.”

Lord Eadgleyr turned and gave him a look of alarm. “Haewkyr I will tan your hide.” He hissed as the younger man laughed and stepped out of range of his grandmother’s arms.

“It was just a little one, he never should have gotten too close to a horse’s backside anyway.” He said, grinning.

“I wish you would be more careful.” Lord Eadgleyr snapped. “His Majesty is *not* a man to be trifled with.”

Haewkyr sobered. “I will stay out of his way Grandmother I promise.” He said. “It just makes me so angry to see him, Loki doesn’t deserve this.”
Loki had to look away at his words. Sometimes it seemed as though everyone except the King was on his side, and yet he still couldn’t turn and run away. It wasn’t fair.

“I will drink the tea all month long.” Loki swore.

It wasn’t freedom, but it helped.

The first week he drank it every three hours, which was how long the warm, tingly feeling seemed to last each time. During the second week he had to attend a daytime function at the request of King Dimcken and was unable to drink it while he was there, although thankfully he managed to have a cup right before dinner that night.

During the third week, disaster struck.

King Dimcken had instructed him to throw a party, which was a semi-regular occurrence in the Queen’s Chambers, and a duty that Loki was used to by now.

The problem was that tea drinking was not usual during a party, and drinking *that* tea, which had a distinctive scent to it, was definitely going to cause comment.

Loki wasn’t worried, King Dimcken rarely wanted sex after a party. He spent his time talking to various nobles in the corner while the young ones danced and laughed and ate too much. But on this night he stayed until late, then came over to Loki and quietly murmured in his ear that he’d like to go to bed now. Loki’s bed.

Loki could feel his heart hammering as he slipped away from the remaining nobles, most of whom were drunk and being herded out of the door by Camtan and Fosxyr. He hadn’t drunk the tea in hours. He was right at the peak of his fertility. He was in big, big trouble.

“I have wanted you all night.” King Dimcken whispered in his ear the moment they were alone. “I almost cancelled the party just to have you.”

Loki wished he had, the tea had still been working when the party had begun. He frantically scanned the room for *something* that might get him out of this as King Dimcken brushed his hair aside and kissed the back of his neck.

“There is something about you Loki, these past few weeks, you look… you look…” He leaned in close and breathed in Loki’s ear. “You look like you need fucking.” He growled.

Loki almost choked in fear. King Dimcken had never used such a vulgar term with him before, the fact that he was doing it now was a clear sign that his arousal would not be abated by simple touching, and indeed it was only minutes later that Loki found himself lying on his back naked and being kissed by the King as long, thin fingers slid their way up his legs to press against his vagina.

Loki tried hard to think. The King’s tongue was in his mouth and the King’s fingers were in his vagina, pushing and rubbing and trying to make Loki wet.

The worst part was that it was working embarrassingly quickly. Loki was fertile, and his body *wanted* to mate. He’d been privately touching himself for days under the covers at night, resulting in the first erections he’d had since he arrived on Vanaheim almost seven years ago. But he did not want the King.

King Dimcken’s penis was full and hard, he was shifting into position. Loki had seconds to think of something, anything.
His anus. He couldn’t get pregnant if the King spilled in his anus. He hated it when they did that, but right now it was a small price to pay for preventing a baby. But he’d never encouraged that, and he certainly couldn’t start now. King Dimcken would be suspicious, perhaps even suspecting that Loki had been taken over again by one of the rebels.

It had to look spontaneous.

King Dimcken lined himself up, the tip of his penis was just touching Loki’s vagina.

Loki coughed suddenly and sat up, pushing the King away from him.

“I’m sorry Husband!” He gasped, coughing a little more. “Some saliva went down my throat.”

He turned over and reached for the glass of water that sat by his bed. On his hand and knees he tilted the glass and swallowed a little of it, looking as though he was *completely by accident* putting his bottom on full display for the King. He put the glass down and looked at King Dimcken over his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry.” He said again.

Would King Dimcken take the bait? Or would he turn Loki back over? Maybe he would just take him in his vagina from behind.

King Dimcken’s hand came down to rest against one of Loki’s cheeks. “It’s alright my darling.” He said in a distracted kind of a voice. “Did you know that you have the most exquisite bottom in Vanaheim?”

“N…no Husband.” Loki said.

‘Please work.’ He silently begged.

“Do you have any oil?” King Dimcken said in the same, distracted tone, sliding a fingertip down in the crack of Loki’s buttocks.

Loki reached into the drawer by his bed and pulled out some lamp oil.

“There’s this.” He said. “It’s scented.”

King Dimcken smiled like a predator. Loki felt a tremor of fear. He had wanted this outcome, but it didn’t mean that it was going to be pleasant.

“Good.” King Dimcken said as he took the bottle.

He poured a liberal amount onto his hand and pushed a finger into Loki’s anus.

Was it possible to feel triumph and despair at the same time? Loki thought that he knew what it felt like as he was worked open by eager hands.

He reminded himself, as the King’s penis inched into him, that this was worth not having a baby.

Thrust.

‘No baby.’

Thrust.
‘No baby.’

Thrust.

‘No baby.’

King Dimcken reached around Loki’s hips and pushed his fingers into Loki’s vagina from the front. He pulled them up as he thrust down, forcing Loki to cry out as both holes were assaulted. But there was no baby. No. Baby.

When it was over the King Dimcken was asleep, Loki rose went to the bathing room to carefully wipe away the traces of spill that trickled from his anus. He was not even going to take the chance that some of it could get into his vagina.

Fosxyr was waiting for him with a pile of wash-cloths, some warm water in a bowel, a short hose, and a cup of tea.

“Better late than never.” He said softly, handing Loki the cup.

Loki drank the whole cup in one go, and then reached for the cloths.

“Thank you.” He said. “What is that for?” He asked, pointing at the hose.

“Cleaning out the seed.” Fosxyr said.

“He didn’t spill in my womb.” Loki said darkly.

“I see.” Fosxyr said softly and put the hose away.

Loki wiped carefully from his vagina to his anus to ensure that none of the seed could be wiped the wrong way.

“He’s still in my bed.” Loki said. “Snoring his head off.”

“Better that than up and about.” Fosxyr said, removing each of the cloths as Loki used them.

Loki nodded. “It’s still my bed. It’s as though he doesn’t belong there, having him there feels wrong. I’m normally safe in my bed.”

“And you will be again soon, he does not sleep in the Queen’s Chamber often.” Fosxyr reminded him gently.

Loki pulled a face. “I know. It still feels strange. I don’t want to sleep there.”

“You could try to sleep on one of the couches, but if he rises before we expect him to then he will be angry.” Fosxyr said.

Loki stuck his tongue out. “I know.” He grumbled. “I’m just out of sorts. I’m sorry Fosxyr.”

“I know Your Grace, there is nothing to forgive. Would you like anything else?”

“No thank you. It’s late, I will try to sleep.” Loki said and headed back to his bed.

King Dimcken was fast asleep in the centre of it. Loki lay down on the edge and turned to glare at the King’s sleeping form.
He lay there like that in the darkness for hours, just glaring, silently, hatred pouring out of his very skin.

Oblivious, King Dimcken slept onwards until late morning. When he did wake it was to Loki’s careful greeting.

They ate breakfast in Loki’s dining area. Loki spent the whole time fighting the urge to get up and leave. He was sick of King Dimcken’s presence. Despite the King regularly acting upon his desires they rarely spent more than a few hours together alone, and Loki could feel the King’s presence pressing down on him. But he did not let a trace of it show on his face. After breakfast King Dimcken finally kissed him good day and left him alone.

Loki went straight into the bathing room and yanked his robe off forcefully. The bath was full and the water was hot. He climbed in and scrubbed himself hard.

“Fosxyr?”

“Yes Your Grace?”

“Can you use the hose please?”

“Your Grace you said that he did not spill there.”

“I know. I want you to do it anyway.”

“It is not comfortable.”

“I don’t care.” Loki said. He wanted to do it anyway, because he was afraid, afraid that some seed may have found its way inside of his vagina somehow, and afraid of all that would entail.

He was certain that none had, but despite both knowing that and drinking the tea regularly, the moment the month was over and Loki felt the first trickle of blood tickle him as it left his vagina he still broke down and wept in relief.
“Congratulations Your Grace.” Fosxyr said when Loki came and asked him for some smallclothes and cloths to catch his bleeding.

Loki smiled at him, relief still clearly present in his expression. “Thank you Fosxyr.” He said as he followed him into the bathing room.

Fosxyr collected what was needed as Loki wiped himself clean. It was only few drops at this early stage.

“At least these are the same.” Loki commented, pulling on the undergarments.

“Indeed Your Grace. Shall I fetch you some tea while you write to His Majesty?” Fosxyr asked.

Loki froze. “Write to the King?” He asked.

“He is your husband and he needs to know that your… activities will be ceasing for the next few days.”

“Mine normally lasts a full week.” Loki commented. “I didn’t realise that I would have to *write* to him. How do I even *do* that?”

“There is a time-honoured phrasing Your Grace, I will assist you if you desire.” Fosxyr said.

Loki followed him into the living area and sat down at the writing desk.

“Alright. What do I say?” He asked, picking up his quill.

“To His Majesty, King Dimcken, my Husband.” Fosxyr dictated.

Loki turned to stare at him.

“That is seriously the way to address him over this matter?” He asked.

The look on his face reminded Fosxyr of how young his charge really was.

“Formalities must be observed Your Grace.” He said gently.

Loki turned back to his paper and wrote down the greeting.

“I write to inform you that, due to my womanly nature, I will be indisposed for a number of days.”

“Womanly nature.” Loki snorted under his breath as he wrote. “Sif’s got a womanly nature, she could take on half the Vanir army.”

“I hope to present you with good news in approximately one week’s time.” Fosxyr continued.
“And that’s only because the other half would be too scared to face her.”

“Until then I wish you the best of health and happiness.”

“They’d run away like baby alpecs while crying for their mothers.”

“Your wife, Loki, King’s Consort.”

“There, done.” Loki said. “And he’ll know what that means?”

“He will Your Grace, he may be somewhat unhappy about having his activities curtailed for the moment, but he is a much married man, he would have known that this was going to happen eventually.” Fosxyr said. “Shall I take it to him now?”

“Yes please. I don’t want him planning anything for tonight.” Loki said with a slight shudder as he handed Fosxyr the letter. A thought occurred to him and he frowned. “I don’t have to stop doing anything else do I? Due to my ‘womanly nature’?”

“No Your Grace, *that* tradition stayed in the distant past where it belonged. Your activities are your own.” Fosxyr assured him before leaving to complete his task.

Loki sat back and stared at nothing for a while, before a smile slowly crept over his face.

In fourteen years, one month and eight days he would be facing this challenge all over again, but for now he had survived it. No baby, and the relief was incredible. Even the uncomfortable feeling of the blood as it began to flow more thickly couldn’t dissipate his light mood.

Fosxyr returned and informed him that the King’s response was simply to nod. It was a fact of biology and thankfully King Dimcken wasn’t so blind as to believe that Loki could control such a thing.

“I am going riding.” Loki said, rising from his chair. “And tomorrow I will spend some time with Haewkyr, he is leaving again soon. I thought we might go to the market in the city. It’s huge and I think he will pretend to hate it while secretly enjoying it.”

“That sounds like good fun Your Grace.” Fosxyr said. “Shall I come down to the yard and let you know when it’s almost time for dinner?”

“Yes please, I lose track of the time when I’m riding.” Loki said.

He left with a spring in his step.

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Haewkyr insisted that he hated the market, but he also did not take Loki up on his offer to leave.

“It’s crowded.” He said for the fourth time that day.

“It would hardly be a successful market if it wasn’t.” Loki pointed out with a smile.

“It’s certainly a magnificent sight.” Sofftia said as she walked beside them on Camtan’s arm. “I love visiting the food stalls from the country. They have such wonderful and unique things for sale.”

“Move there, you can have them every day.” Haewkyr said gruffly, but even those who didn’t know him well could tell that he was not truly annoyed.
“We should have brought more guards.” Musleen said, scanning the crowds for the millionth time.

“You *need* a woman.” Camtan said. “Let me find you one brother, I will make sure she is both pretty and deadly. You will love her.”

“I am perfectly capable of finding my own wife.” Musleen said.

“I never said anything about a wife, I just think you need a spanking.” Camtan said.

Haewkyr snorted as Sofftia turned her head away, blushing. Loki almost jumped in fear at the words but managed not to. Camtan had no way of knowing what he had done with the King, although the idea that the youngest prince thought such a thing was beneficial or even fun made Loki frown slightly in confusion. He couldn’t imagine a single situation in which he would want such a thing.

“I do *not*, nor have I *ever* needed a spanking.” Musleen mumbled as his ears turned bright red.

“Falkeen says he knows some very fine whores, you could relax a little in their loving arms.” Camtan teased.

“My lover is of no business of yours.” Musleen said.

Camtan raised an eyebrow and purposefully included the whole group in his gaze. “Lover?” He asked with a growing smirk.

Musleen’s face was beginning to join his ears in its colouring. “I said lovers, it is a general term.” He said. “I do not have a lover Camtan, they are a liability.”

Camtan was grinning so widely that Loki was strangely reminded of Fosxyr.

“You are *lying*.” He said gleefully.

Musleen’s whole face had turned bright red. “I am not lying, I have no lover, now stop harassing me brother, I need to concentrate.”

“What’s her name?” Camtan asked with an eagerness that had ‘little brother’ painted on it in bright yellow letters. “Is she pretty? Father will not approve of her unless she is pretty. Is that why you’re trying to hide her?” His face sobered. “Is she really tall?” He asked with mock seriousness.

Musleen just sighed and ignored him.

They spent the rest of the day trying all the foods, wines and other specialties on offer. Camtan did eventually ease off on his brother, but only after a nudge from his wife. Musleen appeared distracted and kept scanning the crowd with serious eyes.

“Trouble?” Loki asked him quietly when he got the chance.

“It appears not.” Musleen said, equally quiet. “Enjoy yourself Loki, I will keep watch.”

“Camtan is right about one thing Musleen, you do need to relax one day.” Loki said.

“I will relax when the rebels are taken care of.” Musleen said. “Who knows, I may even find myself a woman.”

“Who Camtan will torture mercilessly.” Loki said.

“If she’s my woman then it will be *he* who will be undergoing torture.” Musleen said with a slight
smirk of his own.

Loki returned to the palace in good spirits. He had enjoyed himself immensely.

“I’ll say my goodbyes now.” Haewkyr said as they reached the stairs that led to the royal chambers. “I’ll be riding out early in the morning and won’t see you.”

Loki’s face fell. “I had hoped to have more time with you.” He said.

“I will be back one day, and you can come out to the fields again.” Haewkyr said. “I don’t belong here.”

“I know. You belong on open ground, with grass and fresh air.” Loki said. “Write to me and tell me all about it.”

“I will.” Haewkyr promised with a smile. “Take care of yourself Loki.”

“You too.” Loki responded, and they parted ways.

Dinner that night was spent telling King Dimcken all about their day, as well as presenting him with some of the finest produce that the market had to offer. Loki gave him some wild honey from the southern mountains.

“The seller said it was the best.” He said. “But I didn’t buy it until I tried it for myself. She wasn’t lying.”

“I will enjoy it immensely, my darling.” King Dimcken said with a smile. “We should go to the southern mountains for a holiday. I have not been in over a century, and you should see them. You can go skiing.”

“Oooh yes Father, let us all go. I love skiing, please.” Camtan said at once.

King Dimcken smiled broadly. “Yes. Let’s have a family holiday. I will organise it for the winter.”

“That’s ages away.” Camtan said.

“It’s also the best time to go.” Musleen pointed out. “As there is no snow in the summer.”

“I hate it when you make sense.” Camtan said. “Tell Father about your lover.”

“What lover?” King Dimcken asked at once.

“There is no lover Father, he teases me.” Musleen said. “There was also no attack.”

“So I heard.” King Dimcken said, his face turning dark as the others looked between one another in confusion.

“My informant told me that the rebels had an attack planned for today in the market.” Musleen said. “They were supposed to detonate a large bomb under the pavilion at lunchtime.”

“Which is why you insisted that we stay away from there and eat on the far side of the river.” Camtan said, putting an arm around Sofftia and squeezing her gently. “Musleen, why didn’t you tell us?”

“I had nine different mages working to conceal us, to deflect our image, and protect us.” Musleen said. “Loki wanted to go and I convinced Father that it was safe.”
“Nine mages? All at once?” Loki asked.

“It was I who insisted on the extra mages.” King Dimcken said.

Musleen’s expression went carefully neutral. “They were most helpful Father.” He said.

Loki suspected that the extra mages had not in fact cast anything. Too many spells at once could interfere with one another and spoil everything.

“My men were waiting at the pavilion in plain clothes all day, but nothing happened. I think they were tipped off somehow.” Musleen said. “So we had a peaceful day, but I do not know what they are planning next.”

“Keep at them my boy, we will crush them eventually.” King Dimcken said. “I will not have my kingdom attacked like this.”

“If I could get a hold of the ringleaders then I could break the back of them easily.” Musleen said.

“You will do it.” Dorgen said, his low voice cutting into the conversation. “You are the best there is.”

Musleen smiled just a little at the praise, but Loki suspected it meant a lot more to him than he let on.

“Thank you Dorgen.” He said.
Chapter Summary

Betrayal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day Loki attended the Tower for his lessons. He was in his sixth year of illusions and transmutations and he had enjoyed himself more and more as the lessons had grown harder. He was determined to complete his studies, and then branch out into other magics. His mind magic lessons were also going well, and he could successfully enchant a variety of objects with all the communication spells. He could read a willing mind and block the attempts of his fellow classmates from taking over his own. He wasn’t quite able to stop Polweren, but the teacher always released him quickly, and Loki was getting stronger every day.

He greeted Thainia in the hallway as they crossed paths on the way to their respective lessons. Thania was one of the cleverest students in the Tower. She had taken well to healing and was already qualified to be a nurse, and was well on the way to becoming a fully-fledged healer. It would keep her at the Tower for four more years to do the senior level work, available only to those who passed the tenth year with more than ninety percent, but Loki had assured her that if she wanted to do it, he would pay for it.

Shiarpia wasn’t in class. Daenceia sat down beside Loki and gave him a worried sort of a smile.

“She’s probably just ill.” She said and faced the front with more than usual determination.

She disappeared to the library as soon as the lesson was over, leaving Loki to seek lunch alone. He bought a roll and took his illusionist books to one of the smaller gardens.

He had finished eating and was absorbed in the casting method required to place sound into an illusion when he heard his name being called.

“Loki.”

He looked up to see Daenceia standing there, except that she wasn’t. Her image kept fading in and out. “Loki pay attention, I don’t have much time.” She said.

Loki rose with his mouth open. “You can put sound into your illusions already?” He asked.

Daenceia looked sadly at him. “The rebel master mage taught me how.” She said.

Loki froze in shock.

No.

Not another one.

“I joined because Rohundia did. We were best friends, if only she could dance she could have joined
my troupe instead of making her living with men, but that is not important. Loki, listen, please. Shiarpia was charged by the rebels to blow up the pavilion yesterday.”

“Her *too*?” Loki said in anguish.

“All of us but Thainia, although they wanted us to recruit her. But you ruined that plan five years ago when you paid for her lessons before they could make their own offer. Loki please I swear that we mean you no harm, please listen, *please*.”

She was desperate, Loki could see it in her eyes.

“I’m listening.” He said suspiciously.

“She wouldn’t go through with it. She refused to harm innocent people, in fact she’s been trying to distance herself from them ever since Rohundia’s attack on you. We didn’t know about it, we had no idea how deeply Rohundia had become involved. They have Shiarpia at their main base, she managed to get a message to me and I finally know where it is. You have to tell Prince Musleen that they are all in Shriver’s Lane, it’s the house with the red bricks and the white door, three stories high and a green roof.”

“You’re the informant.” Loki said in shock.

“I became one after the attack that blew up the coach. The Prince had me in the interrogation room and he broke me like fine china. I told him everything I knew and he offered me my life in exchange for more. Please Loki, please believe me that I am sorry. I had no idea what I was getting into when I joined the rebels, we were just so sick of watching all the nobles send their children to the Tower when they only had mediocre talent, and we all had such *potential*. They promised us a future, and we accepted.”

“All of you?”

“Rohundia and myself. Shiarpia has reasons of her own for hating the King but she never wanted to hurt you, she was shocked by what Rohundia did. Loki please, we did as they asked and got to know you, but you are so much *better* than them. We want to stop, both of us, but they will not let us. They are going to kill her for her betrayal if you do not tell the Prince everything. They suspect me I know, they are watching me even now.”

“Where are you?”

“In the library, I look as though I am studying really intensely. Please Loki. I’m begging you. I know you feel betrayed but I swear we were in over our heads before we realised. We have wanted to leave ever since.”

Loki nodded, just once. “I’ll tell him so that he can end this, but you and I are no longer friends Daenceia. I trusted you. I liked you. Never speak to me again.”

She nodded slowly and sadly in understanding, and faded from view.

Loki clenched his fists in rage. For six years he’d been living a lie. Thainia was the only one who was innocent, and he wasn’t even sure that he could trust Daenceia’s word on that.

But the rebels had to go, and Fosxyr would be grateful for his niece’s life. For those reasons, and no other, Loki faked illness, left the Tower and returned to the palace.

Loki found Musleen working in his study. The second Prince was carefully marking places where
known rebels had been spotted recently.

“Forget it, they’re in Shriver’s Lane.” Loki said bluntly. “Red-brick house, three stories, green roof and a white door. Daenceia told me. They’re going to kill Shiarpia for not blowing up the pavilion and they suspect Daenceia is not completely loyal. I’m going to my chambers.”

Musleen looked at him, startled, then turned back to the map.

“We have to move quickly then. Will you help me?”

His words stopped Loki at the door. Did he want to fight rebels, possibly even the rebel master mage? Yes. Did he want to save Shiarpia and help Daenceia? No, they could reap what they sowed. But the threat of a little, or even a lot, of danger was too good to pass up.

“Yes.” He said.

“I need you to go back to the Tower and protect Daenceia. When they realise what’s happening they will probably try to kill her.” He said.

Loki scowled. “She lied to me. She only befriended me because they told her to.”

“She’s been risking her life to keep you safe for six years.” Musleen said bluntly. “She’s brave, and clever, and tough, and strong-“

“You sound as though you are in love with her.” Loki snapped.

His eyes widened as Musleen’s ears gave away what his expression did not.

“What?!” Loki shouted. “You-“

“No one can choose what happens to their heart!” Musleen snapped back at him. “She’s a *dancer* Loki, a commoner and technically a traitor, I *cannot* love her, not until… not for a while yet at least. She has a good heart. She made a mistake and she has more than made up for it, I promise you that. Please protect her, please.”

Loki took in his earnest face and pleading eyes.

“All right. For *you*.” He said.

“One day I hope you can forgive her Loki, but that is between you and her.” Musleen said.

Loki walked out without saying anything. He went to the stable and grabbed the reins of Lightning. “I’m heading back out.” He said to the stable boy who had been about to stable the horse away. “I’ve seen the healers and I feel better, I will attend my afternoon classes.”

He rode back to the Tower as fast as he dared. Musleen would move swiftly and Loki had to be in position if he was to be of any help at all.

Loki made his way to the library as quickly as possible, but even as he got there he knew that the rebels had already struck. There was a crowd of mages clustered around a figure lying on the ground.

It was Daenceia and she was choking.
Her face had turned red and her eyes were popping out as she struggled for breath. The librarian and several of the more advanced healer students were trying to open her airways.

Loki felt a jolt of fear for her, an instinctive reaction that occurred before he reminded himself that she had betrayed him. But she had also risked her life for six years to keep him safe.

Loki growled in frustration before taking a deep breath and focussing his magic.

It was a killing spell, he recognised it easily from experience and his studies. Unlike the ones on the Princes Lyren, Octir and Dorgen, this one was active. It spun and twisted like a wind sprite. Loki reached out and grabbed hold of it, trying to make it freeze.

He couldn’t breathe. The power behind the spell surged and he felt it block his lungs. He almost let go of it, but managed to hold on as it thrashed and railed against him.

He should really just stop trying to breathe. Why would he even want to? It wasn’t as though he had anything to live for. He should just… stop… breathing…

Polweren appeared in Loki’s vision, he was yelling something but it was hard to hear. Loki frowned in concentration.

“Your mind is your own!” Polweren was screaming.

What? Of course it was, he just didn’t see the point of breathing, what was wrong with that?

Everything. Breathe for Thor.

Loki took a huge breath of air and forced the power to retreat. He threw more of himself into fighting back, pouring his magic against it as hard as he could.

Spots were beginning to dance in front of his eyes when the spell froze, locking the attacking magic into place. Loki could feel it trying to break free, but he strengthened his hold, pushing the cold magic along the strand until he lost the feel of it. Even then he made what he could hold onto freeze harder.

Daenceia was managing tiny gasps of breath with the help of the healer mages. The spell wasn’t broken, not yet, only frozen mid-cast. Loki turned his attention back onto it.

“Shatter.” He whispered.

The spell broke, the magic powering it exploded into tiny shards which flew off in all directions. Books all over the library flew off their shelves, burst into flame or turned into random creatures. A mouse fell on Loki’s head.

Loki didn’t care. He fell over onto the floor as the mages ran around trying to deal with the chaos around him.

Daenceia was breathing hard, sucking in air desperately. She turned to look at where Loki lay beside her.

“You saved me.” She rasped.

Loki looked back at her. Could he really hate her for making a mistake? Musleen had spoken time and time again about his informant. The King’s grandsons were safe because of her information, she risked her life to try and save Shiarpia’s.
“That’s what friends do.” He wheezed back at her, and they shared a smile.

They were both taken to the healer’s rooms where they were fussed over by everyone. Thainia came running in with panic in her eyes that only softened slightly when she saw the two of them.

“What happened? I heard that you were both attacked!” She said.

“Thainia, you are still a junior student, you do not have permission to be in here. The head healer snapped.

“She’s my friend.” Loki said, and the woman paled.

“I’m sorry Your Grace, of course she can stay.”

Loki gave Thainia a wink. “This position has some perks.” He said.

Then he sobered. “Daenceia was attacked, I tried to help her and got caught up in it. I just hope that someone was there to save Shiarpia.”

“What’s happened to Shiarpia?!” Thainia asked, looking terrified.

Daenceia took a deep breath. “Thainia, I have a confession to make.” She said.

It took her a while to tell the whole story, and Loki watched Thainia’s face change from disbelieving to horrified to angry to sad to sympathetic.

“That could have so easily been me.” She said when Daenceia was done. “If it weren’t for Loki.”

“We’ve been trying to get away for years, but once they have you they don’t let go. They taught us so much, and paid for us to learn more. We were caught before we even realised.” Daenceia said.

“That does not make it right though.”

“It makes you flawed.” Thainia said. “Which makes you like everyone else.”

Loki nodded slowly. He had been angry, he’d been furious, but now that he’d had time he was thinking once more about Rohundia and how her circumstances had led to her rage against the royal family. There were so many people out there who deserved a chance.

His thoughts were interrupted by the King.

“Loki! Oh my dear wife they said you had been attacked! Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

Thainia slipped away to Daenceia’s bedside and both girls kept their heads down as they tried not to attract any attention from the King of Vanaheim.

“I am alright.” Loki said. “I was exhausted by the spell, but I fought it off. The lessons you arranged for me are responsible.”

King Dimcken ran his hand over Loki’s chest and shoulders. “You are certain?” He asked. “There is no damage?”

Loki shook his head. “None at all, I have been thoroughly checked.”

“I want the palace healers to check you. They are the best in Vanaheim.” King Dimcken said, within
As you wish Husband.” Loki said. “Please, do you know if Musleen has found the one who did this?”

“He has.” King Dimcken said, taking Loki’s hand and holding it gently. “Prepare yourself my love for shocking news.”

Loki felt his heart freeze up. Shiarpia.

“But Musleen found the main rebel base itself! And this attack was made by the head rebel, a very powerful mage. She almost killed you my darling, another minute and she would have.”

King Dimcken paused, and Loki realise that this was the shocking news he was apparently bracing for.

“Oh no.” He said, trying to sound sincere. “Is she in custody?”

“She was killed by some kind of magical spell, no one knows who cast it but she was frozen solid when they found her.” King Dimcken said gleefully. “The lesser mages were taken care of, and a maiden was saved.”

Loki sat up a little straighter. “What maiden?” He asked.

King Dimcken waved his hand dismissively. “A commoner, no doubt they planned to threaten another of my servants into betraying me, but it doesn’t matter, Musleen has saved us.”

Loki forced himself to nod. “I am so relieved Husband.” He said.

“The other ringleaders are in custody, we will have the trial and then execute them immediately. But right now you must come home. I have brought the carriage for you, and my guards will carry you downstairs.” King Dimcken said.

Loki forced a smile onto his face. “You are very kind Husband, but I can walk.”

“No. I want you to rest. You mustn’t strain yourself at all until the healers say you are alright.” King Dimcken said firmly. “I will call the guards.”

He left the room, and Loki reluctantly glanced up at Daenceia and Thainia. Thainia looked horrified, Daenceia looked sympathetic.

“I will see you when he lets me return to the Tower.” Loki said resignedly.

They didn’t get to reply, the guards entered the room and one of them gently scooped Loki up into his arms, blankets and all. Loki watched their faces as he was carried from the room, he felt humiliated, but there was nothing he could do.

He rode home in the carriage tucked under King Dimcken’s arm. The King insisted that he be carried to the healer’s wing, and then to his chambers where he was settled into bed by Fosxyr.

“Would you like anything Your Grace?” He asked cheerfully.

Loki looked at him for a moment, then realised that Fosxyr had no idea that what had happened had involved his niece.

“Fosxyr, go to Musleen and ask about Shiarpia.” Loki said. “Then go home and see your family.”
Fosxyr frowned as comprehension slid over his face.

“What did she do?” He whispered, horrified.

“The right thing, but I do not know if she’s alright. I’m sorry Fosxyr.” Loki said. “Go.”

Fosxyr bowed quickly and left Loki with Wraenyr, who made him some soothing tea.

Two hours later, Fosxyr returned.

“I told you to go home.” Loki said when he saw him.

“I know Your Grace and I am not disobeying, but I thought you would want to know that Shiarpia is alright. She was almost killed but the mage froze in the middle of casting her curse. Shiarpia survived.” Fosxyr leaned over and gripped Loki’s arm tightly. “Thank you Your Grace.” He said earnestly, and left.

Loki felt relief flood through him at his words. Wait, did that mean he fought the head mage of the rebels and *won*? Not only that, he won from a distance?

Wraenyr appeared and quietly informed him that his grandparents were here.

“Thank you, send them in.” Loki said.

Lord Eadgleyr came in first, eyes searching for signs of injury.

“Come in, come in, I am fine, I can even get up if not for the King’s wish that I remain in bed to rest.” Loki assured them. “If anything I have energy to spare now, things are happening all over the city and palace and I am to stay here.”

“And a good thing too.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “You were attacked by a mind mage of the highest level. You can just stay right there and be safe.”

“I have information about the mage you vanquished, from Musleen himself.” Lord Fallconyr said as he made himself comfortable.

Loki sat up straight. “What did he tell you?” He asked.

“Only that she was from a high born family, and that they are right now disowning her as fast as they can. She was one of the strongest mages in the realm, and apparently wanted Dorgen on the throne because His Majesty jailed her lover for running down some children who got in his way. The other rebels were fighting for the cause, she just hated the King, and was willing to help them in exchange for his death.”

“She sounds like a nasty piece of work.” Loki said.

“Loki, she was a terror, and the only reason she was never confronted about her crimes *before* now is because there was no one in the realm who felt strong enough to take her on. You beat her, and you’re able to walk afterwards. That is nothing short of amazing.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Loki felt a blush touch his cheeks. “I have very good teachers.” He said.

“Yes, and they wouldn’t have taken her on in a thousand years.” Lord Fallconyr said. “Everyone is impressed Loki, the whole court is talking about it, and about you.”

“Just promise me you won’t do it again.” Lord Eadgleyr said seriously.
Loki shrugged. “I didn’t plan on doing it the first time.” He pointed out. “But I promise to avoid it if there is another way, alright?”

“I suppose it will have to do.” Lord Eadgleyr said grumpily. From behind his back, Lord Fallconyr gave Loki a wink.

‘Well done’. He mimed, bringing a smile to Loki’s face.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know that this chapter has a lot of sudden revelations, but this is how it was always going to go.

Usually in stories it is the main character who knows about all the plots and things, then they come to a friend right when things get exciting and ask them to please just trust them and do this thing that will help. No one ever writes how the friend feels about it all. That’s what this chapter was. Loki was the one kept out of the loop for his own safety, until he became the 'friend' who just had to take everything on faith.
Sixty Four Steps

Chapter Summary

Judgements

All in all, seventy two people were brought to face trial for their role in the resistance. Once the main base fell, and the mage who had helped to conceal them all, it was an easy task to round up the conspirators.

Musleen interrogated them all as the weeks went past. Some were placed in the special isolated holding cells, and the others were put into the regular dungeons.

Loki stayed in the palace. He read his books, walked in the garden, practised his spell work, and tried to fight the urge to break out and run away. King Dimcken had told him in no uncertain terms that he was to remain in the palace until the investigations were over.

Fosxyr brought him his homework from the Tower, and a letter from Shiarpia. It said simply:

“One day I hope I will be able to show you how sorry I am.”

Loki burned it and went back to his books.

He was having trouble with Shiarpia’s betrayal, moreso than he had done with Daenceia’s. Daenceia had been acting as an informant for six years. She had risked her life over and over again to keep Loki safe, and the circumstances by which she had come to be at the Tower were, in a way, understandable. She had great talent but no money, so had Rohundia. They, and a small number of fellow mage students Musleen had discovered, had taken the only real chance they had out of poverty and prostitution. The thought of trusting her again made Loki uneasy, but he didn’t hate her.

Shiarpia was different. She was at the Tower because her family had sent her there. She was not living on the streets, or in desperate poverty. Daenceia said that she had joined the resistance for ‘reasons of her own’, Loki had no idea what that could mean.

He didn’t trust her, and he was still angry at her. For Fosxyr’s sake he kept a lid on his tongue, but he *wanted* to rage at her, to yell and scream and tell her how hurt he was that she would fake their friendship for so long.

He’d liked her, but her feelings had always been a lie.

Betrayed and angry, Loki threw himself into his studies. At least magic didn’t go around betraying people.

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News of the attack on Loki had spread to the furthest reaches of the realm. Rumours flew about what had happened. Some said that he had been attacked because he had discovered the mage at the Tower, others said that he had been protecting someone else, still more claimed that he had blasted the mage into a million pieces, a few claimed that he had shrugged off the attack and killed the mage with a flick of his wrist, such was the power of Odin’s second son.
The courtroom was packed to greater than capacity. There were people standing in the aisles, sitting on one another’s laps, a few were cloistered under the seats. Everyone who had an excuse to be in the room was there, they all wanted to know what had happened.

Loki sat beside King Dimcken and tried to look dignified.

“The men and women before you have been accused of grave crimes.” The court speaker intones to the royal couple. “They are accused of treason, conspiracy, plotting to blow up the town pavilion causing the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands. They orchestrated the mental attack on His Grace the King’s Consort, orchestrated the physical attack on His Majesty the King, kidnapping and extortion, blackmail, theft and using magic for the purposes of the aforementioned crimes.”

King Dimcken raised a hand and the speaker stopped.

“Do any of you wish to spare your families the indignity of a trial? If so you may plead guilty now.” He said.

Two men stepped forwards, they did not look sorry.

“I plead guilty.” The first one said. “I only wish we had succeeded.”

“I plead guilty.” Said the second man. “And I hope you rot in Hel.”

King Dimcken did not react, his temper, so easily released in private, was never placed on public display.

“I sentence you both to death by hanging, with your corpses to be placed at the execution grounds for the wolves.” He said calmly. “Anyone else?”

No one else came forward as the men were taken away.

“Very well. We begin the trial.” King Dimcekn said.

Musleen presented the evidence he’s gathered over the last ten years of the rebels’ activities. He linked each and every person on trial to what they had done, planned or worked on. He used mages to show the past to *prove* that this man was there on that night, this women delivered that message, or explosive. Now that their protection was dead, they could not hide such things. He spoke for hours. Periodically, King Dimcken asked if any wished to change their plea. One did, and got the same sentence as the first two men, the others just sneered.

When it came time to explain the actions of the rebels’ head mage, Lady Spaiteia from the family of Lord Eveilyr, Loki had to remind himself to stay calm. She was pure evil. She had joined the resistance back when it was mostly just men and women standing around complaining about the King. It was her influence that took them to great heights. She used her magic to find young talent and teach them in exchange for loyalty. She taught them the skills they would need to mentally attack the royal family as well as others. It was she who plotted to set off explosives in public, so that the rebels could blame the dark elves and claim that the King did not care about the common people.

In truth she did not care the slightest bit about the rebels or their cause. She wanted the King dead. She hated the royal family and wanted nothing more than to watch them all die. In fact, it had been one of the other leaders who had prevented her from killing the King’s grandsons when they were prisoners.

At last they got to the circumstances of her death. The crowd leaned forward noticeably. Loki tried to look impassive.
“She had placed a killing spell upon one of His Grace’s friends.” Musleen said. “We believe this was an attempt to force the poor girl to attack His Grace. They also held another of his friends hostage, who was rescued in the raid on the main house. His Grace’s friends refused, as a noble and loyal Vanir would. When the killing spell was activated, His Grace attempted to prevent it from achieving its goal, in the process he caused the spell to backfire, killing Lady Spaiteia.”

No mention of her having frozen solid. No mention of Daenceia’s name. Musleen also did not use the mages to show what had happened. He was protecting both Loki and Daenceia. Loki did not mind.

When he was done King Dimcken spoke again.

“Does any one of you wish to speak in your defence?” He asked.

One lady stood forwards, she was young and fairly pretty.

“Only that if His Grace had been here to sponsor me to the Tower earlier, I wouldn’t ever have joined the resistance. I only wanted a chance to be more than a whore.”

There were a few mutterings among the younger members of the group.

Loki scanned the crowd sadly. How many were here because they had no other choice?

He turned to the King.

“Husband?” He asked softly, in case this didn’t work.

“What is it my darling?” King Dimcken asked.

“Can you please spare the lives of the young red-haired girl in the back, and the those two standing over there?”

“What?!” King Dimcken almost shouted. ‘So much for softly.’ Loki thought.

“From what I have seen here today, they were all recruited with the promise of a better life, none were involved yet with any murders or blackmail, they stand accused of the least of the crimes. I ask you please to spare them their lives, so that they may learn to be better.” Loki said quickly. “A punishment is due, but I ask that you find something that is a lesson for *them* not the rest of Vanaheim.”

King Dimcken looked at him suspiciously. “Musleen?” He asked quietly.

“Yes Father?” Musleen said, coming close.

“Are you certain that this attack did not addle Loki’s wits?” He asked. Loki flushed a furious shade of red.

“I am Father, the healers said so themselves.” Musleen said, looking concerned.

“They are not children Loki, if they wanted to get ahead in life they should have worked harder.” King Dimcken said flatly, before turning back to the court.

“I find you guilty on all charges. I sentence you to death. You will be hung by your wrists, alive and naked, at the execution grounds for the wolves to eat. The bodies of your co-conspirators will be used to lure the wolves to you.”
Up on the balcony, the families of the guilty began to wail in grief. Loki couldn’t help but wince at both the sound and the look of horror and fear on the faces of the rebels. It was a horrible way to die.

King Dimcken caught the look and sighed.

“You, you and you, come forwards.” He said, singling out the three girls Loki had identified as being victims of circumstance.

“My Consort believes that you should be given a chance at undoing your mistakes. I disagree. So I am going to give you one chance each right now to convince me that you do not deserve death.”

The girls looked at one another in a panic.

“Please Your Majesty, I was working on the streets to support my two sisters, they are children and our parents are dead. I was offered a job in the house of Lady Spaiteia as a maid and I took it. I didn’t know about her activities until just these last two months and she swore she’d kill me and my sisters if I told. I provided food and drinks at the rebels’ meeting from that day forward. I did not want to betray you and I swear I will never do so again. Please, if you cannot spare my life, please spare it until my sisters are of age and can work to support themselves, without me they will starve.”

She was on her knees and shaking. King Dimcken looked at her with a bored kind of expression.

“No.” He said. “As a small mercy you will hang before you are left for the wolves, and your sisters will be supported by the palace until they are old enough to work. The kitchen staff will find someone to take them in.”

On the floor, the girl started to cry. Loki swallowed hard.

King Dimcken looked to the next girl, who was shaking where she stood.

“I was a maid for Lady Spaiteia. I was asked to deliver messages to a number of people for months. I did not know what was in them as it is not my place to read my Lady’s letters, also, I cannot read. I saw my Lady give magic lessons to many students but I did not realise for what purpose she had done so. What Liaghtia here told me that she had been threatened, I did not know what to do, so I did nothing. I regret this Your Majesty, not because I am here today but because I am going to die a traitor without ever having the chance to prove that I can be better.”

King Dimcken took a slow breath.

“Yes.” He said. “You are.”

The last girl just shook her head.

“If their stories did not sway you then mine will not.” She said. “I was raped by a Lord of your court and when I reported it your men did nothing. I joined because I wanted you to feel as helpless as I did. I did not do much for the rebels because I realised very quickly that what they wanted and what I wanted was not the same thing. I still wish one day that you know what it feels like to be thought of as less than dirt.”

Musleen’s eyes narrowed. “When did this happen?” He asked.

“It is irrelevant.” King Dimcken said with a slight trace of anger. “She dies as the others do.”

“Husband.” Loki pleaded.
“I have made my decision, they are guilty and they will die, that is final.” King Dimcken said.

“Twelve years before you took over the guard, Your Grace.” The girl answered calmly. She had a look in her eye of one who had accepted her fate.

“I will investigate.” Musleen said calmly. “All crimes must be punished, even if you are no longer here to see justice done.”

She smiled then, and her eyes filled with tears. “I should have come to you the day you took your post.” She said.

“Enough.” King Dimcken said. “Take them away, that one is to go with the others who will hang, the rest go into the dungeons to await transportation.”

Loki turned to the King, only to be stopped by the look King Dimcken gave him.

“Not one more word, I have made my decision.” He said dangerously.

“Yes Husband.” Loki whispered sadly.

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Guards were posted around the execution grounds to prevent family members from trying to save their kin. The shrieks and cries of the men and women as the wolves tore into them echoed through the forest. It took over two weeks for them all to die; the wolf pack could only eat so much at a time. Two of the condemned died of thirst before the wolves reached them, the others were not as lucky.

Loki spent the time in the palace, pretending that he didn’t dream about wolves in his sleep.

Fosxyr was equally pale and restless. He didn’t have to say why. Being left for the wolves was the highest level of punishment on Vanaheim, and one reserved for traitors. There had been no one killed in that way since the last queen.

By the time Loki returned to the Tower he had done a lot of thinking, which was why the moment he saw Shiarpia he went up to her and demanded, in a low tone, that she come with him somewhere private to talk.

“You betrayed me.” Loki said bluntly the moment they were alone.

“I know.” She said. “I’m sorry.”

“You have no better reason to live than those poor women, one of them was a maid who barely knew anything about the resistance, she was torn to death and here you stand.” Loki hissed.

Shiarpia nodded, her face was sad. “Do you want me to confess?” She asked softly. “I deserve it, I know I do, those people were my friends.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “Well you betrayed me when I was supposed to be your friend so why not them too?” He snapped.

Shiarpia started to cry. “I didn’t think twice about it when they asked me to get close to you.” She said. “I thought you would be like them, like *him*, just another stuck up royal with more power than sense. You weren’t, you were normal and nice, and Uncle Fosxyr told me to be careful around you because you were under a lot of strain. I like you Loki, I mean it, I never wanted to hurt you, even when I was trying to get information out of you about the King’s movements. Then when
Rohundia did what she did, oh I don’t know! I knew I couldn’t do the same! I knew that you were not how I thought at all. You didn’t deserve to be attacked like that, attacked at all! I’m sorry Loki, you have no idea how sorry.”

“Daenceia said that you joined for reasons of your own.” Loki said. “You’re not poor, you’re weren’t desperate, why did you do it?”

She hugged her arms around herself. “I did it to destroy him, after what he did, he tore my family into pieces, nothing was the same after he killed the queen. Uncle Fosxyr smiles all the time but never with his eyes, and my father sees that and tries to help but he can’t. I heard them yelling at each other after the King killed her, father stopped Uncle Fosxyr from doing something stupid, I know that much, but Uncle Fosxyr’s never really forgiven him for it either. Our whole family is a mess because of the greed of the King. I wanted to kill him, I still wish I could. Maybe then they can find peace.”

Loki wondered what it must have been like to watch the queen, who you had served for years, being taken to die, Fosxyr do something stupid? It seemed impossible, but then the servant never really spoke about himself that much, servant’s didn’t. He may have the same fire in him that Shiarpia did, but Loki was sure that he’d never see it.

“I can’t trust you.” He said. “But for Fosxyr’s sake I will not condemn you either. We are not friends anymore Shiarpia, but know that I will mourn the loss.”

She nodded slowly, tears still present on her cheeks. “Please thank Prince Musleen for me.” She said. “Tell him I am glad I got the chance to know him and his brother.”

Loki nodded. “I’ll tell him.” He said.

They parted ways that day, and did not speak again for a long time.
Sixty Five Steps

Chapter Summary

Planned Progress

The trial had done wonders for King Dimcken’s sex drive, in that he had been far too occupied to think about having any sex. But with the trial over and the executions taken care of, he once again requested Loki’s presence after dinner.

Thankfully, it was not anything ‘special’. King Dimcken lay on top of Loki and thrust slowly but steadily into his body. Loki for his part tried to look accepting while he waited for it to be over.

“You are angry with me.” King Dimcken panted above him.

Loki blinked in surprise.

“No Husband.” He said.

“Ugh, yes you are. You, ugh, did not like that I executed those women.”

Loki tried to think of an appropriate response. It was quite hard to do with the King’s penis sliding back and forth.

“I had hoped to teach them the error of their ways.” He said at last.

“Ugh, yes, I know, but my darling, ugh, they are commoners, they cannot be taught, ugh.” King Dimcken replied. He was having trouble talking as he neared his climax.

“Surely, ah, some commoners are trustworthy.” Loki said, trying not to yelp when the King shifted to a new angle.

“A very few, ugh, my darling, ooh, you care too much.”

“Care too much?” Loki asked. The King’s rhythm was becoming less steady.

“Ooooh yes, far too caring for the lower classes, ugh, ooh, ahh.”

King Dimcken panted his way to completion and paused above Loki to catch his breath.

“You wanted… to save… those women… and… that serving boy… and… wasn’t there a kitten?”

“The baby Alpec?” Loki asked, wishing that King Dimcken would remove himself and roll to the side.

“Yes… that’s it. You need… something to care for. You need… a baby.”

“A baby.” Loki exclaimed in surprise. “I don’t-“

“It will give you something… to focus your care towards. It will settle you Loki, you need to… settle. You will tell me the next time… you are fertile, and I will give you a baby.”
Loki fought to keep the horror from his face, a baby was the last thing he wanted.

“Husband.” He began as King Dimcken finally pulled out and rolled off him.

“No arguments Loki, you will be a perfect mother. A baby will give you something to fuss over and care for. Besides, I’d like to see you with a waddle in your step.” At that statement King Dimcken reached over and rubbed Loki’s taut belly. “You’d look beautiful like that.” He said and sighed in contentment. “Promise me you will tell me.”

“Yes Husband.” Loki whispered.

Inside he vowed to drink nothing but the preventative tea for the whole month. There was no way that he was having a baby, not with King Dimcken. He couldn’t have that, perhaps the King would forget about it in time? There was always the hope of that too.

Loki had troubled thoughts for hours after King Dimcken fell asleep. He couldn’t concentrate on his books at all, he wanted to find out if there was a spell that could prevent conception, something that was more subtle than the tea, but there was no way to find out without asking someone else, and that way could lead back to King Dimcken.

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A few months later, at the height of winter, the royal family went skiing.

Loki was having the time of his life up on the slopes. Musleen and Camtan were both expert skiers, as were Lyrren and Octir. Dorgen was not, and fell over even on the easy slopes. King Dimcken was quite skilled, although he wore out easily, and he would roll his eyes at his eldest son.

“You take after your mother.” He said one day when Dorgen slipped yet again.

“Yes Father, I know.” He replied dryly as he struggled in vain to get to his feet.

Sofftia turned out to be one of the best skiers in the group.

“I grew up on the ice slopes on the far side of these mountains.” She explained. The activity had given her cheeks a healthy glow and her smile was infectious. “I met Camtan on those slopes.”

“I got lost.” Camtan said cheerfully. “There was a storm coming, and I was going to freeze to death, I had even accepted it, when out of the snow came the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. It was her father, coming to rescue me.”

Sofftia started to laugh.

“He hauled me back to their manner and Sofftia nursed me back to health.” Camtan finished. “I asked her to come to court after a few years of writing soggy letters.”

“They weren’t soggy when I wrote them.” Sofftia said cheerfully. “And yours were always frozen.”

“Still, it made it difficult to understand one another, so she came to court, and never left.” Camtan finished.

“I left all the time.” Sofftia said. “It was eight more years before I stopped going home every year.”

“You have ruined my perfect ending.” Camtan complained loudly. “It was a fairy tale until you did that.”
Loki was grinning at them both. “It’s still a wonderful story.” He said.

They looked at one another with love in their eyes. “You know, if you’d gone west instead of your father you would have been the one to find me.” Camtan said. “That makes a better tale again.”

“If I’d found you I may not have had the strength to carry you back and our tale would have died right there.” Sofftia replied. “You cannot underestimate the cold on the far mountains, men who have grown up there have died suddenly when the wind strikes up.”

“I know that lesson well now.” Camtan said, wrapping his arms around her. “I will never be so foolish as to strike out on my own up there, I promise.”

“Well this has been very depressing.” Musleen said flatly. “Let’s go and warm up with hot milk and chocolate.”

There was general agreement, and the party made its way back to the winter lodge where they were staying.

King Dimcken wanted sex that night. He gave Loki the impression of trying to make up for lost time, although there were days when he would exhaust himself too much to do anything that night.

Tonight was not one of those nights. He kissed and nuzzled and petted and stroked as Loki tried hard to stay still and endure it. He was good at staying still by now, good at faking his willingness, although not his enthusiasm, but even so, it never got any easier.

Then there was the fact that the internal walls in the lodge were not as thick as normal walls. It helped the heat to circulate inside, but it also meant that the following morning no one would look Loki in the eye. They all knew what he and the King had been doing. Of course, in theory they all knew anyway, but ‘knowing’ and ‘hearing’ were two different things.

Up on the slopes that day Musleen suggested a cross country ski for the morning. It wasn’t until all the others declined, including the King, that Loki realised why he’d done it.

They spent several hours making their way across the snow-filled terrain. They did not speak of what everyone had heard the night before, not until it was half over and they were as far as they could be from the lodge and the King.

“You’re a lot stronger than I am Loki.” Musleen said quietly. “Even so, if I could have married you instead I would have, to keep you from him.”

“I thank you for the thought.” Loki said. “But you must trust me that this is best, for one day you can have your dancer, and I can go home to Asgard.”

They shared a small, identical, smile, each of them thinking of a still distant future.

“We’ll get there.” Musleen said quietly. “We’ll get there.”

The ski trip finished a few days later and was deemed a success all around. The only one who was happy to see it end was Fosxyr, who had spent his time bundled up at the lodge making everyone hot drinks and puddings. King Dimcken had laughed at him in his furs but the servant had politely endured it rather than disrobe. He hated the cold far too much for that.

“I’ll have to send Wraenyr with you next year.” He said as he tucked Loki into bed back at the palace. “He likes the cold, he never seems to suffer in winter.”
“I’ll miss you.” Loki said. “No one makes hot chocolate like you do.”

“I am flattered Your Grace, but you’ll just have to do without me.” Fosxyr insisted. “I was not built for the cold.”

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In the following years Musleen rooted out and eliminated the remaining rebels. Most already fled to the far reaches of the realm, with their ability to hide destroyed there was no safe place in the capital for them.

Loki finished his primary studies and began studying new subjects under new teachers. He branched out into healing, summoning, teleportation, and took advanced transmutation, learning to turn inanimate objects into living creatures.

He was very good at snakes.

Daenceia remained at the Tower to complete her studies. Loki had offered to pay for her after the collapse of the rebels, but she told him in a shy voice that someone had already taken care of it.

Thainia qualified as a healer, and, with Loki’s urging, remained to study the more advanced surgical magics.

Loki and Shiarpia did not talk. She finished her studies after her tenth year and left the Tower to go and work alongside her parents, enchanting the cloths and clothes that they imported and made. Fosxyr did not mention her to Loki, and Loki did not ask about her.

He missed her though, sometimes.

Loki was in his eighteenth year of study when King Dimcken announced that the entire royal court was to go on Progress through the kingdom.

“Loki hasn’t seen it yet, and he’s been here nearly twenty years.” He said at dinner. “I have planned a great journey through the lands of all the high lords and a number of the lower ones.”

“The court hasn’t been on Progress for over two centuries.” Dorgen said. “It is about time it was done again.”

King Dimcken looked surprised that his eldest son agreed with him on something, but he did not draw attention to it.

“I have planned our path already, we will be gone for just over eighty years, and will arrive back in time for our one hundredth anniversary.”

Loki’s face did not betray any shock, but inside his heart was hammering. It was such a long time to be traveling, would he be sharing a bedroom with King Dimcken every night?

“That sounds wonderful.” He said instead.

King Dimcken beamed with happiness.

“Of course we will not start until you have finished your current studies, Horseen said that you would be done in two more years.” King Dimcken said. “But we will go immediately afterwards. It will take that long to organise the messenger trails and such, so it is no bother.”

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said quickly. He’d been worried that his magic studies would be
disregarded.

“I want you all to come with us of course.” King Dimcken said. “The people need to see us; they need to know that we are strong after that terrible business with the rebels.”

“They are gone now Father, the people know that.” Musleen said calmly.

“Yes, yes, but they must never think of doing such things again.” King Dimcken said pointedly. “We must show them our strength.”

“Of course Father.” Musleen said. “And the nobles?”

“They will also need to see our strength.” King Dimcken said, a little darkly. “We cannot have them, any of them, doing what that woman did. Lord Eveilyr assures me that she was rogue from her family for years before she was found out, but *I* know I saw her at several feasts not long before she was killed during the raid. Nobles must not grow too strong my boys, otherwise they get notions, like they could rule our realm. That is not to be tolerated.”

“Will we be visiting Lord Eveilyr’s lands first?” Camtan asked.

“No. Our route is logical and methodical, but we will stay with him the longest, and use up most of his coin. He will spend years recovering his losses.” King Dimcken said with a smile. “He will keep the rest of his kin in line after that.”

“It sounds splendid Father. We shall make our arrangements and be ready to leave when Loki’s studies are completed.” Musleen said with a smile.
Chapter Summary

Arrangements

There was an awful lot to do to prepare for the Progress. Each of the Princes had arrangements to make. Dorgen saw to his finances and how to split his household, as Mulmyr wasn’t coming. He arranged to have his more public messages sent via the royal courier service that King Dimcken was setting up, but also arranged a private one for personal letters and business.

Musleen had the most to do. He had to leave someone he trusted in charge of the city guard, and the justice hearings. His spy network had to adapt to his ever changing address, and his own household had to be organised for the long road ahead.

Camtan and Soffitia had to arrange a nurse and a nanny for Roaseia who didn’t mind constantly being on the move. They had a mountain of things to pack just for their baby, and had to arrange for an extra cart to go with them.

Loki spent months working out his side of things. He was to take Femtchyr and Fosxyr with him, leaving Canrryen and Wraenyr at the palace.

“Don’t forget to keep my leathers supple.” Loki reminded Wraenyr for the thousandth time. His Aesir clothes were one of a very few pieces of home that he had, and it mattered far more than it should that they be taken care of. Thankfully the leather was from the Asgard herds, and lasted a very long time when properly cared for.

Wraenyr bowed to him while trying not to smile.

“I will Your Grace, I promise.” He said.

Loki normally did them himself, he took joy in keeping them well maintained, and sometimes at night would dream of dressing in them when he finally got to go home.

Then there was his scholarship. Every year he chose one, or sometimes even two, talented commoners to attend the Tower. He couldn’t do that while on Progress, and it was important that his program continue.

Loki spent days deciding what to do about it all.

“It needs to be someone who can see talent.” He said to Fosxyr as he sat curled up in an enormous chair one evening. “Someone who won’t dismiss an applicant because their clothes are dirty or their past is spotty.”

“I’m sure you will find just the right person for the job.” Fosxyr said calmly. “Someone with experience schooling young things in the ways of magic I’ve no doubt.”

“Someone with the same sort of background would be good.” Loki said. “They’ll know what to look for.”
“You will have a hard time finding them; they’re all still too young.” Fosxyr said.

“Not all of them.” Loki said with a smile.

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“Me?” Daenceia said with wide eyes. “Oh Loki I couldn’t, I don’t even know what I’m doing myself half the time, and you want me to judge others?”

“Why not? You know what to look for, and the first step is simply to prove they have talent, *that* test is taken care of by the use of crystals, you only have to interview the ones who succeed.”

Daenceia still looked frightened. “It’s such a huge responsibility.” She said. “What if I ruin it?”

“You’ll be fine, please say yes.” Loki asked.

“Can Thainia help me?” She asked him.

“Of course she can, that would be a great idea, then the two of you can discuss it.” Loki said.

“I still don’t feel right about it, who am I to say who has talent and drive enough to succeed?” Daenceia said.

“I’d have asked Sheiftyr, but she’s still out of favour with the King.” Loki said. “I can’t give her such an honour.”

“Now it’s an *honour*?” Daenceia asked with her eyes like saucers. “I can’t Loki, I just…” She broke off and thought about it. “Can Sheiftyr help me if no one knows that she did?” She asked.

Loki thought about it.

“I suppose so, but it *must* remain a secret.” He said. “The guards shouldn’t be a problem—“

“Oh no, Toanyen and Staeveen are alright.” Daenceia said dismissively. She blushed at Loki’s look. “They work for Prince Musleen, sometimes I would deliver my messages to them.” She said, a blush spreading all over her face. “I still make reports about the lower city sometimes, when I hear something troubling, and… and Prince Musleen arranged for Toanyen to teach me some self-defence in the training yards sometimes.”

“Daenceia.” Loki said, trying not to grin. “I think you have a crush.”

She shut her eyes and slumped her head into her arms on the table. “In all my life I never wanted to be this obvious.” She moaned. “Toanyen and Staeveen tease me about it all the time. He’s very… very stern and strong, but so honourable.” She clamped her hand over her mouth and looked up at where Loki sat. “Don’t you breathe a word.” She gasped. “Not one word, he’s far above me, far too noble and, and, and perfect.”

Loki bit his lip in an effort to keep from laughing.

“But Daenceia, he can’t dance.” He said with his best serious expression.

“Yes he can.” She said confidently, before trying to hide her face again. “He just doesn’t get any practice and *stop talking about him*.”

“You keep yourself out of trouble.” Loki said. “Focus on magic and dancing.”
"I should try to find someone else.” She said. “That way I will forget about him.”

“Magic and dancing.” Loki repeated firmly. “That will see you right, I promise.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll award your scholarship for you, but you give terrible relationship advice.” She said.

Loki said nothing, as tempting as it was no one could risk anything while the King still lived.

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The worst news Loki received in relation to the Progress was that his grandparents couldn’t come.

They were not a part of the royal court, like most nobles who lived in the palace they rented their rooms and managed their business from the city but officially they had to place, and if they wanted to come would have to pay their own way, which wasn’t always possible.

“Lord Coaffeety hates me.” Lord Fallconyr said bluntly. “Because no one wanted to drink that disgustingly bitter stuff he tried to sell them. My teas dominate the marketplace. I was happy to let him try his best, but if the product is bad then there is no saving it, people can’t be *made* to drink crap.”

Lord Eadgleyr suppressed a smile. “I think it had more to do with the fact that you spat it out in front of him.” He pointed out.

“I didn’t *mean* to, he should have warned me that it was so bitter. I did say it would be good in milk, the way chocolate is. Is it *my* fault no one took me up on my suggestion?” Lord Fallconyr asked, turning in appeal to where Loki sat trying not to laugh.

“Maybe Loki will get a chance to try it on his travels.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “He can have the deciding vote.”

“What vote? Everyone is free to like or hate the vile stuff as they choose.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Loki took a sip of his tea, nodded in approval to his grandfather, who returned the gesture, and asked a question that had been on his mind for some time.

“I was wondering, while I’m on Progress it will be very hard to continue monitoring the heterwart trade. It’s going well, but the scholarship relies on it, so I can’t let it start to fail. What do you do when you have to go away for a time?”

“I have a number of very capable and trustworthy children.” Lord Fallconyr said. “You can borrow one if you wish, I’m sure there’s at least one who would like to stay here, in fact Smiartyr was just complaining last night that he doesn’t want to go on Progress, but as a member of the King’s household he must. We might be able to swap him out for someone else.”

“Such a simple plan.” Lord Eadgleyr said dryly.

“Simple enough, we contribute two representatives to the King’s household, as do all nobles, *who* they are is up to us, within reason. I will see if someone else wants to go on a long adventure, and Smiartyr can stay here and take care of your trade. He’ll send you reports monthly, or even weekly, if you prefer.”

“If you could ask the others if they would be willing then that would be wonderful.” Loki said. “I will ask Uncle Smiartyr if he minds taking over the business for me while I’m gone. He certainly
seemed very competent all the times I’ve met him.”

“He takes after me.” Lord Eadgleyr said a split second before Lord Fallconyr said the same thing. They shared a laugh.

“Now Loki, you may always write to us, you know that, and if we can come and visit you we will. I will send you some of your favourite teas so that you always have a fresh supply, the far reaches of the realm do not always have the best quality.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “And be sure to take good care of yourself when you reach the cold areas, the snows can be quite hazardous, oh, and be careful around the volcano.”

“Volcano?” Loki asked, his eyes lighting up.

“Don’t you dare look excited child, the volcano is not to be played with. It erupts every few years and spills ash and lava… you’re getting more excited by the minute aren’t you?”

“How can I do otherwise? I’ve always wanted to see an active volcano. I never even realised that Vanaheim *had* an active volcano.” Loki said. “Do you have any idea how powerful the lava stones can be if captured at just the right time? And they say that volcanoes make stones that float, *float*.”

“Yes, and you can buy them at the grand market every year.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

“It’s not the same.” Loki protested.

Lord Fallconyr winked at him. “I climbed the volcano once.” He said.

Lord Eadgleyr whirled. “Don’t you dare tell him that story, you almost *died*.”

“Of course, all good stores have a little terror. His Majesty, our friend Biallyr and I climbed up one fine day to the very top so as to see the lava as it rolled about in the crater. We had just reached the edge when the land shook all around us. We only managed the slightest glimpse before we had to turn tale and run, of course we were never going to make it back down in time, it’s an all day hike! But I created a raincloud and poured rain down onto the lava as it flowed towards us, the first part cooled, which slowed down the next wave, which also cooled. Each layer kept cooling on top of the last one which is why there is now a spot called ‘Fallconyr's Peak’. It looks like a lookout point, very nice aspect too.”

“Honestly.” Lord Eadgleyr mumbled.

“Of course I couldn’t keep it up all the way down, but the rescue party was already on its way in the flying craft. They pulled us to safety and took us back down to the lodge where we were staying. We had a drink and laughed about it.”

“And of course you did.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “You were terrible in your youth.”

“Says the man who once rode over the top of the Falls of the Spritefolk in nothing but a primitive raft just to prove that our ancestor ‘could have’ done it. You broke both your legs.”

“The experiment needed tweaking.” Lord Eadgleyr said while blushing slightly. “Besides, I’ve settled, you haven’t. If it weren’t for your leg you would have driven me to an early grave by now with worry.”

“I cannot help that you were born a worrier. You must take responsibility for your own actions my love.” Lord Fallconyr teased.
“I wish Thor could meet you both.” Loki said suddenly. “He’d love you.”

They both went quiet for a moment.

“There is no reason why he cannot visit us, we can go to Niflheim for example and meet him there after you have left on Progress.” Lord Fallconyr said softly. “If we had a way to contact him.”

“Perhaps Frigga?” Lord Eadgleyr asked.

“From what I have heard our other Aesir grandson does not write often and rarely stays in one place for long.” Lord Fallconyr said. “She does not know where to contact him.”

“Heimdall will know. He sees everything, you can guarantee that he’d keeping a watch on the Crown Prince of Asgard.” Loki said.

“Will he help us?” Lord Fallconyr asked.

Loki looked up out of habit. “Heimdall? Will you deliver a message to Thor? His grandparents would like the chance to meet him, if it is possible.”

They looked at one another when he was done.

“How do we know if it has worked?” Lord Fallconyr asked.

“You’ll get a letter from Thor.” Loki said. “I’m afraid Heimdall is not an exact science.”

“Still, it is better than nothing.” Lord Eadgleyr said.

“Yes.” Loki agreed, privately aching at the thought that they would be able to see what he himself could not for centuries yet.
Chapter Summary

Musings of a Servant, and Good News for the Progress

Chapter Notes

Just to let you know that there is a non-con scene in this part, sort of two thirds of the way through it. Nothing terribly graphic but you've been warned regardless.

Loki was facing off against Musleen in the training yard. They were both carrying a knife in each hand and were circling each other with serious expressions. Neither one was willing to move first and they were both too skilled to leave the other an easy opening.

“You’ve been staring at each other for three minutes now without striking.” Camtan called from the sidelines.

He was lazing on the arena steps as he waited his turn. His sword was lying next to him.

“My weapons will rust before you two make a move.” He called out.

Neither Loki nor Musleen acknowledged him, they were too focussed on one another.

“There’s a naked woman on the higher steps.” Camtan tried.

Nothing.

He sighed and settled into his slouch some more. He had a feeling that it was going to be a long fight.

“Your Grace, I never taught you to sit like that.” Said a familiar and welcome voice from behind him.

Camtan turned and grinned up at Fosxyr.

“How are you today my long-suffering friend?” He asked, gesturing to the seat beside him.

Fosxyr sat down carefully and sat very straight, a servant in the presence of his masters.

“I am well, very well. The sun is shining and the day is warm.” He said. “It is good for my old bones.”

“You’re not even close to old Fosxyr.” Camtan said cheerfully. “You’re a young man still.”

“Old enough to have raised you.” Fosxyr pointed out. “Let me age, Sunbeam, if I choose to.”

Camtan chuckled. “You haven’t called me that in a long time.” He said. “I miss it.”
“If I recall correctly you hated it for a few years.” Fosxyr said.

“Only because Musleen got Moonlight, I thought that was a much better pet name.” Camtan said. “More mysterious.”

“More serious.” Fosxyr corrected. He frowned at the two fighters in the ring. “Aren’t they meant to move?”

“Eventually. Loki will win. He has a lot of patience. Musleen does too, which is why they’re taking so long about it, but when it comes to knives Loki always wins. He’s *very* good at them.” Camtan said. “I want to have a go against him with my sword though, he is quick, but I think I can take him.”

“As long as you three don’t hurt yourselves.” Fosxyr said.

“You never stop worrying about us, do you Fox?” Camtan said affectionately.

“It’s been forever and a day since you last called me that.” Fosxyr said, smiling with the memory.

“I wanted to ask you something actually.” Camtan said, sitting up straighter. “I was going to come to you in a little while, when Loki no longer needs you.”

Fosxyr tilted his head in question. “Oh? And what were you going to ask me?” He said.

“When Roaseia is old enough to begin lessons, will you teach her? You were the best of all our tutors; I cannot imagine anyone who would do such a good a job as you.” Camtan said.

A smile broke out on Fosxyr’s face. “I would be honoured.” He said, and turned his head away to look at the two fighters again.

“Are you crying?” Camtan asked.

“No.” Fosxyr said, blinking heavily. “The sun is in my eyes.”

“Of course it is.” Camtan said. “The fact that it’s behind us is irrelevant.”

“You do me a great honour Your Grace, I am mindful of it.” Fosxyr said, turning back to him with a smile. “When Loki returns to Asgard you will have me at your disposal.”

“Do you think he’ll need you for all his time?” Camtan asked him.

“I think if I am not present he will need some very good friends.” Fosxyr replied.

In the arena, Musleen finally lunged. Loki caught his knives and forced him upwards, twisting around as fast as lightning to push him forwards. Musleen spun and countered very effectively, forcing Loki back, only to be thrown over Loki’s shoulder in a surprise move and land in the dirt.

“Finally.” Camtan called out, climbing to his feet. “You could have just attacked him straight off, it would have had the same ending.”

“Quiet you.” Musleen grumbled as he climbed to his feet. “Or I’ll fight you next and toss you in the dirt.”

Loki grinned at them both broadly. “Who wants to try me now?” He asked.

“Me, but we’ll use the swords. They’re kind of like big knives so I’m sure you won’t have any trouble.” Camtan teased.
Fosxyr stayed on the seat in the sun and watched as the three of them sparred away the afternoon.

****

It was much later, and the official tally stood at Camtan: 4 wins, 4 losses, Musleen: 6 wins, 2 losses, Loki: 7 wins, 1 loss. They were tired and soaked in sweat, but happy and relaxed as they made their way through the yard to the armoury to replace the training weapons.

A squadron of horses rode by, the group stood carefully out of the way and watched as the men rode in.

“They’re astride.” Loki commented.

“They’re in the army.” Musleen said. “Just returned from Asgard by the looks of it. They’ll get back into the swing of things soon enough.”

“By the swing of things you mean side-on riding.” Loki said.

“Of course. Astride is for battle, side-on is for pleasure.” Camtan said as they continued on their way.

“I’d like to ride astride again.” Loki said. “Just for fun.”

“I cannot imagine why.” Camtan said, fighting a yawn. “How do you not spend most of the time worrying about your manhood? At least in battle there are people trying to kill you, I can see why you would not be troubled with the question then, but the rest of the time? It would certainly trouble me.”

Loki laughed. “There’s a technique to it, once you have that then you do not need to worry about it.” He said.

They replaced the training weapons and parted ways to wash and change for dinner.

Loki took his time over his bath, relaxing with his eyes closed in the hot water and moaning in contentment.

“Would Your Grace like a massage for his muscles?” Fosxyr asked from somewhere above him.

Loki opened his eyes and found the servant.

“Do I have to get out?” He asked.

“Sadly yes Your Grace, but Wraenyr is at your service if you choose.” Fosxyr said, sitting down at the edge of the bath and reaching for a bowl. “Femtchyr says that your Uncle Smiartyr came by earlier. He was hoping to talk about the hetewart trade. Apparently he’s going to be overseeing things while you are gone?”

“Yes.” Loki said, sitting up. “Did he say if he’ll be back?”

“His message said that he would try again tomorrow, Femtchyr told him where you were, but apparently he did not wish to disturb your time with the Princes.” Fosxyr said.

“Hopefully I’ll be here when he calls tomorrow, if not then send someone to fetch me, the trade is
important, I don’t mind being disturbed.” Loki said.

“As you wish Your Grace.” Fosxyr said.

Loki stayed in the hot water for a little while longer before he decided that a massage would be worth climbing out after all.

“I’ve got just enough time before dinner.” He commented.

“Indeed Your Grace, I will make your clothes ready while you relax.” Fosxyr said. “His Majesty has sent you a new present, a set of fine cuffs, which you can wear tonight.”

“Oh, yes, thank you Fosxyr.” Loki said. “I’m sure they’re lovely.”

Fosxyr raised an eyebrow but did not comment. Loki turned and shot a nervous look at Wraenyr.

“Have you seen them?” He asked as he lay down on the massage table.

“Yes Your Grace.” Wraenyr said calmly. “They are very decorative.”

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They were disgusting. They were *covered* in glittering jewels, enough to decorate several pieces at least, and the reflection they gave off was what distracting became when it had really honed its skill for several centuries.

Loki stared at them in horror.

“Did he choose them himself?” He asked.

“I believe so Your Grace.” Fosxyr said. “The emeralds are particularly fine, and the diamonds are exceptional.”

“Yes, there’s nothing wrong with a good emerald, and diamonds always provide such a lovely shine.” Loki said in a faraway voice. “It’s the rubies, garnets, sapphires, opals and peridots that seem to be getting in the way of that.”

“Also topaz.” Fosxyr said with a hint of mischief in his voice. “Is that an amethyst?”

“Stop it.” Loki said, trying not to giggle. “They’re very colourful, very, very colourful. That’s all. I should wear dark greys to help, um…”

“Show them off to best effect?” Fosxyr suggested. “Oh look some aquamarine.”

Loki started to laugh. “Just help me put them on.” He said.

Fosxyr helped him line the patterns up so that they matched evenly on the top of his wrists and clipped them closed. “They look very fine Your Grace.” He said.

Loki rolled his eyes.

“What is it Your Grace?” Fosxyr asked as he caught the look.

“Nothing.” Loki said with put-upon weariness. “I’ve just spotted some topaz.”
Half an hour later, Loki sat in the King’s chambers and thanked his husband for the gift. He managed to sound flattered and thrilled as around the table, the other members of the family reacted with varying levels of horror.

“They must have been very expensive.” Camtan said, trying to keep a straight face.

“Very.” King Dimcken said, oblivious to the true emotions of his sons and grandsons. “I designed them myself.”

“And how much exactly did you waste on them?” Dorgen asked bluntly.

King Dimcken glared at him. “Given that it’s *my* treasury, I don’t see how that is any concern of yours.” He snapped.

“It’s not even his birthday, or any special day.” Dorgen protested. “Will you bankrupt the realm for the sake of spoiling your wife?”

Musleen jerked slightly and Dorgen fought to keep a wince off his face. Loki suspected that he’d been kicked, and not gently.

“I will do as I choose.” King Dimcken said. “If I want to spoil Loki then that is *my* decision. You would do well to remember who is king around here.”

Dorgen narrowed his eyes and looked at Loki. “I have not forgotten Father, and neither has *anyone* else. He said.

King Dimcken huffed angrily. “You should all go.” He said. “I am in no mood to continue dinner tonight. Blame Dorgen. Loki you stay.”

Loki sat and watched everyone else file out. He tried to look grateful for his present.

“Are you sure you like them?” King Dimcken asked him the second they were alone.

“I do Husband, very much.” Loki lied. “There are so many colours that they could go with anything, I need never have another set.”

King Dimcken frowned. “There are rather a lot of colours on there.” He said. “You shouldn’t have only one set, that will never do, they will say that I am miserly toward you. No, I will have the stones taken out and set into many different cuffs, so that they will know how I care for you.”

Loki looked down at the monstrosities adorning his wrists. “If you are certain Husband.” He said. “But you do not have to, these are very fine.”

“No, they are not good enough, I see that now. You need more than one set, of course you do. I want you to show off your beauty. How can you do that to best effect if you wear the same old things every day? I will have them changed.”

“As you wish Husband.” Loki said, trying to keep his face neutral and not sigh with relief.

“Come to bed.” King Dimcken said. “I will have you wear them for me tonight.”

Loki supressed his fear and disgust and followed King Dimcken into the bedroom.
“I’ve been thinking about you all day.” King Dimcken murmured into Loki’s ear as he pushed him down onto the bed. “I almost called for you at lunchtime, but there was so much to do to make ready for the Progress that I could not. I want to touch you.”

Loki forced himself to remain calm as King Dimcken pulled off his robes and ran bony fingers down his flanks. It should have gotten easier with time, letting the man paw at him like this, but it hadn’t. He felt like a whore as he spread his legs in response to the King’s touch.

“You look so beautiful.” King Dimcken said admiringly. “I knew the second I saw you that I wanted you.”

Loki thought back to the King’s visit on Asgard all those years ago, if only he had been ill that night, his life would be so different now, so much *better*.

“You hair, your eyes, so exotic.” King Dimcken mumbled as he lavished kisses against Loki’s ear and jaw.

“Thank you Husband.” Loki forced out as he stared at the ceiling above him.

He was well acquainted with that ceiling by now, having spent so many nights tracing each little feature with his eyes as he was forced to endure the King’s attentions. There were naked people frolicking all over it. They all looked delighted to be there.

‘Bastards.’ Loki thought furiously.

“Your skin is so smooth, and yet so soft. I love the feel of it, I love *you*.” King Dimcken continued.

His fingers had reached Loki’s vagina and were rubbing back and forth in preparation for entry.

‘Liar.’ Loki thought. The King didn’t *love* him, the King wanted something pretty to mount and rut into. It was a sad, unfortunate fact that Loki looked exactly like what he wanted.

“You flatter me Husband.” Loki said instead. “I will grow vain.”

“Why should you not be? You are wonderful, you must not pretend otherwise, not such a beauty as you. You should have the finest things, the best things. I will show you the best Vanahem has to offer, I will dazzle you.” King Dimcken promised, thrusting his fingers into Loki’s body. “I will spoil you.”

“You already have Husband.” Loki said quickly, trying not to let his feelings at being breached show in his voice. “I want for nothing.”

“Good, it pleases me that you are happy, but I will show you more. I will give you so much more.” King Dimcken said as he lined himself up and pushed into Loki’s body.

“I…I thank you Husband, you are very generous to me.” Loki gasped.

He hated this moment, when once again his body yielded to the King’s. It didn’t hurt anymore, it didn’t leave him tender or sore. It was a thing to be endured, survived, a trial of his spirit.

If he thought of it like that it didn’t seem as bad somehow, but perhaps that was just a lie he told himself to see through yet another night.

King Dimcken stepped talking, concentrating instead on his thrusting. Loki focussed back on the
ceiling. Soon he would have new ceilings to look at, for almost eighty years. It was a disturbing thought.

On the ceiling in his own chambers there was still a small burn mark from his dream of Thor. Sometimes when Loki felt especially lonely and lost, he would lie in bed at night and gaze at it. It made him feel as though Thor was nearby somehow. He would be without that for eighty years too.

King Dimcken worked himself up and released with a shudder. Loki lay still as he rolled to the side and caught his breath.

“I’ve been thinking.” King Dimcken said when he was calmer. “About how we should farewell this room before we leave.”

Loki felt terror seize him. Another ‘special’ night. There had not been too many of them lately.

“I want you to dance for me.” King Dimcken said.

Loki blinked and turned his head to look at the King.

“Dance?” He asked.

King Dimcken smirked as he reached over and slid his hand across Loki’s chest and belly. “Yes, I would like to see you dance *just for me*. Something… slow and teasing.”

On the far side of King Dimcken, where his hand could not be seen, Loki pinched his fingers together. It was a movement he made when he wanted to remind himself not to lose control.

“Of course Husband, I will dance for you.” He said.

Was it his imagination or did the words sound strange as he forced them out? Like his mouth and his mind were trying to do two different things?

Regardless, King Dimcken did not notice. He grinned widely and gave Loki’s chest another little rub. “I look forward to it, in fact I have just the clothing for you to wear. You can put it on before we start.”

“As you wish.” Loki said.

It was no use protesting that he didn’t know how to dance ‘teasingly’, and there was no way he’d ask anyone for help. The very thought of asking Daenceia made him want to vomit, she’d seen enough of his treatment at the hands of the King as it was. He would just have to do his best and hope that King Dimcken was not disappointed.

*That* though was the most disgusting of all.

King Dimcken fell asleep not long afterwards, and Loki had a few hours to himself in the living area. When they were on Progress and had to share a bedroom he thought that he would come to rely on these hours to himself, and he cherished every one.

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The next day Loki finished his final lesson at the Tower. It was a sad moment, and he said goodbye
to a lot of friends from his many classes. Thainia gave him a hug and wished him well. Daenceia gave him a small carved statue of a dancer in mid-twirl.

“It is the dancer’s talisman of luck.” She said. “May your feet be ever sure and your movements ever graceful. Come and see me when you get back.”

“I will.” Loki said, giving her a hug. “I will write too, don’t forget to reply.”

“As though I would.” She huffed, but she was smiling. They were both sad at his going.

Loki returned in a sombre mood. He had enjoyed studying at the Tower, the ‘classroom’ lessons had been fun, once he got the hang of it, and he’d finally sorted out his essay problem, with Shiarpia’s help.

He found himself wondering about her. He hadn’t seen her in years, ever since she’d completed her primary studies and had not gone any further.

Loki shook his head and told himself that it didn’t matter. She wasn’t his friend anymore, that he had made perfectly clear.

He rode into the palace yard and to the stables, where he dismounted. To his surprise and delight he found the reins being taken by Haewkyr.

“How are you Your Grace?” Haewkyr asked with a grin.

“I am well.” Loki said. “And what is with the ‘Your Grace’?”

“Well, I’m a member of the King’s household now.” Haewkyr said with a twinkle in his eye. “Going on Progress and everything, I have to be respectful.”

“*You’re* the new representative?” Loki asked, incredulous. “*You* hate the court.”

“I hate the palace.” Haewkyr corrected. “It’s not very nature friendly, what with the millennia of cobblestones and tamed gardens, but we are not staying in the palace, we are going on an adventure. How could I pass it up?”

Loki was grinning. “You’re really coming with me?” He asked. “Really?”

“Really.” Haewkyr said. “I have been given the job of Master of the Horse, which means I get to make sure they are fit and healthy for the duration of the journey. I have already made friends with the stable boys who will be going with us. It will be fun.”

“I am delighted to hear it.” Loki said. “I had no idea it would be you, our grandparents didn’t so much as hint at it.”

“They certainly made me promise not to do a rather large number of fun activities.” Haewkyr said. “I was looking forward to eight or nine of them, but such is the life of a Court Lord.” He sighed dramatically, then brightened. “Luckily, they didn’t think of a couple of them, so as they did not specifically ban those ones I will be attempting them as soon as we are underway, as that is what young people do when they have no guidance.”

Loki started laughing. “Of course, of course. It is our job, or so I was always led to believe.” He said.

“Quite.” Haewkyr said with a smile. “No more cats.” He said softly. “Or birds, I will be good.”

“Unfortunately I think that is best.” Loki said, equally quiet. “But there is no reason why we cannot
have fun regardless.”

“No, no reason.” Haewkyr said with a grin. “Now I shall see to your horse while you go and do Queen things.”

“You have no idea what I do all day, do you?” Loki asked as Haewkyr took the bridle.

“None whatsoever, but I’m sure it is important.” He said.

“Was that sarcasm I detected?” Loki asked.

“Of course not Your-Grace-Queen-Loki, I would never do such a thing to someone who can curse me as effectively as you can. You got quite a reputation about the city, your skills in seidr have not gone unnoticed.” Haewkyr said. “Neither has you generosity of spirit, or your merciful nature. Now go and queen something while I decide who the most skilled stable boy is.”

Loki walked away while shaking his head. “Queen something.” He muttered under his breath with a smile.

Was it possible that he would actually enjoy parts of the Progress? With Musleen, Camtan and Haewkyr around he was beginning to think that it wouldn’t be so bad after all.
Sixty Eight Steps

Chapter Summary

A Visitor

The carts were packed. The nobles were waiting. The servants were exhausted. It was almost time to leave. Loki lay in bed with a nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach. They were leaving the day after tomorrow, and tomorrow night he would have to dance for the King.

The thought made him feel sick inside. Was there no limit to the King’s perversions?

He tried to imagine dancing for Thor but couldn’t even fathom it. Of course Thor wouldn’t ask him for such ridiculous things. Would he?

Loki bit his lip and rolled over restlessly. Normally he pushed thoughts of the future to the back of his mind, because they were far too painful to dwell on when they were still so far away. But the thought that Thor would ask him to do the things that King Dimcken had was troubling.

He couldn’t. His anus? No, never. Mouth? He couldn’t imagine how that could be anything other than humiliating. Costumes? Surely Thor wouldn’t need such vile things to enjoy sex. Object? The very thought made Loki moan in distress and turn again, trying to escape his memories. And now this new request, the dancing. It made him feel sick inside. Thor wouldn’t want that, Thor would be gentle and kind, Thor would hold him tightly, but not so tight that he couldn’t move if he wanted to. Thor would be perfect.

What if he wasn’t?

Loki pressed his face into his pillow to hide the tears that began to fall down his face.

What if Thor wanted all of that stuff?! Could Loki even do it? His time with King Dimcken was torture, he didn’t want to feel the same way when he was with Thor.

His grandmother had said that it was fun when you loved them, was it possible that he could *enjoy* himself doing those things with Thor?

What if he couldn’t. What if all those things were normal and Loki was the one who was broken, ruined by King Dimcken’s poisonous touch?

What would Thor think of him?

It was these thoughts that haunted Loki into the early hours of the morning, when exhaustion finally claimed him.

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The following morning Loki was irritable at breakfast. Fosxyr shot him a questioning look but did not pry. Loki ate only a little and stomped off to his bathing room in a bad mood. He wanted to break something, shatter something into a millions pieces so that he could *see* the way he felt.

He splashed about dejectedly in the water. There was no joy for him this morning. He knew that his mood was not ideal, and that he would soon have to go out and be cheerful for the princes, Haewkyr and the public.

He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to do anything but stay inside and smash everything.

“Your Grace?” Fosxyr said quietly from the door. “You have a visitor.”

Loki shrugged his shoulders without turning around, he was still glaring out at the middle distance, his face reflecting the loathing he found inside of himself.

“It is your mother.” Fosxyr added.

Loki whirled so fast water went all over the floor.

“Mother?” He repeated. “How?”

“I understand that with your leaving on Progress soon His Majesty asked if she come might say goodbye.” Fosxyr said.

“King Dimcken asked that?” Loki asked. His expression was incredulous.

“It may have been suggested by a long-suffering servant, but you didn’t hear that.” Fosxyr said as he picked up the towel. “Getting out?”

“Yes.” Loki said, climbing out so fast he almost skidded on the tiles.

“Easy Your Grace, she’ll still be outside in a few minutes.” Fosxyr said, helping Loki to dry off.

Loki dressed in record time and practically ran to his living area where Frigga sat waiting with a cup of tea.

“Mother!” He exclaimed and threw himself into her arms.

“Oh Loki my darling, how are you?” She asked, wrapping her arms around him tightly and giving him a squeeze.

“I am well.” He lied. There was no sense in worrying her about things that could not be changed. “I have completed my studies.”

“Oh well done, I am proud of you my son.” Frigga said, tucking a stray bit of damp hair behind his ear.

“I got a final mark of ninety nine.” Loki said, grinning.

Frigga winked at him. “I always knew you were exceptional.” She said.

They sat down and Fosxyr appeared with more tea and some savoury muffins. Loki suddenly discovered his appetite and tucked in with a vengeance.

“So you are leaving tomorrow?” Frigga asked as she delicately ate her first muffin.
“Yes, in the early morning, just after the sun has risen, we need to get to the first stop before nightfall and it’s quite a way away.” Loki said. “There are so many carriages and carts to carry everything.”

“Progress is a rare event, but necessary in a land as big as Vanaheim.” Frigga said. “Asgard is half the size, but the capital city is far bigger.”

“The King said he wanted to show me the realm, but I know he’s also checking on his nobles. The fact that one of them was practically running the Resistance really worried him.” Loki said. “We will stay with all of them, some longer than others, and basically drain their treasuries with our feasting and entertainment.”

“Wise, no noble should be more powerful than their King.” Frigga said. “I just wish it didn’t take so long, I don’t like not being able to visit you for eighty years.”

“Me too.” Loki confessed. “Writing is just not the same.”

“There is so much that can be forgotten in a letter.” Frigga agreed. “But we have today, so let us make good use of the time. Shall we go out into the city? I have not seen it since the end of the war, and it was hardly in a good state at that point.”

Loki grinned. “It’s definitely improved then.” He said and turned to Fosxyr. “Can you ask the princes if they want to come with us? And my grandparents?”

Fosxyr bowed to him. “Of course Your Grace.” He said and disappeared on his errand.

“I’m sure that some of them will want to come.” Loki said. Camtan and Sofftia may not, they are still preparing all of Roaseia’s things. Baby’s need so much.”

“I remember.” Frigga said with a smile. Her face turned serious when she saw Loki expression. “There is something troubling you Loki, what is it?”

“The King thinks I need a baby to settle me.” Loki said quietly. “I have to tell him when I am next fertile so that he can give me one.”

“Surely you do not want one?” Frigga asked.

Loki shook his head. “It is the King’s idea, but he does not like to hear that his ideas are not liked.” He said. “He gets… annoyed, then angry. It is better not to argue.”

Frigga frowned deeply. Loki thought he saw a glint of steel behind her eyes. “I see.” She said.

She did not say anything more. Loki found himself trying to fill the silence.

“Grandmother gave me some special tea to prevent it, but it must be drunk regularly, I am afraid that I will miss it at a key moment.” He confessed.

Frigga nodded slowly. “I will see if there is anything that the healers know of that can provide a better solution.” She said.

Fentchyr entered the room and quietly announced that Prince Musleen was at the door and happy to go into the city.

“Show him in.” Loki said.

Musleen entered a moment later and bowed deeply to Frigga. “Your Highness.” He said.
“Prince Musleen.” She said formally.

Loki rolled his eyes. To him they were his mother and his friend, but of course to each other they were the Queen of Asgard and the second Prince of Vanaheim, formalities had to be observed.

“Are you two finished?” He asked. “Because if you’re going to keep this up all day then we won’t have any fun.”

Frigga’s mouth twitched. “I think we can dispense with the formalities, especially as my son is so keen to have a relaxing day.”

Musleen smiled his usual, reserved, smile. “As you wish Your Highness.” He said. “If you wish you may call me Musleen, Loki does.”

“Thank you Musleen, that is a lovely name.” Frigga said with a smile. “Does it have a meaning?”

“It’s supposed to mean ‘hard worker’ Musleen said. “Although new theories on the origin of our language say it might also mean ‘stubborn’.

Loki and Frigga laughed together as Femtchyr appeared again. Loki’s grandparents had arrived.

“We’ll soon have a merry group to go out with.” Loki said as they were shown in.

Frigga hugged them both hard. In the years since their reconciliation she had seen them every time she visited, and Loki knew that the number of letters they wrote to one another rivalled the ones he sent.

Less than a minute later Camtan and Sofftia were at the door with Fosxyr and their nanny, who was cradling Roaseia on her hip.

“We need a break from packing.” Camtan said. “Your invitation came at just the right time.”

It was then that he appeared to notice Frigga’s presence and dropped quickly into a deep bowed next to his wife’s curtsy. Musleen hid a chuckle at his brother’s reddening face.

“Your Highness.” Camtan said from somewhere near his own navel.

“Prince Camtan.” Frigga said, hiding her own smile. “Princess Sofftia.” They rose and Frigga’s eyes flickered past them to where Roaseia was sucking on her fingers in Fosxyr’s arms. “And this is your daughter.” She said.

“Yes Your Highness.” Sofftia said.

She took Roaseia from the nanny and presented her to Frigga. “She’s just starting to crawl.”

“That is a wonderful age.” Frigga said. “Loki used to get into all kinds of trouble once he was mobile.”

Loki groaned and covered his face with his hand. “Let’s get going.” He said.

“Not yet Loki dear, we’re talking.” Frigga said in a slightly teasing tone.

“Would you like to hold her Your Highness?” Sofftia asked.

Frigga’s arms shot out immediately. Sofftia passed Roaseia to her and she happily bounced the baby in her arms. “She’s a happy one.” Frigga commented as Roaseia giggled.
“Most of the time.” Soffitia agreed. “I’ve been told that I’ve been spoiled by her, and that when our next one is a terror we will not know what to do.”

Frigga chuckled and glanced over at Loki.

“You’ll manage.” She said at the same time as her mother did. Lord Eadgleyr was looking right at his daughter, when he caught her gaze he raised an eyebrow. Frigga didn’t say anything.

Roaseia was left to spend some quality time with Fosxyr on the reasoning that she ought to get to know him at some point if he was going to tutor her once she was older. Loki noticed that Fosxyr did not complain about the arrangement, although the nanny was watching him like a hawk.

The group took one of the larger carriages to the centre of town, where they climbed out and began to stroll leisurely down the main street while being shadowed by Musleen’s guards.

Loki found that he took joy in showing Frigga her rebuilt home. Her eyes scanned the streets with a mixture of wonder and melancholy.

“That’s where the old fountain used to be.” She said of one of the main squares. “I played on the edge when I used to visit the city as a girl.”

“Fell in about a third of the time.” Lord Fallconyr commented dryly.

Frigga shot him a look, but it failed because she was smiling. “It was broken in two during the final battle.” She said.

“Yes, and you almost went with it.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “I have never been so afraid in my life.”

“I remember that you went berserker on my attacker and tore him limb from limb with your bare hands.” Frigga said. “I learnt two things that day, one: it is possible to tear a man into pieces without a sword, and two: my mother possesses this ability.”

Loki caught Musleen’s eye, his expression was one of startled bewilderment. Loki imagined that he looked much the same. His grandmother once tore a man *limb from limb*.

How had no one ever mentioned this to him before? It was the sort of thing, Loki felt, that he ought to know.

“I prefer not to talk about it.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “It was a terrible day, for everyone.”

Frigga looked again at the replacement fountain. “It’s a good sculpture, it goes with the plaza.” She said as they walked away.

“The city was so badly damaged that it had to be almost entirely rebuilt.” Lord Fallconyr said. “But the outer holdings were not attacked, they remain much the same, your friend Mulmyr’s family still live in the same manner they always did. You used to go and stay with them for a few weeks in the summer, remember?”

“I do.” Frigga said with a smile. “And home?” She added, almost tentatively.

“Still as it was, although the furnishings have moved around as people grew older and had families of their own.” Lord Fallconyr said.

“I would like to see it again.” Frigga said wistfully.

“There is no reason why you cannot.” Lord Fallconyr said. “You could come when Loki is due to
arrive on Progress, unfortunately we are one of the last nobles to host the royal court, but you can still come and stay.”

Frigga was silent for a moment, then nodded. “I would like that, I will try to make the arrangements with Odin.”

“Oh good, be sure to describe his expression to me.” Lord Fallconyr said.

Lord Eadgleyr smacked him lightly on the arm. “Quit it.” He said warningly.

“Very well, I am too afraid to argue with you.” Lord Fallconyr said. “You might tear my leg off.”

Lord Eadgleyr sighed and walked ahead to join Loki.

“Shall we find a place to stop and have a drink?” He asked.

“Absolutely.” Loki deadpanned. “I would not like to anger you grandmother.”

Lord Eadgleyr groaned as the group laughed. “It was one warrior.” He muttered under his breath.

“It was my life.” Frigga said to him quietly, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “And I have never forgotten it.”

She kissed him on the cheek and they shared a smile as Camtan suggested a nearby drinks shop as the group’s stopping place.

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They day was as peaceful and relaxed as it could possibly be. There was no trouble, no problems. They had a picnic in one of the parks, walked through the city showing Frigga what to them was quite old, but to her was brand new, and Loki had a chance to catch up on much more than a mere letter could tell him.

It was with a heavy heart that he bid his mother farewell at the end of the day. She hugged him tightly and promised to write often.

“I will see you at Teialandsen Rise if I can, or when you get back to the capital if I cannot.” She said. “Until then, keep yourself safe my son.”

“I love you mother.” Loki said.

And then she was gone, taken in a blaze of light. Loki stared at the spot where she’d been and wished he could have gone with her.

Instead he had to have dinner with the King, and then, no. He wasn’t even going to think about it until he had to. His night time thoughts had been an indulgence. He had a long way to go yet and he *could not* give in to despair.

No Trouble, No Mischief. That meant no sulking or giving in to his anger. Not yet, there would be time to scream in the future, when the King was safely gone and Loki had Thor to hold him.
Hi guys, sorry for the delays. I promise the following is completely true:

About two days after I recovered from my illness, I got food poisoning. I will not burden you with descriptions, but it kept me from doing most things, including writing this story.

What with the end of the year approaching and me getting sick twice so close together, these updates might slow down a bit. But I *promise* on my honour, which I have, having never done anything truly bad enough to revoke it, that I *will* continue as often as I can and I *will* finish this monster with LOTS of super fluffy times. No way am I leaving poor Loki hanging there without a happy ending.

Having said that, this bit contains the dancing, but no physical non-con, for those who don't like it you have been warned.

The last night in the Palace was a quiet one for everybody. The bags were all packed, and all but the most essential personal items were already stowed away on the carts. The King’s Chambers looked quite bare.

“You’re taking the tapestries?” Camtan asked his father as they sat and ate dinner together.

“Of course, I cannot stand to be surrounded by bare stone walls.” King Dimcken said with a frown. “That would be horrible.”

Loki glanced around at the places where the tapestried used to be, the enormous chambers somehow looked even bigger without them.

“Oh, the bedroom ones I completely understand.” Camtan said quickly. “I was only talking about the ones out here, surely not every manor house will have large enough living chambers to hang them all.”

“No, no they won’t, but I shall rotate through them, it will make for some nice changes while we travel.” King Dimcken said with a smile.

Dorgen rolled his eyes on the other side of the table, but the King didn’t see it.

“You’ve got new cuffs on.” He commented to Loki.

Loki resisted the urge to hide his wrists under the table.
“Yes, His Majesty had them made for me.” He said quietly.

“I had those other ones melted down and the stones reset into new ones.” King Dimcken said. “There was too much on the old ones.”

“And what happened to the other stones?” Dorgen asked, glaring slightly at Loki, who avoided his gaze.

“They’re being set into new cuffs as well.” King Dimcken said.

“So even more precious metal goes onto his wrists.” Dorgen said.

King Dimcken’s face darkened as everyone tried to find somewhere to look. It was harder to do with all the tapestries missing.

“I can give my wife presents if I want to.” King Dimcken said darkly.

“I’m sure Odin appreciates it.” Dorgen said.

King Dimcken’s eyes narrowed but he didn’t say anything. The sentence had been a dart that could go either way, and thankfully he chose not to rise to it.

Dinner was finished in silence and the others all filed out with murmurs about getting a good night’s rest. Loki watched them go with a feeling of dread rising in his stomach. It was time, he had to dance for the King and he still didn’t know *how*. The very thought of moving slowly and teasingly was sickening, but he would have to try.

Maybe he’d be so bad at it that the King would tell him to give up?

No. More likely than not he would simply instruct Loki on how to do it better.

King Dimcken escorted Loki into the bedroom and to the bed where the dreaded costume lay. The King was grinning with excitement as he started pulling off Loki’s clothes.

Loki took as deep a breath as he could without it looking suspicious, and began removing his cuffs. King Dimcken had indeed had the ugly old set taken apart, and Loki now had five new sets of cuffs in gold and silver packed in his bags. Eight more were still being made. Dorgen was right about one thing, it was a shocking amount of excess.

Naked now, Loki forced himself to stand still as King Dimcken picked up what turned out to be a belt. There were wispy bits of material attached to it all the way around. He tied it around Loki’s waist and reached for another one. There were thigh straps, ankle straps and wrist straps, each one with floaty, wispy material in many colours hanging off it. Loki had seen dancers wear this sort of thing, although they had worn them as additions to their costume, not the whole thing.

The last strap went around his neck. Loki had to pinch his fingers together behind his back as King Dimcken tied it into place. It felt like a collar, and Loki felt like a slave.

‘Properly’ dressed, Loki stood before the bed while King Dimcken retrieved a music box from one of the drawers in the cabinet beside his bed. Loki sighed in relief, it wasn’t until that moment that he’d thought about where the music would be coming from. In Vanaheim live musicians were preferred over recordings, Camtan had even brought a musician with him to teach Loki to dance back when he first arrived, the thought that someone else would be witness to Loki’s humiliation tonight was almost too much to bear.
King Dimcken set up the music box and switched it on. He settled himself on the bed and smiled at where Loki stood.

“Go on my darling.” He breathed.

Loki swallowed nervously and bit his lip. He still had no idea what to *do*, but he had to do something or the King would get mad.

He slowly rocked his hips from side to side, as he had seen some of the more exotic dancers do. He tried to match his movements to the music, although he doubted whether the King would care too much.

It wasn’t working, he couldn’t do this, he couldn’t dance around and tease the King and pretend to *like* it.

But he had to, for his little sister Thainia, who needed the money to go to school.

Loki shut his eyes and lifted his arms in time to the music, he twisted them around in slow circles while swinging his hips back and forth.

He was poor, he always had been, he and his friend Daenceia had grown up together and trained as dancers, and he was so good at it that the ‘establishment’ where he worked started to do better business. The nobles would come to watch him as he danced on the stage. He didn’t like it, but someone had to earn enough to give Thainia a better future.

Loki twirled on the spot and then bent low before slowly straightening up.

One day the King himself had come to see what the fuss was all about. He’d sat and watched Loki dance from a private room up on the balcony. No sooner had Loki finished his dance than the King had requested a private show. That’s where he was now, dancing, just dancing, nothing else. It was a part of the arrangement, all he had to do was dance.

Loki tilted his head back and rolled his shoulders. He could hear moaning coming from the bed but didn’t dare look.

Thainia would be so happy. She’d be able to go to the good school next year, she worked so hard, she deserved it, and Loki would make it happen, he was a good big brother, he would do anything for her.

There was a cry from somewhere on the edge of his consciousness, followed by his name.

“Loki.”

Loki opened his eyes and looked over at the bed. King Dimcken had spilled all over himself.

“Loki that was beautiful.” He panted. “Fetch a cloth for me, there’s a good boy.”

Loki bowed to him and went to the bathing room. It was over. He could hardly believe it. He’d been stressing about it for days and now it was over, and the best possible outcome as well. The King had spilled without laying a hand on him.

Hieddenyr was quietly cleaning the bath when Loki stepped into the room.

“May I have a cloth and some warm water please?” Loki asked, trying not to feel self-conscious in his costume.
Hieddenyr jumped slightly, he hadn’t noticed Loki coming in. He hastily bowed and went to fetch the items.

Loki loitered by one of the pillars. He *really* wished the material wasn’t so thin.

Hieddenyr returned with the cloth and a small bowl of warmed water. Loki took both with a mumble of thanks and left quickly.

King Dimcken was yawning when he arrived back. The preparations for the Progress had been arduous and they were taking their toll. Loki helped the King disrobe completely and cleaned him up with the cloth.

“You were beautiful to watch my darling.” King Dimcken said with a smile. “I liked to see it.”

“Thank you Husband.” Loki said automatically.

“Next time I’d like you to move a bit closer though, maybe a few kisses when I’m getting close?” King Dimcken asked.

Loki’s wipes with the cloth didn’t falter, he’d had too much practice by now to allow that to happen, but inside he felt sick.

“Of course Husband.” He made himself say.

After the King was cleaned up, he helped remove Loki’s costume and put it aside.

“It will be a big day tomorrow.” He said as they lay down. “We will be travelling for eight days to reach the edge of the mountains, and only staying three days with Lord Cuinningyr before moving on to Lord Fetatheren’s lands.”

“Is that because we stayed with Lord Cuinningyr not too long ago when we went skiing?” Loki asked.

“Yes, he has hosted us a few times over the last twenty or so years, he is loyal and I do not wish to burden him with the entire court for too long. But we will stay almost a year with Lord Fetatheren. He is Sofftia’s father and she wishes to have an extended stay, he offered to have us longer himself, and assured me that he can see to the needs of the court. We are bringing quite a large amount of fresh foods with us as well, a lot of northern things that he does not get to see very often. He is a good man.”

“I am looking forward to seeing his lands. Sofftia told me that even in the height of summer they still get snow, although the thaws do create fantastic waterfalls.” Loki commented as King Dimcken yawned again.

“Yes they do. We will be arriving at the start of Autumn, when the weather cools. It will be lovely, although we must all take care. I almost lost Camtan up there.”

“But instead you gained a daughter.” Loki said.

King Dimcken smiled. “And a very fine daughter she is too. Now if only Musleen could find one half as pretty I’d be satisfied.”

Danceia immediately flashed across Loki’s mind. She *was* quite pretty, with golden brown hair that fell in huge curls, and honey-like eyes. But she was also common, and Loki knew the King’s views about commoners well enough.
There was a snore from beside him, the King was asleep. Loki breathed a sigh of relief and tried to follow his example. He’d survived his dance, although it appeared that one day there would be another, but for now he had the Progress to look forward to. And the was always the hope that the long days of travel would sap the King’s energy. Loki might even find himself untouched more often.

With that happy hope in his head, Loki drifted off to sleep.
Seventy Steps

Chapter Summary

Departure

The early morning departure had an air of adventure to it. The carts and carriages stretched out for a clear mile, and the whole thing was surrounded by horses.

Loki rode for the first part of the day. He was quite good at staying side-on now, and hardly had any trouble with his back. He stayed by Musleen and Camtan, who were both in good spirits as they trotted slowly down the long road ahead of them.

King Dimcken was riding in the carriage. The last few days had caught up with him and he was snoring loudly as the miles went by, catching up on his rest.

With the sun shining brightly in the sky, Loki actually felt happy. He had learned over the years not to dismiss happiness when he found it. Once upon a time he would have felt as though somehow he was being disloyal to Thor if he ever found himself able to enjoy something about his time here, but he knew now that to be miserable all of the time would have killed him. So in times like this, when the King was busy, or in this case, sleeping soundly, he let himself relax, smile and enjoy the moment.

“You should sing Musleen.” Camtan said suddenly. “It is a day for singing. Don’t you think so Loki?”

Loki grinned at him. “It *does* feel like that sort of a day.” He said. “Does Musleen sing?”

“Beautifully.” Camtan said as Musleen’s ears turned bright red. It was such an obvious tell for a spymaster, which was how Loki knew that it was entirely involuntary.

“I am not going to sing.” Musleen said calmly.

“We both had lessons when we were younger.” Camtan said. “But they let me give mine up because I sound like a donkey giving birth to a hippo.”

Loki snorted in his saddle. “Thank goodness they did not persist then.” He chuckled.

“Musleen can sing like Mother could, only *really* low.” Camtan said softly. “Oh go on Musleen, stop being stubborn.” He said in a more normal tone.

Musleen shook his head.

“What’s the trouble?” Said a familiar voice by Loki’s ear.

Loki turned and grinned at Haewkryr, who had come to ride beside him. Haewkryr had spoken just low enough that the two Princes had not heard him.

“Camtan wants Musleen to sing, Musleen does not wish to.” Loki told him in a loud enough tone for them to hear. “Camtan, Musleen, this is Haewkryr, I believe you’ve met before?”
“At a dinner once.” Haewkyr said with a wide grin. “But we didn’t talk, we stayed as quiet as little lambs while our elders reminisced. Mind you,” he added, “lambs aren’t that quiet generally, so I’m not sure who came up with that phrase but I know they weren’t a shepherd.”

Loki laughed as Camtan and Musleen each gave Haewkyr a nod of welcome.

“You are the grandson of Lords Fallconyr and Eadgleyr, aren’t you?” Musleen asked.

“I am, third son of their eldest son. One day I shall be very great and powerful, although as yet I have not figured out how to achieve this.” Haewkyr said cheerfully.

Camtan grinned at him, Musleen smiled a medium smile, which was the closest Loki had ever seen him get to a grin.

“You ride astride.” Musleen commented.

Haewkyr nodded at him. “I never got the hang of side-on.” He said.

“So you’ve never been in the army? That is normally where men learn it.” Musleen asked.

Haewkyr’s just grinned wider. “Nah, never.” He said. “I’m bloody rubbish with a sword, I’d run myself through before the first day was out.”

Musleen stared at him for a fraction of a second before giving another smile, a small one this time. “I did a few turns on the border before coming home and taking over the guard.” He said. “It’s not the life for everyone, I knew it wasn’t for me the moment I got there.”

“I tried it.” Camtan said. “Princes sort of have to, it’s tradition. But I like my comforts too much.”

“I trained with the army back in Asgard.” Loki said. “But I wasn’t yet old enough to do a proper spell in the field before I left.”

“Don’t bother, unless you think you’ll enjoy it.” Haewkyr said. “If it’s not the life for you then you’ll probably just get in the way of those for whom it *is* suited. What matters is that you can fight if you need to, you can defend you home if you have to, and that the rest of the time you support those who protect you.”

“True, very true.” Musleen said, giving Haewkyr a thoughtful look.

“You were going to sing for us Musleen, nice job of changing the subject, but I have not forgotten.” Camtan said, leaning towards his brother with a grin.

“I was not going to sing.” Musleen said.

“Sing ‘The Traveller’s Companion’” Camtan said.

“No, I am not going to sing.”

“I’ll start you off.”

“You’ll finish it too; I am not going to sing.”

“Go on.”

“No.”
“For Loki? Look at him, he wants you to.”

“Leave me out of this.” Loki said quickly.

“The man was walkiiiiing, along a dusty traaack.” Camtan began, badly.

Loki and Haewkyr shared a wince.

“And through the haaaaaze, he saw a little shaaaack.”

“Stop it, you’re destroying music as we know it.” Musleen said.

“And out from the shack, there came a pretty maaaaid. He said to heeeer, what have you this fine
daaaaay.”

“Fine. Shut up, I’ll sing it.” Musleen mumbled.

“It won’t be so bad.” Haewkyr said cheerfully. “I’ll sing it with you, anything to drown out *that*.”

“I told you I was bad.” Camtan said without any trace of embarrassment. “Sadly, that was me really trying.”

Musleen sighed, took a deep breath and began to sing.

“She said to meeee, I’ve got nothing for youuuu, for my poor faaarm, has yielded nothing gooood.”

His voice was deep and smooth. Loki was frankly impressed. Haewkyr joined in on the next line, his voice was not quite as deep, and the effect of the two together was exceptional.

“So he said to her, just come along with meeee. We’ll go to towwwn, and see what we can seeeeee. That pretty maaaaaid, packed up her trav’lling baaaags, it wasn’t much, just a few torn raaaags. And I asked of her, what were you waiting foorrr? She said for youuuuu, to walk right by my dooooor.”

After ‘The Traveller’s Companion’ they moved on to ‘Bright Sunlight in the Morning’ ‘Missing my Lover’ (Loki had to look away quickly at some of the lines) and ‘Dance to the Moonlight’. They ate their morning tea on horseback, bread rolls with cold beef and thick, creamy, cheese, and generally just larked about like the young men they were.

It all changed when the King joined them.

Haewkyr drifted away discretely as King Dimcken came riding up. He was looking refreshed and happy, and he immediately asked them what they’d been doing with themselves.

“Oh you know us Father, we were riding dangerously and encouraging each other to be foolish.” Camtan said.

King Dimcken reached out and tapped him lightly on the arm. “Don’t tease you Father.” He chided with good humour, adding a wagging finger for good effect. “The servants said you were singing.”

Musleen sighed as Camtan grinned. “Musleen has such a beautiful voice Father, he should sing for us far more often.” He said with the light of a little brother in his eyes.

King Dimcken regarded his middle son.

“I think he can do as he likes in that regard.” He said affectionately. “Although you should take up
your lessons again Camtan, it is unfair to make Sofftia do all the nursery singing.”

Musleen bit his lip at the sight of Camtan’s face.

“Father knows best Camtan, better arrange that nice and soon.” He deadpanned.

King Dimcken grinned and looked over at Loki.

“Do you sing Loki dear?” He asked.

Loki shook his head quickly.

“I’ll wager that I can carry a tune better than Camtan, but I do not have a good enough voice to be a singer.” He said.

“Will you show me?” King Dimcken asked. “Sing me a song from Asgard, I would like to hear one.”

Loki had seen that request coming, King Dimcken could be quite predictable sometimes. He didn’t argue, just drew breath and sang one of the old saga-songs that he’d learnt as a child.

Camtan and Musleen listened politely as he sang about how the Great King Bor had crushed the goblin king and brought peace to the nine realms. He wasn’t bad, although nowhere near the level of Musleen, or even Haewkyr. He had never been able to sound that smooth, or that strong.

“Lovely.” King Dimcken said when he’d finished, although he did not ask for another. Loki description of being just okay had been an accurate one. “It is unfortunate that Camtan inherited my own ability to sing, that is, none at all. I used to have to get bards to perform my songs of love and courtship for me.”

“I did the same thing with Sofftia.” Camtan said. “Still, we make up for it in other ways don’t we Father?”

“Oh yes, not everyone can be a perfect songbird.” King Dimcken said. “You dance far better than most, and if I were younger and less creaky in my bones I would be your equal, there was none so fine as me when I could dance.”

Camtan grinned at Musleen. “Some of us are very light on our feet.” He said. “And some of us dance like we have a broom handle up our bottoms.”

Musleen sighed and ignored him, not looking over even when Camtan did a little pantomime of the last time Musleen tried to dance without steps to follow. There was a lot of shoulder rocking and stiff arms. Loki lost the fight not to giggle and had to shoot Musleen a look of apology as King Dimcken roared with laughter.

“You should marry a dancer Musleen, give your children a chance.” He said.

Musleen smiled at his father. If Loki hadn’t known better he’d have thought it was a real smile, but he knew Musleen too well by now.

“A dancer Father? You would not approve.” He said. “But if you hold some dances while we are on Progress then I should look to the noble ladies to see who has the greatest freedom of movement.”

King Dimcken laughed happily. “You are so serious my boy, but practical, very practical, I am glad of that. I would hate for you to lose your heart to a pretty dancer, they are but one step above whores
Loki had to press his lips together hard as the memory of the night before came back to him. The King had reduced him to ‘one step above a whore’ for his own pleasure. In truth what was the difference between Loki and a real dancer in the King’s mind? Well nothing, obviously. He’d always known it. He was a plaything, a pretty toy. Hearing it practically said out loud was more painful than he’d thought it would be.

Musleen’s smile was a little tight as well, no doubt he was thinking of Daenceia, and how his Father had just insulted the woman he loved. For a brief moment his eyes met Loki’s, but then he looked away. It was too risky with the King there for them to even sympathise silently. If he ever guessed at Musleen’s feelings then Daenceia’s life would not be worth anything at all.

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They stayed the night in a large inn, although the majority of the court had to bed down in tents. Loki worried about Haewkyr until he saw the man literally sleeping stretched out on the back of one of the horses.

Sadly the King’s nap in the carriage had left him in an energetic mood, and Loki found himself on his back and staring at the inn’s white ceiling soon after dinner. It was unfortunate, as the two of the three Princes were bedded down in the next room over, and the third was with his wife and baby across the hall. Loki struggled to stay quiet, but King Dimcken did not seem to care about being overheard, perhaps he even wanted to be, he certainly seemed quite proud of his prowess the rest of the time.

Unfortunately for Loki, ‘energetic’ did not mean the same as ‘aroused’. King Dimcken could not harden, so instead focussed all his energy on making his young wife whimper and moan. His fingers were everywhere, and his mouth was plastered over Loki’s for what felt like hours.

The following day when they set off everyone just carried on as normal, because sadly, that *was* normal for them by now.

It took them eight long days to reach the edge of the High-Mountains, and the weather grew colder all the time. The highest mountains which made up the southern border were permanently snow-capped, and the wind that blew down from them made everyone start to shiver. Those who slept in tents began doubling up with friends and relatives to keep warm.

King Dimcken began wearing more and more coats over his thin frame. He liked the snow when he was properly bundled up, and took a great deal of pleasure from riding along the crisp pathways.

Loki also liked the cold. He had always preferred winter to summer in Asgard, and was more likely to let himself be dragged out on a quest or adventure with Thor if there was snow on the ground. He rode for long hours during the day while wearing the fine sable cloak the King had given him as a gift the year before. It was sleek and soft, and wonderfully warm. His matching gloves were perfectly tailored to his hands.

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The small manor in which they stayed was warm and welcoming. The court was certainly relieved to be somewhere large enough to hold them all indoors, although doubling up was still required, and the air filled with the sounds of mirth as people began to *enjoy* the snow for the first time.

Loki hopped down from his horse and took the bridle in hand. Beside him, Musleen was already
looking out of the front gate.

“Cross country tomorrow?” He suggested to Loki, who grinned at him.

“Sick of riding are we?” He replied.

The stable boys came to take their horses and they headed inside behind the King.

“Your Majesty, Your Grace, Your Grace, Your Grace, Your Grace, Your Grace, Your Grace.” Lord Cuinningyr said as the King, Loki, all five Princes and Princess Sofitia approached. Camtan stifled a chuckle and Loki pressed his lips together tightly to keep from laughing. Lord Cuinningyr was *very* proper, and never grouped any of them together like so many of the other Lords.

“Lord Cuinningyr, I greet you with relief, these last few days have been difficult on the road, we normally make the journey in far less time, but the Progress moves slowly as you can imagine.” King Dimcken said.

Lord Cuinningyr nodded seriously. “I understand Your Majesty, my home is yours for as long as you want it, and my servants have prepared a hot meal of elk and hot cider to warm your chilled bones.”

“That sounds perfect my Lord.” King Dimcken said.

Lord Cuinningyr bowed them all inside and showed them to the chambers that they would use for their brief stay.

The servants had arrived before them, Fosxyr and Hieddenyr were waiting patiently in the main bedroom with a hot bath already filled and steaming in the next room. Loki noticed with surprise as he passed through the bedroom that the royal marriage ropes were hanging above the bed, he hadn’t realised that the King had brought them.

King Dimcken stripped off at once and slid into the hot water, moaning in contentment.

“Come on Loki, you need to warm up.” He said as Hieddenyr scooped hot water up into a bowl and poured it over the King’s head.

Loki stripped as well and climbed into the bath. It was big enough for the two of them but did not leave much room left over. Fosxyr came to his side and began to wet his hair.

“How was your ride Fosxyr?” Loki asked him.

Fosxyr gave him a careful smile and answered. “Very pleasant Your Grace, we made good time.” He didn’t say anything more, the chatty servant he truly was vanished with the presence of the King.

“Did I hear Musleen correctly earlier when he suggested a cross country ski for you both?” King Dimcken asked.

“If that is alright Husband.” Loki said carefully. “We had such fun last time.”

“You two do love your cross country journeys. I prefer the slopes myself, but you may go if the weather is good. I will stay inside and discuss important matters with Cuinningyr. There is much work to be done on Progress you know.” King Dimcken said. His tone was a little reproachful.

“I know Husband.” Loki said quickly. “I cannot imagine how you handle such things alone, I do not
think there is another man in the realm who could do so.”

The flattery was a bit thick, but a reproachful King was a dangerous King.

King Dimcken smiled, oblivious to what Loki saw as a clumsy attempt to placate him.

“It is hard work being a King.” He said. “But I was raised for it, do not worry yourself about it at all my dear, you should have fun, you are young! Now is the time for play is it not? Just come back when the day is done so that I might hold you in my arms.”

He pressed a kiss to Loki’s lips and let their naked bodies press together. Loki endured it, trying hard not to burn red with embarrassment at his treatment in front of the servants. He also tried hard not to think about his own upbringing, and how he knew damn well how to run a realm. He wasn’t stupid enough to think that there would be no mistakes at all, but he was sure that when the time came and he stood by Thor, they would be effective rulers who would not run Asgard to ruin.

He deliberately did not think those thoughts, because of the anger it brought him to be reduced to an empty plaything, as though he had not had a life or a purpose before King Dimcken married him. He could not dare let that anger have a moment, because he feared he would be unable to stop it again once he had.

After a few more kisses the King let him go and climbed out of the bath.

“Come my darling, dinner awaits, and I am famished from our ride. It will be good to eat something hot and wholesome.” He said.

Loki climbed out and let Fosxyr help him dry and dress.

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The three days they spent there were good ones. Loki spent all his time out of doors with Musleen, Camtan, Softia, and Haewkyr as they skied and larked about. King Dimcken did join them on one of the days, during which time Haewkyr was absent, but on the others their time was their own.

“I cannot imagine a whole year of this up in the mountains.” Loki said on the last day as they finished one of the gentler slopes.

“It won’t be like this.” Softia said seriously. “It’s like this in the summer, but the winter is deadly, we will stay indoors for most of it. The autumn can be harsh unexpectedly and you have to be wary, and spring can bring sudden thaws, which can bury you in slush before you even realise it.”

“So we’ll be stuck inside for most of the year?” Loki asked, trying and failing to keep the disappointment from his face.

Camtan laughed at him.

“Look easy Mother-Loki, Lord Fetatheren has built slopes into his gardens, they are made safe by the servants and we can spend hours there. It is only really winter when it is too cold to go out. But we shall be very merry regardless. The manor is old and built like a castle, with many passageways and halls and things to get lost in.”

Loki found a smile, although the idea of not being able to get away from the King for a day was horrible. Still, just being in the same building didn’t mean that they would have to be in the same room. He tried hard to remain optimistic.
“Father has an enormous library.” Sofftia said, perhaps sensing his still apprehensive mood. “It has a
general seidr section, from my great uncle who was quite a powerful mage. You are welcome to
explore the shelves all winter.”

Loki’s smile grew at that. It had been less than a month since his studies ended and he already missed
the Tower and everyone in it.

“I’ll look forward to it.” He told her as they headed back to spend their last night at the base of the
High-Mountains.
Chapter Summary

The High-Mountains

Lord Fetatheren’s castle was almost the same size as the palace. It was built out of thick, heavy, greystone with surprisingly large window openings that had been filled partly with later stone, but also with glass thick enough to distort the view.

Loki stood and looked out of one of them as the royal family warmed up with hot drinks in Lord Fetatheren's personal living room.

The rooms were smaller here, to hold in the heat, they were also extremely old.

"When was this place built?" Loki asked Camtan as Sofftia and her father chatted quietly to the King.

"Back before the migration." Camtan said.

He caught Loki's puzzled look and explained.

"This used to be the seat of royal power, back when the realm was first united. The air was warmer, and the oceans higher. When the temperature dropped, King Wiaseen made the decision to build a new capital in the warm plains below. Once the old palace was built he moved his entire court, leaving the family Ichean to guard the High-Mountains, as they came to be called. The old palace on the plains was destroyed in the war, and the new one is built on top of it, to a new design. Father wanted it to be the most spectacular royal residence ever built."

"I like to think I succeeded." King Dimcken said, having heard the last of their conversation. "This place has been through a lot of changes itself though, has it not Lord Fetatheren?"

"Very much so, Your Majesty." Lord Fetatheren replied. "The outer walls were always thick, for defences against attack rather than cold, but the inner walls have been changed here and there, often to reduce the rooms down to a better size for heating, and the old servant's pathways have been converted into a heating system, with the great fires roaring below in the kitchen helping to warm the whole castle throughout the day."

"That sounds fascinating." Loki said, leaning forwards. "Were the changes made over time as the mountains froze further?"

"Yes, each generation does what they can to keep this place a haven of warmth against the harsh snows." Lord Fetatheren said. "There are some books of the old plans and the changes that were made in the library, if you would like to read them Your Grace."

Loki nodded eagerly. "I would love to." He said.

"I did not know that you liked architecture." King Dimcken commented.

Loki forced a smile at him. "It is more the history of a place that intrigues me, when changes were
made and why, designing a building from scratch is not nearly so interesting, although the people who do so would certainly disagree." He said.

King Dimcken smiled and held out an arm for Loki to join him on the couch. "You should have fun in the future then, we are going to be visiting all the old places, you can investigate the stories told by their brickwork."

Loki smiled again as he complied. "Vanaheim has such an old history." He said as King Dimcken wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him into a hug. "And the landscape is more volatile, it is so different to Asgard, whose environment has remained almost unchanged for most of its history."

King Dimcken silently preened at the praise of his realm as the others began talking about their plans to take advantage of the mild summer weather.

Camtan was in favour of visiting the top peaks, an adventure of ten days. Soffitia was almost bouncing in her chair in excitement at the thought. Musleen was more cautious, but agreed that it would be a lot of fun, even Dorgen wanted to go and encouraged his sons to do so as well, Loki looked at the King, his heart falling as he realised that King Dimcken was frowning.

King Dimcken squeezed him a little tighter possessively. "I'm not sure that I like you going camping in the snow, what if you get sick?" He said.

"He won't get sick Father." Camtan said at once. "Musleen's too responsible to let that happen."

Musleen rolled his eyes. "Is it not enough that I am the sensible one, must I also be mocked for it?" He asked.

"Yes." Said Camtan and Dorgen together, they shared a brief grin as Musleen sighed.

King Dimcken was frowning. "I don't want Loki going." He said firmly.

Camtan frowned but did not argue, Musleen shot Loki an apologetic look. Dorgen looked faintly pleased.

"He can stay here then." He said. "He can spend some time with you Father, you need to relax as well."

There was nothing Loki wanted more right now than to shoot Dorgen a furious look, followed by a dagger to the face. He hated spending so much as a second more with the King than he had to, Dorgen seemed to know this, and was deliberately trying to irritate him by encouraging it.

He had a feeling that he'd failed to keep his feelings hidden, because from the corner of his eye he saw Lord Fetatheren raise an eyebrow. Loki hastily fought to smooth his expression.

"I do don't I?" Said King Dimcken. "Well, Loki and I will stay and ski on the garden slopes while you are gone."

"Yes Husband." Loki said obediently.

If it weren't for 'No Trouble, No Mischief' Dorgen would be waking up with frogs in his bed, or possibly some frozen fish. Some giant crabs? Maybe a live elk. Something horrible at least, Loki mused as the servants arrived to announce dinner.

There was one good thing about the castle, as it was built on the old style, Loki had his own
chambers. They had belonged to Soffia's mother until her death and been vacant ever since. Now Loki's things were everywhere. He felt vaguely guilty as he changed into his thick woollen nightshirt.

"I feel as though I'm trespassing." He said to Fosxyr.

"I doubt anyone else sees it that way." Fosxyr said. "Her Grace told me herself that these rooms have stood empty for centuries, it's not as though your arrival has moved things about that would have lain still otherwise."

Loki gave him a half smile and climbed into bed. The King had been too tired to send for him that night.

"I'm not going to go on the camping trip." He said, trying to keep the sadness from his voice.

"There will be other opportunities to have an adventure Your Grace," Fosxyr soothed as he tucked Loki in tightly. "And I've been told by the castle servants that the garden slopes are wonderfully made and very fun to ski on."

Loki gave him a tired smile. "Goodnight Fosxyr." He said.

"Goodnight Your Grace." Fosxyr said.

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In the King's chambers the following morning, Musleen arrived and waited for his father to rise and have breakfast.

"Musleen? My boy, what is wrong?" King Dimcken asked as he left his bedroom.

"Does there need to be something wrong for a son to eat with his father?" Musleen asked calmly.

"Maybe not in the rest of Vanaheim, but when it's you my boy I worry." King Dimcken said, sitting down.

"I do have something I wish to talk to you about." Musleen confessed.

"I knew it, go on." King Dimcken said.

"I wanted to talk to you about Loki and the camping trip." Musleen said.

"He's not going." King Dimcken said at once. "I will not be argued with."

"I am not arguing, merely discussing." Musleen said, looking calmly into his father's eyes. "He's a young man father."

"I know, that's why I worry." King Dimcken said gruffly.

"Do you remember what happened to Camtan when he was that age?" Musleen asked, grabbing a piece of bread and helping himself to cheese.

"He almost died up here." King Dimcken snapped.

"Do you remember why?" Musleen asked.
King Dimcken scowled at his cup of tea. "I told him he couldn't climb the mountain on the north side and he disobeyed me and tried to do it anyway. I was right you know."

"Did that matter when he almost died?" Musleen asked.

"Get to your point boy, you are upsetting me." King Dimcken growled.

"Loki is young, young people are stupid, you know that Father. Camtan almost died, I went around with a ridiculous haircut and tried to join a juggling troupe, I don't know what Dorgen did but I know my nephews each went a little mad with their friends. But the important thing is, Father, was that you let us. With the exception of Camtan, who let's face it was the stupidest of us all, you let us be young and silly and we all made it through in time. Loki is young, and he's at just the right age to be silly, he's shown an amazing amount of maturity in the time he's been here, but for someone barely of age he is going to have rebellious moments, made all the worse by harsh restrictions placed upon him. Has he been disobedient to you? Wilful? Defiant? I know you worry about him, but a reward for his maturity would be well received. He would be with us at all times, I promise that we would let nothing happen to him. We're taking servants who know the mountains, we will take double the usual number if it would make you happier, but I am asking you to let Loki go."

King Dimcken was frowning in thought. He stayed that way for several long minutes.

"He's a good boy." He said at last. "He doesn't make trouble, you are sure that you will keep him safe? It is not just me you will have to answer to, Odin is not to be trifled with."

"We will take every care Father, I promise." Musleen promised.

King Dimcken sighed. "I suppose then he can go." He said reluctantly. "I will tell him this morning."

"Thank you Father." Musleen said. "I know that he will be very happy."

He left the King to his breakfast. As he walked back to his rooms he passed Camtan who shot him an inquiring look, Musleen answered with a wink and a nod.

"How does he do that?" Camtan muttered to his wife. "I *never* get Father to change his mind, *never*."

"Your brother has a different way about him." Sofftia said calmly. "He always has."

An hour later, Loki was on his way to the gardens at the request of the King when Hieddenyr stepped out of the shadows and passed him in the hall.

"Hug him when he tells you, it will make him happier about it." The servant said without stopping.

Loki had no time to wonder about his strange behaviour, because he was already stepping outside.

"Loki, darling, come here." Called the King. "Come and see the first slope."

Loki obediently came to the King's side, trying not to look dejected and sulky.

He forced a smile and looked down at the slope before him.

"That's amazing." He said after a moment.

Lord Fetatheren had created a masterpiece of snow right outside his doorstep. The first slope was a gentle run down to a large platform, from there Loki could see three further slopes of varying difficulty branching away down the hill.
"The castle protects this side from avalanches and even the more deadly melts." King Dimcken said. "He had the whole thing carefully shaped to be challenging without being deadly. And at the bottom is a lift with chairs that can be used to pull you back up when you're tired."

Loki looked out at the cabled carriage.

"That's brilliant." He said.

"You can spend a whole day here having fun and never get bored." King Dimcken said.

Loki's smile felt slightly wonky, but he forced it anyway. "I'm sure I will Husband." He said.

"Um, Loki, Darling, it occurred to me this morning that I may have been a little hasty in banning you from going camping last night." King Dimcken said. "I have given it a lot of thought, and, well, you can go with the others if you *promise* to take care."

That's what Hieddenyr meant, Loki realised suddenly. A hug? He'd never done that voluntarily before, but the look on the King's face was still unsure, despite what he had just said.

Loki steeled himself, but couldn't bring himself to hug King Dimcken. Instead, he grabbed the King’s bony arm excitedly and gave a little jump on the spot.

"Thank you Husband." He said. At least the enthusiasm in his voice wasn't fake. "I will be very good, I'll do everything Musleen tells me to."

"You do know that Dorgen is the eldest?" King Dimcken said with a smile on his face. He still looked cautious though.

Loki paused for effect, then said brightly:

"I'll do everything Musleen tells me to."

King Dimcken roared with laughter.

"You cheeky boy." He said and gave Loki a light swat on his bottom. "Although I cannot fault your logic, Musleen is the better one at leading by far."

They spent the morning skiing on the garden slopes while Musleen, unofficial leader of any and all expeditions, carefully organised the supplies, maps and servants.

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They set off two days later. Loki would have been skipping in excitement were it not for the fact that he was riding on a mountain-horse, actually a type of Alpec, that had been specially bred for climbing steep slopes.

They rode up the mountainside for the whole morning along a path that grew steadily narrower as they ascended. The mountain-horses were surefooted and steady, which allowed Loki to admire the view from up high. By lunchtime the castle was far into the distance, and almost looked unnatural compared to the landscape around it.

"It's so small from up here." Loki said.
"The first day's climb is one of the steepest." Sofftia said. "We'll reach the plateau by mid-afternoon, then we'll climb a little slower for the rest of the days."

They ate their lunches on horse-back as they climbed further. Dorgen was beginning to breathe heavily as the air thinned. Camtan, Ooctir and Lyrren were next to begin labouring, before finally Musleen and Sofftia also began to show signs of discomfort.

Loki actually felt fine. He and the servants continued easily up the slope to the plateau.

"I have been away too long." Sofftia said as they dismounted and sat on the snow at the top.

The servants were already setting up tents and a small fire for cooking.

"We'll rest here all night." Musleen said, trying to breathe deeply. "And try to get used to the thinner air. Loki, are you alright?"

"I feel well." Loki said. He was breathing more deeply, he could feel his lungs expanding into his stomach, but it didn't feel difficult or uncomfortable.

He instead helped the servant who was trying to light the fire by igniting the burner with magic. Then he put some snow in a pot and set it to make tea.

"Does anyone need a charm?" Musleen asked, looking at Dorgen.

Dorgen shook his head. "I'm… a little… faint… but… not… in danger." He got out.

Musleen shook his head.

"Take the charm." He insisted.

The charm turned out to be a small amulet on a thin chain. Loki could see the spells written on it.

"What does it do?" He asked.

"It concentrates the oxygen in the air and pushes it up to the wearer's mouth." Musleen said.

Dorgen was already looking better.

"I'll just use it to recover." He snapped, shooting a look at Loki.

It was clear that he did not like to show weakness in front of him.

"Whatever you feel will work brother, I do not want anyone having troubles up here, or we will never be allowed to go again." Musleen said.

His rest was doing him good, he was already catching his breath more easily.

"Tomorrow we will ride slowly along the plateau to the base of the top peaks, we won't climb much again until the following day."

After a hot drink and a rest, everyone slowly made their way back to the edge to admire the view. The castle was very small now, and the garden slopes looked almost comical.

"What protects it from avalanches?" Loki asked curiously.

"It's location." Sofftia said. "The slopes fall in such a way that the snow goes down past it on the
western flank. Of course it wasn't always like that, when the snows first came to the High-Mountains there were problems every spring, but time and a lot of work carving into the landscape protects us now."

"It's amazing." Loki said.

They spent the rest of the day resting and trying to get used to the thinner air.

"We should be alright." Musleen said to Loki as they skied slowly across the flattish ground. "It's not that thin really, but combined with the exercise it can hit you pretty hard. The fitter you are the better you will adapt."

"Dorgen should get out more then." Loki said.

Musleen gave him a look.

"You two really haven't gotten off on the right foot have you?" He said.

Loki allowed himself the luxury of a scowl.

"He thinks I'm here to manipulate the King for Odin." He said. "To flounce about and take all of your gold with my wily ways."

"Are you?" Musleen asked.

Loki's expression was indescribable, but overwhelmingly negative.

"Camtan didn't think so, he thought you were a reluctant bride." Musleen said. "Dorgen worries about Vanahime, it is so easy to be overwhelmed by Asgard, and we *are* an independent realm.” He added.

"This wasn't my choice, and I don't report to Odin." Loki said quietly, but firmly.

"Dorgen's main argument is your eagerness to please Father." Musleen said. His 'spymaster' eyes were watching Loki closely.

Loki's face flushed pink.

"I can't make trouble." He said, so softly it was almost a whisper. "Please believe me Musleen, I just want to go home."

Musleen watched him closely for a moment, Loki almost felt as though his thoughts were being read right out of his mind.

"I believe you Loki, but Dorgen won't, he cannot think why you would be so eager to please Father..." Musleen trailed off, giving Loki an opening if he wanted to explain, but he couldn't. Even though he desperately wanted to tell Musleen everything, to admit his feelings for Thor and tell him all about the thrice sworn oath Odin made, he couldn't. The fewer people who knew about his true feelings the better.

"I wish I could tell you everything." Loki said. "But all I can do is ask you to trust me, I am not here to hurt Vanahime, or advance Asgard's influence. I...I was asked to calm the peoples' more hostile feelings towards Asgard, but nothing further I swear to you, but I have to please the King, I have to."

Musleen just nodded.
"One day I hope you will tell me why. In the meantime, I would appreciate it if you tried to get along with Dorgen, he's not a bad person."

"So everyone tells me." Loki said, trying not to roll his eyes.

"He's had a difficult upbringing. Even now he lives in the shadow of our brother, the wonderful Norbleen." Musleen said. "To hear Father speak of him, Norbleen never did anything wrong, ever. Dorgen cannot live up to perfection, no one can. He is determined to be the best King he can for Vanaheim, sometimes that makes him more aggressive than he normally is. He is a good brother to Camtan and me."

Loki thought about growing up in the shadow of Thor. Everyone thought Thor was perfect, even Loki. By comparison, he was the dark child, the different child, the expendable child. What would it be like if he had suddenly found himself Odin's heir halfway through growing up?

But that thought would mean the end of Thor, which was something Loki could barely fathom. Thor was like a force of nature, like something that had always existed, and, in Loki's life at least, he always had.

Had that been how Dorgen felt about Norbleen?

"I will try to be civil to him." Loki said reluctantly. "But you know that it is he who attacks me, I mostly try to avoid him."

"I know. I think that may be half the problem between you two, but I am grateful that you will try to make the effort. I promise that Dorgen is a good man, would he have so many people willing to speak for him if he wasn't?" Musleen pointed out.

It certainly gave Loki a lot to think about as they walked back. Dorgen greeted them with narrowed eyes, he still hadn't been able to remove the amulet.

"You shouldn't wander off like that." He said to Musleen. "You'll get lost, and you might get injured."

"We were fine." Musleen said calmly. "There is no snow falling, we easily followed our own tracks back."

Dorgen didn't answer, he barely glanced at Loki, concentrating instead on getting some tea for Musleen.

"Warm up." He said, handing the cup over.

Musleen handed the cup over to Loki, prompting Dorgen to fetch another one with a scowl on his face.

It occurred to Loki that this was the longest that he had spent in Dorgen's company. They normally just avoided each other as best they could.

He lay back on a thick rug put down by the servants and relaxed. The air was clear and the setting sun was making the whole area glow golden.

"The temperature will drop soon, we should move inside." Sofitia said.

"It's already freezing." Loki pointed out.
"No, it's extremely cold. Freezing is what you are going to feel about an hour after the sun goes
down." Sofftia corrected him as the others all climbed to their feet.

Loki followed them, he wasn't really feeling that cold. He put it down to the sable coat and gloves.

They all crawled into the tent that the servants had set up. It was large enough to hold everyone, with
'rooms' made out of fabric that could be fastened closed when sleeping. There were half as many
rooms as there were people.

"Cosy." Camtan said with a smile as Sofftia quietly put her bag in what Loki suspected would become the warmest room in the tent.

He settled down by the little heater that the servants had set up and made himself comfortable.

"Alright." Camtan said with a grin. "Story time."

There was a subtle shifting of bodies as people paid attention.

"Once long ago there was a beautiful princess who had lived for many years in the Kingdom of Fire.
She was happy there, and quite content. But then one day her brother made war on the neighbouring
Kingdom of Ice, and she went with him, although not without misgivings. It was a terrible mistake
for the King of the Ice saw the princess, and immediately recognised her as his long lost betrothed!
He snatched her from the battlefield and-"

"That's a stupid story." Musleen interjected. "Utterly unbelievable in every way. Tell us a horror
story or something, but not that silly old fairy-tale."

"Fine." Camtan huffed as Occtir fought to hide a smile. "*I* like that one."

"Well then maybe you can tell it when I'm asleep." Musleen said. "For now, I want you to try and
scare me, I sang for you."

"It's not a transaction!" Camtan protested.

"Go on Uncle Cam, scare Uncle Musleen so that he can't sleep tonight." Lyrren said.

Musleen raised an eyebrow sceptically.

"You are all welcome to try."

Camtan took a deep breath and began again.

"Up in the High-Mountains, on the plateau in the shadow of the top peaks, there was a small party of
campers, sleeping away the night. Unbeknownst to them, they had a monster in their midst, a
terrifying, deadly, frost giant! Blue skinned and red eyed-"

"And this giant blue monster was in the tent with them, totally undetected?" Musleen asked.

"Shut up brother I am getting to it!" Camtan protested. "He used magic alright? Perfectly ordinary
magic to conceal his true appearance and move among them. He befriended them before they started,
so that they did not suspect him, then, when night fell and the air grew freezing, he crept from his
sleeping place and frozen his first victim, the annoying sceptic who never got scared of anything."

There were chuckles around the heater. Musleen pulled off one of his gloves and threw it at Camtan,
who grabbed it out of the air and threw it back.
"In the morning, the others were shocked and terrified. How could their dear friend have frozen so solidly in the night when they stayed so warm and comfortable? There was terror in the camp. Some people, including the frost giant himself, tried to convince everyone that the heater had failed in the night. At last everyone calmed down and agreed that it had to be natural causes, and so, as the day ended, they all went naively to sleep."

Camtan worked his way through each of the campers in turn, slowly heightening the terror of his tale until the very end, when the last man left (a handsome, cheerful, fellow) ended up fighting desperately for his life against the evil frost giant (who grew to an enormous size once the spell was dropped). In the end he prevailed, but only by dropping the frost giant off a cliff.

"They say the giants can survive such things." Camtan said creepily. "And if he has, then he'll be out there, waiting for us to sleep, then he will come. So beware the feeling of frozen fingers in the night, for it may be the last thing you ever feel."

"Why did he do it?" Musleen asked.

"What?" Camtan said.

"Why did he kill them? I mean, he clearly didn't need to, he didn't eat them, he was surviving quite well down in the town with his spell, why did he kill them?" Musleen said patiently.

"Because he's evil." Camtan said as the others chuckled. "Evil people do not use logic."

"Neither do bad story-tellers." Musleen said.

"Hey!" Camtan responded as the chuckles became laughter. "I'd like to see you do better."

Musleen sat up with a mischievous smile.

"Uh oh." Camtan said, suddenly looking wary.

Musleen's tale was about the Stalker-of-Men, who walked the streets and struck in the night. His voice was quiet and calm, and very spooky. Everyone jumped a mile when one of the servants accidentally put their dinner down hard enough to make a bang.

They ate cheerfully enough, laughing a little too loud in order to chance away the shadows, before trying to sort out the bedroom arrangements. Camtan and Sofftia were obviously together, and Occtir and Lyrren staked out a spot together as well, leaving Dorgen, Musleen and Loki facing the only remaining spare room. Loki glanced over to where the servants were lying, three to a room, and sighed.

“Cosy.” He said.

Dorgen looked furious. Musleen sighed loudly.

“I'll take the middle shall I?” He asked, sending a pointed look Dorgen’s way.

They uncurled their sleeping rolls and climbed in. Dorgen half closed the flap when they were settled, and one of the servants put out the light.

“Goodnight all, try not to dream of frost giants.” Camtan called out.

Musleen groaned softly under his breath but didn’t say anything more.
Four hours later, in the dead of night, Loki opened his eyes. He wasn’t sure what had woken him, but it had been something, some kind of… but there was nothing but silence.

He glanced over the sleeping Musleen and realised that Dorgen was not there.

Loki frowned, Dorgen wouldn’t be stupid enough to go about alone at night, it was freezing. Perhaps he was just using the toilet quickly.

There was the slightest hint of movement and Dorgen returned. He saw Loki lying there awake and looked momentarily startled. He held a finger to his lips.

Loki’s eyebrows rose in surprise. His face became a mask of horrified delight as he watched Dorgen silently hold out an icicle to the sleeping Musleen’s neck.

The freezing icicle touched him gently, Musleen stirred, jerked awake, and screamed loudly as he struggled to jump out of his sleeping roll.

Loki exploded into laughter along with Dorgen, as the rest of the tent woke up.

“What! What happened?” Camtan called out, struggling with his own sleeping roll.

“Frost giant.” Dorgen said seriously. “It went for the sceptic, but the screams scared it off.”

Musleen growled in embarrassment. “It was the cold that startled me.” He insisted as the others laughed.

“Don’t worry Musleen, that’s what we’ll tell everyone when we get back.” Camtan teased.

He and Dorgen bumped their fists sideways at one another. In that moment, Loki knew they were definitely brothers.

“I’m going back to sleep, we have a long ride ahead tomorrow.” Musleen said, his face was burning red.

He lay back down beside Loki and pulled his sleeping roll around him.

“I saw it all and did nothing to stop it.” Loki told him. “I hope we can still be friends.”

Musleen shot him an outraged look.

“Betrayed on all sides.” He said, and tried to roll over just as Dorgen returned to his own sleeping roll.

“Yes, yes you are.” Dorgen said cheerfully. It was the happiest Loki had ever seen him.

He lay down as Musleen decided to lie on his back, so that he didn’t have to face any ‘traitors’. For the next half hour the tent was full of light chuckles and the shuffling of blankets, before they all fell back to sleep.
Morning saw the campers rise early, despite the excitement of the night before. Musleen shot everyone a final, suspicious, look before letting the incident go and focussing on the morning’s activities.

They were going to ski overland for the morning, giving the servants time to pack up the camp and ride the mountain-horses to catch them up. They set off after a good breakfast, and headed for the distant peaks of their final destination.

Dorgen had taken off the amulet, but was already starting to puff as he made his way across the rough ground. A look from Musleen made him put it on again, scowling as he did so. Loki ignored him, their brief truce of the night before had hardly been the start of a new friendship, although Loki was trying not to actively antagonise the man, at Musleen’s request.

They travelled slowly for an hour, growing warm even surrounded by the freezing ice and snow. Snowballs were thrown and a mock fight broke out between Occtir and Lyrren that ended in rolling limbs and flying snow.

It was one of the best days Loki had experienced since his arrival in Vanaheim. He could feel his spirit relaxing as they travelled.

The servants caught them up in good time and they remounted the mountain-horses to continue the rest of the way. The ground rose slowly now, making adjustment easier, and the views from around them were spectacular.

They paused near an old ruin to have lunch. It had once been a guards post in the days before the snow, now it stood, barely, alone and forlorn on the path to the high peaks.

“You can see the stone benches where they used to put their sleeping mats.” Musleen said as Loki peered into the gloom of the structure.

“It’s so sad.” He said. “I mean, time must pass, and things change, but this structure standing up here
all alone against time just seems… I don’t know, ignore me, I’m getting sentimental.”

Musleen gave him a smile. “They say that the spirits of the men who stayed here will return to help a traveller lost in the snow.” He said. “At least that’s what Sofftia told me once.”

“It’s true.” Sofftia said from among the group. “Legend says that if you are lost in the snow and call out for the ‘Guards of the Old King’ they will rise and help you find your way to safety. There have been several accounts from people who have done just that.”

“Of course no one is going to test the theory, because we are *all* going to stay together.” Musleen said sternly.

As a group, they all laughed.

“You need to relax brother, no one here is planning to run for the hills.” Camtan said, clapping Musleen on the back.

“I will relax when we are safely back at the castle.” Musleen said.

“No you won’t.” Camtan said. “You’ll just find something else to worry about.”

Loki ignored their banter and crept a little closer to the other side of the guardhouse. It was covered by a snowdrift, but beyond it lay the ‘Old Road’. He wondered where it had led to, seeing as Lord Fetatheren’s castle was now considered to be at the edge of the realm.

He couldn’t make anything out leading down the mountain, if there was a road it was long covered by the falling snow.

There was a mark on the wall, he could see a bit of it. Curious, Loki tried to brush off the snow but it was stuck fast. He pulled out his dagger and chipped away at it until he revealed the Old King’s emblem. It was some kind of odd shape, like crown-shaped stones pressed together, and worn almost beyond recognition.

“Come on.” Musleen said. “If you want any real time at the top of the high peaks then we need to get going.”

They mounted up again and set off through the snow. Loki kept looking back over his shoulder, curiosity burning within him. He wanted nothing more than to follow the Old Road and find out what was at the end of it.

Maybe there was nothing. Maybe the snow buried it all, or maybe there would be ruins, just like the guardhouse, long abandoned and falling down.

That night he dreamed that he was riding Lightning down the Old Road at a gallop, free and filled with light.

“Guards of the Old King, lead me home.” He shouted into the sky and was answered with the sound of hooves and a roll of thunder.

Suddenly he was lifted from his saddle, he was carried on the wind by a hundred battle-worn hands until he was deposited onto the ground in a meadow that was utterly unfamiliar.

Thor was there.

So was Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr. They were sitting at a small table and chairs that had
been set up with sandwiches and cakes. Thor was watching them with half suspicion and half want. “He is well?” Thor asked tentatively.

“Loki is coping astonishingly well given his circumstances.” Lord Fallconyr said as Lord Eadgleyr scowled. “He is a strong man, but he will need a great deal of comfort and understanding when his ordeal is over.”

“I will be there for him.” Thor said determinedly. “I love him, whatever he needs I will provide.”

Lord Fallconyr looked slightly pained. “And if he needs you to step back? To let him go?”

Thor frowned. “He won’t want that, why would he want that?” He asked.

“I hope he doesn’t, but it is not unknown for those who have been… hurt in this manner to respond by withdrawing, sometimes forever, but often, if their boundaries are properly respected, they come back.” Lord Eadgleyr said. “He has already questioned why people wish to touch one another, he has found nothing in the act to enjoy, and I believe that he is afraid it. He may be afraid of you.”

“Never.” Loki swore at the same time as Thor.

“I hope so my grandson.” Lord Fallconyr said. “But you should be ready just in case. Go slowly, treat him gently.”

“I have a plan.” Thor said suddenly. “One that will fix this mess forever.”

Lord Fallconyr raised an eyebrow, but Thor did not elaborate. He looked as though he regretted his outburst.

“Take care my boy, Loki is very strong and very weak at the same time, it takes an expert to see it, but while he’ll hold himself together through all this, the end of it may be his undoing. I want nothing more than to see you two united in love, but I caution you to take care.”

Thor nodded curtly. It was clear he did not believe that Loki could ever fear him. Loki nodded right along with him. He could never fear Thor, never, except… No, never, it was unthinkable. He was just a little nervous about s-sex. It was nothing though, Thor would only touch him when he wanted it, and he would want it, he would, because it was Thor and he loved Thor. So there was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Loki’s eyes snapped open. He was back in the tent, the others were rising for another day.

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The trip was a great success. They travelled up to the high peaks and spent two days admiring the view, skiing up and down the natural slopes created by the craggy ground and relaxing with hot drinks under the weakened sun.

The air was so fresh and clear that Loki felt the old urges of his youth rise within him, making him leap about like a child and laugh openly at nothing and everything. They couldn’t even see the castle form here, he felt utterly free.

“You can see the Old Road from here.” Sofftia said to him on the second day up there. “Just there, weaving its way through the mountains to the valley on the far side.”

Loki followed her pointing fingers but couldn’t make it out.
“It just looks like snow to me.” He confessed.

She smiled at him. “It takes a while to get the knack of seeing it, it helps if you spend some time watching the modern path from the castle, after a while you can see the smoothness that isn’t anywhere else.”

“How does it lead?” Loki asked her.

“Who knows?” She responded. “The realm was so different then, I used to daydream about travelling down the road and finding out when I was younger.”

“Why did you stop?” Loki asked. “Surely you and Camtan could have an adventure.”

A touch of sadness came into her eyes. “His Majesty likes his family to be near him.” She said softly.

It was the first indication that she too was not pleased with the King’s influence.

“Maybe one day.” Loki said to her. “When little Roaseia can ride a pony.”

She grinned at him. “Maybe then,” she said.

Sadly for them all, the camping trip had to come to an end. They packed up and turned back reluctantly. It was like a place out of time, up on the high peaks, and everyone could feel the magic draining away as they headed back to the castle and their duties.

Loki felt the worst of all. His trip had been wonderful, a break from the stresses of simply *living*. If he had the choice he would stay up there until the King died, but ‘No Trouble, No Mischief’ brought him back.

The King was thrilled to see him, so much so that he came out of the castle into the cold air to help Loki down from his saddle and wrap him in a hug.

“Did you enjoy yourself my dear?” He asked, still keeping a tight grip on Loki as Haewkyr silently took the bridle and led the horse away. If expressions could be aggressively blank then that’s what it was. Loki shot him a reassuring smile from over the King’s shoulder.

“It was wonderful Husband, thank you for letting me go.” He said.

King Dimcken pulled back enough to kiss him. The feel of his chilled lips pressing against Loki’s warm ones was horrible, but he endured it without pulling away.

“I missed you.” He said, giving Loki another squeeze. “Now come inside and tell me all about it. Did Camtan tell you any of his scary stories? He’s quite good at them.”

“He told one or two.” Loki said as he was half led, half dragged into the castle with the others trailing along behind.

“You weren’t afraid though, were you?” King Dimcken asked.

“Not at all.” Loki said quickly.

“Hey!” Camtan protested from behind them. “I work hard on those.”

“Work harder.” Dorgen said, giving his little brother a nudge. “Of course there was one person who got very scared.”
Loki heard Musleen groan from somewhere at the back of the group.

“Who was scared? What happened?” King Dimcken asked.

“No one.” Musleen said, just as Camtan, Dorgen, Occtir and Lyrren all called out ‘Musleen.’

“I don’t believe it.” King Dimcken said as they reached the living room. “Anyone but him, he’s far too sensible and clever.”

“I think we’ve all just been insulted.” Camtan said as he raced forward to gather up Roaseia into his arms. She squealed in delight at the sight of her daddy and gave him a sloppy kiss.

“How’s my princess?” Camtan asked her. “How’s my baby girl? Are you good? Yes you are, you are perfect my little angel.”

Loki saw Fosxyr standing in the corner of the room watching the greeting with a smile on his face. He saw Loki watching and the smile widened in greeting.

Loki wasn’t able to say anything however because he was pulled down to sit by the King.

“Hot drinks for everyone Fosxyr.” King Dimcken said.

Fosxyr mumbled a polite response and left for the kitchens.

“Tell me all about it.” King Dimcken said, turning to Loki.

Aided by the others, Loki told him everything about their trip. He was careful to mention the Old Road only as a passing curiosity, least the King figure out his desire to up and travel down it, but everything else he recounted accurately.

King Dimcken sat back and listened with a smile on his face.

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That night Loki was called to the King’s chambers. He had been expecting it, and steeled himself as best he could.

“Be careful tonight Your Grace.” Fosxyr said to him as he helped him into his nightshirt. “He missed you, and his temper suffered for it.”

“He said I could go.” Loki protested.

Fosxyr shook his head. “What he said and how he feels are two different things, had I known that he would change his mind I would have advised you in some ways to lessen the result, but you will just have to do your best.”

Loki glanced at him in worry. “What result?” He asked, fear creeping into his voice.

“You will be alright Your Grace.” Fosxyr said, although his eyes were lying. “He may just want an eager reunion, regardless, it’ll all be over by morning.”

Loki was trying to calm his frantic heart by the time he reached the King’s chambers.

“Husband?” He said as he entered the room.

“Thank you Hieddenyr, you may go. Loki come here.” King Dimcken said. He was lying in bed
Hieddenyr disappeared as Loki came closer to the bed.

“I missed you, you know.” King Dimcken said, sounding resentful.

“I’m sorry Husband, but I’m so grateful, it was wonderful of you to let me go.” Loki said by the edge of the bed.

King Dimcken scowled, his good mood from before had completely vanished. “Did you miss me?” He asked suddenly.

Loki was shocked. Had he *missed* the King? Only because hitting him from that distance was impossible. What did he think Loki had done?

What had he hoped?

“We all did.” Loki lied. “I wish you could have come.” He added, trying to sound sincere.

The King was still looking unhappy. “You were gone for ten days.” He said. “I was alone.”

“I’m sorry Husband.” Loki said.

King Dimcken held out a hand without looking at him. Loki made himself lean over and take it.

“Come and lie with me.” King Dimcken said. “Show me how much you missed me.”

Loki forced his movements to be smooth and calm as he slid under the covers and pressed himself against the King’s bony body.

King Dimcken turned to look at him, he looked sulky. Loki forced himself to put an arm around the King’s body.

King Dimcken leaned in and kissed him. Loki endured it, the same as always, but he could already feel that it wasn’t enough. The King wanted more than that.

“If we were in the tent, would you cuddle up like this?” King Dimcken asked, pulled back from the kiss.

“Yes Husband.” Loki said immediately.

“Just like this? You wouldn’t come closer for warmth?”

Loki made himself shuffle closer. King Dimcken stuck a leg between Loki’s and tugged his nightshirt up.

“What would we do to fight the cold?” He asked in Loki’s ear.

Loki made himself give the King a hug, he wondered whether following Hieddenyr’s suggestion back before the camp would have eased the King’s mood in any way.

“My lips are cold.” King Dimcken said.

Loki swallowed the bile in his throat and kissed the King. King Dimcken pressed his tongue into Loki’s mouth and Loki parted his lips to allow the intrusion.
“Are you cold too my love?” King Dimcken said after a minute.

Loki wondered what would happen if he said no, but it wasn’t worth the risk.

“Yes Husband, but you are warming me up wonderfully.” He said.

Judging by the King’s reaction this was not the right thing to say.

“Are you sure?” He asked, his cold fingers touching between Loki’s legs.

“I-I’m cold in one place.” Loki forced out.

“Oh?”

“Y-yes Husband.”

“And where are you cold my love?”

“Um, in, um, in between my legs, Husband.”

It almost made him sick to say it.

“Do you think there is a way for me to warm you up?”

“I’m sure you can think of something.” Loki said.

The answering squeeze told him once again that he’d answered incorrectly.

“How would you have me warm you up my love?” The King asked again.

Loki wanted to scream. He didn’t want to say it, he didn’t want to play this stupid game. It was bad enough having to feel it, asking for it was too much.

But he had to.

“I-if you, if you put your-your manhood there and moved it, I’m sure that it would warm me up Husband.” Loki said.

There words felt strange, as though he was disconnected from them. King Dimcken clearly did not hear the change, because he rolled himself on top of Loki’s body and pressed his penis in between them.

“Like this my love?” He asked.

“Yes Husband.” Loki said. “Just like that.”

Kill him, just kill him, the King or Loki, it didn’t matter, as long as this *stopped*.

It didn’t stop, the King pushed inside fast enough to make Loki gasp and began to thrust eagerly. It was a little painful, King Dimcken hadn’t waited until Loki was properly stretched, and he was moving very quickly. Loki tried to bite back his cries, but it was impossible, they spilled out of him as he was rocked under the King.

King Dimcken came with a rush and collapsed on top of Loki, panting heavily.

“Are you warm now my love?” He asked.
“Yes Husband.” Loki whispered. “Very warm.”

“Good, good. I want. More. Spread your legs and touch yourself.”

Loki fought to keep the look of shock from his face. What?!

“Husband?” He questioned nervously.

King Dimcken pushed the covers back to leave Loki exposed on the bed. “I want to see you touch yourself.” He said, still getting his breath back.

Loki reluctantly opened his legs and reached a trembling hand down to his vagina. He touched tentatively at the entrance for a few minutes as the King watched him with one hand stroking his sagging balls.

“More, Loki you are not trying.” King Dimcken said with a frown.

“I’m sorry Husband.” Loki said. “I don’t know how.”

King Dimcken looked up into his eyes.


Loki shook his head. He *had* given his body some experimental touches in his youth, but that had mostly focussed on his penis for one very good reason: It was easy to get to.

His vagina had always been something of a secondary concern. Sometimes he’d touched around it while masturbating, but going further seemed to require more effort than he wanted to give when the same result could be achieved so easily without it.

“Oh, well, I thought, it’s of no matter, I will show you.” King Dimcken said, leaning forwards.

He put his hand over Loki’s and guided his fingers around and inside.

“Like that, do you feel that?”

“Yes Husband.” Loki said.

“Good, now rub yourself gently, yes like that, in and out, bring your fingers out, rub them around the entrance. Is there anywhere that feels better than the rest? Give it an extra rub, now back in, back in yes, like that. Oooh yes, touch yourself like that.” King Dimcken instructed.

Loki did his best to obey, it would have to end sometime, he just had to survive it. He touched and rubbed and worked his fingers in and out as King Dimcken sat back and licked his lips in delight as the sight Loki made.

“Good boy, good, do you feel anything inside? Like some muscles that want to squeeze?”

“N-no Husband.” Loki said. “It feels very good.” He added hastily when the King frowned.

“I’m glad Loki darling, but I want to see you climax. Keep trying, move your fingers a little more around, try and make yourself climax. You’ve done it before remember?”

Loki remembered. He had panicked under the King and tried to fight him off, but due to the way they had been lying, and Loki hastily pulling himself back under control, the King had believed it to be a climax.
“I remember the feeling Husband.” He lied. “But I can’t seem to feel it now. I’m so sorry to disappoint you.”

He would never do that, never. The King could take a lot of things from him, but he couldn’t have that.

“Just keep trying my dear, you look lovely with your legs open like that, if I were half my age the sight of you would make me harden again and ravage you.”

‘If you were half your age I’d kill you and damn the consequences.’ Loki thought furiously. The thought of spending *more* than three hundred years with the King was enough to make him want to vomit. Of course so many things about the King made him want to vomit that he was hardly unused to the situation.

After about half an hour of trying, the King finally told him to relax.

“Maybe another time, I want to see you scream my love.” King Dimcken said as he pulled the covers back over them both.

“Yes Husband.” Loki replied as the King threw an arm over him and settled into sleep.

King Dimcken’s mood swings were a frightening thing, it was only by pure luck that Loki’s night had not gone far worse. And there was still no guarantee that it was truly over, if the King woke in the morning and decided that ‘missing’ Loki was still on his mind then things could get much worse.

It was with these unhappy thoughts that Loki finally drifted into sleep, and without even a dream of Thor to comfort him.
The next morning, King Dimcken decided that he wanted Loki to spend the entire day with him as he went about his royal duties. This was a first in twenty years and Loki was horrified.

“You always had those magic studies of yours, but now that we’re on Progress I would like to see you more often.” King Dimcken said, pressing a kiss to Loki’s lips. “Meet me at the workroom after you are bathed, alright my darling?”

“Yes Husband.” Loki said, fighting to keep from screaming.

Last night had been humiliating, shameful and traumatising. The last thing he wanted was to spend any more time with the cause of all of his pain.

But he had to.

He went back to his chambers and tore off his nightshirt with a vengeance.

“I need a bath.” He hissed in fury. “I need soap and *water* and a bloody wire brush. I need, I need, I, I…” His face crumpled and he fell to the floor. “I can’t.” He whispered, his eyes tightly closed. “I can’t – he made me – I can’t do it.”

Fosxyr came over and carefully laid a robe over Loki’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry Your Grace, I’m so sorry. I wish there was something I could do.”

Loki just sobbed openly on the floor, King Dimcken’s attentions had been a nightmare, even just *pretending* that he wasn’t opposed to the King’s touches was difficult, actively participating, pretending to be trying to *like* it for the King’s pleasure was more than he could bare.

“I have to spend today with him.” Loki rasped out as Fosxyr stroked his hair gently. “I have to meet him in the workroom after I bathe. I don’t want to.”

“I know Your Grace, but you must, I will run you a hot bath and get you ready, you can do this Loki, you can.”

“I can’t, I hate him, I can’t do this, what he did, please don’t make me go to him.” Loki begged. “Please.”

Fosxyr pulled Loki into a tight hug.

“He is an evil, evil man.” He whispered into Loki’s ear. “But there is nothing we can do, you have to go to him today. You have to be strong.”
Loki slowly raised his head and looked through red eyes at Fosxyr’s worried face.

“I can’t stop him.” He said dully. “I’m not allowed. But I want to, he doesn’t deserve his life, his power.”

“I know.” Fosxyr said softly, glancing nervously around the room. “But there is nothing we can do, we must wait him out my poor child, it’s all any of us can do.”

Loki sat for a few more minutes just gulping air and getting himself under control, before he slowly climbed to his feet and walked to the bathing room.

Fosxyr filled the bath and fetched a soft cloth as Loki climbed in. He was still sullen, withdrawn and close to tears. Every time he thought of the King’s leering gaze as he lay exposed on his back he almost broke down all over again.

He scrubbed as hard as he could while Fosxyr kept a careful eye upon him. Then he dressed in his robes and jewels and walked like a prisoner on death row to the workroom.

Fosxyr tapped on the door and it was opened by one of the King’s advisors, Lord Fielesyr.

“Your Grace, what are you doing here?” He asked.

Inside the room the heads of those assembled looked up. Loki realised that King Dimcken had not yet arrived.

“I was asked to be here by His Majesty.” He said nervously.

The men in this room ran the realm of Vanaheim. Loki was an intruder here, and as Lord Fielesyr stepped back to allow him into the room he saw Dorgen look up from the central table with an expression that went from surprised to sour very quickly.

Loki walked in, glancing back at Fosxyr just once before the door was closed in the servant’s face.

“Did His Majesty say *why* he wanted you here?” Dorgen asked waspishly.

Their camping trip hadn’t exactly sorted out the tensions between them, but they had managed at least to be civil, now it looked as though all that work would be undone.

Musleen kicked his brother under the table, but Dorgen did not stop glaring.

Loki was just starting to feel the flush of embarrassment creep up his neck when the door opened and King Dimcken walked in.

“Loki.” He said in a delighted tone. “You arrived before me, I’m glad you are so eager, now come and sit beside me.”

The Lord closest to the King’s chair immediately stood and offered his seat to Loki, who sat down with a careful murmur of thanks.

“Now, Dorgen and Musleen have been away, but I trust you both got caught up last night?” King Dimcken asked them.

They both nodded, and the men assembled turned to their various notes.

King Dimcken slipped an arm around Loki’s waist and gave him a smile.
“You look lovely today my love.” He said.

“Thank you Husband.” Loki whispered, but the King had already turned back to his work.

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It was boring. Back in Asgard, Loki had been encouraged to join Odin’s council so as to properly learn how to run a realm. Thor had been the least patient of the two of them, but even he took his lessons seriously, and between them they had found things to be interesting, fascinating and important. But here things were different.

The problem was, Loki had no background to work from. He knew which families the King favoured, that certain trades were more important to the realm than others and that some borders needed more of the army than others, but he didn’t know why. No one had ever told him, and a combination of magic studies and not wanting to appear to be Asgard’s agent meant that Loki had almost no clue why Vanaheim worked the way that it did.

He wasn’t about to interrupt their work to ask questions either. He wasn’t here to help them run the realm, he was here because the King wanted to see him. He was a living ornament.

Every so often the King would give him a little squeeze as he sat there, trying not to slouch in boredom. Dorgen kept glaring at him every time something that was probably important got mentioned. Musleen shot him a look of sympathy early on but became absorbed in the realm business soon after.

In the end Loki began to mentally redesign the room just for something to do. He’d put the fireplace over there, add a little screen to shield the tea and food preparation area, maybe a nice thick rug for the floor, not the one that was there, another one, a better one.

“Loki?”

Loki’s head snapped around in response to the King’s voice.

“Yes Husband?” He asked, suddenly nervous that he might have been caught daydreaming.

“We’re going to have a little break now, tell the servant what you would like and then we will move to the couch.” King Dimcken said.

The rest of the room was watching as the servant waited for him to speak.


The servant bowed in reply and went to make it as King Dimcken pulled Loki out of his chair and to the couch by the fire.

‘No couches.’ Loki thought. ‘Absolutely no furniture that two people can use at the same time.’

King Dimcken wrapped an arm around him and pulled him in for a public cuddle. Loki did his best to keep a neutral face.

“I missed you.” King Dimcken said into Loki’s ear.

He pulled Loki’s face around and pressed a kiss against his lips.

Loki felt horribly aware of their audience. He would give anything not to be shown off like this.
The tea arrived, and Loki accepted the hot cup gratefully as Musleen helped himself to a fresh scone before waving the plate under Loki’s nose.

“Go on.” He said with just the tiniest hint of a smile. “They’re delicious.”

“Will you be spending the whole day with us?” Dorgen asked.

King Dimcken frowned at his aggressive tone.

“Of course Loki will be staying, I want him here.” He said, a warning in his voice. Lord Fetatheren slipped quietly from the room with a bow, the King didn’t notice. “I’ve missed him these past ten days, you all went off on camp and left me alone.”

“I am sorry to hear that you were unhappy Father.” Musleen said. “I would have thought that you couldn’t wait to have us all out from under your feet.”

King Dimcken smiled slightly. “You’re a good boy.” He said to Musleen, before shooting a hard look at Dorgen, who returned it. “Of course I missed you all, you stopped being underfoot years ago, and Fosxyr always kept you out of the way when you were being troublesome anyway.”

“He’s a good servant.” Musleen said.

“One of the best, he takes good care of you doesn’t he Loki?” King Dimcken asked.

“Yes he does.” Loki said immediately. “He’s an asset to your family.”

“*Our* family Loki dear, you are my wife after all.” King Dimcken said. His hand slid down from Loki’s waist to caress his belly. “On the subject of family, I would like to know when you are fertile my dear, ten years have come and gone and I have had no word from you.”

Loki felt his blood run cold as he forced a smile onto his face. Musleen looked faintly shocked and Dorgen did not even begin to hide his disgust.

“I… have a schedule of my own.” Loki said. “But I will tell you when it comes Husband, I promise.”

“Soon?” King Dimcken pressed.

Loki tried not to wince as he confirmed. “Yes, it is soon.”

“Good, I want to see you swell my love, you will look beautiful like that.” King Dimcken said, oblivious to the fact that he was the only one in the room who thought well of his idea. Even the nobles were carefully looking out of the windows or into the fire in an attempt not to let their true feelings show.

Lord Fetatheren returned with a book in hand.

“Your Grace, this is the book I was telling you about, it is the history of the castle, I thought you might like to read it as we work.”

Loki reached out for it gratefully.

“Thank you Lord Fetatheren.” He said. “I’m sure it will be most informative.”

King Dimcken’s arm tightened around Loki’s waist. “You can tell me all about it over dinner tonight.” He said, pressing another kiss to Loki’s cheek.
“Yes Husband, I’d love to.” Loki said as his insides screamed and cried out for relief from this man, this monster.

The rest of the morning was a lot better. Loki sat next to the King and became utterly absorbed in the history as detailed in the book. The old kings had built the castle here because it had a good strategic, as well as aesthetic aspect. The road up to the high mountains, back then simply known as the hills, had been well guarded with many little guard stations, and the plateau above had been a small, yet thriving village.

It was all gone now, eroded by the wind and buried by the snow.

The Old Road, the book said, had led to a township on the distant coast, when the weather had changed the seas slowly began to drop, forcing the fishermen to build new docks further and further below the town itself, before they finally abandoned it. The sea had continued to fall all around, which led to the swamps below draining and turning into the plains where the new palace and capital had eventually been built.

The town by the sea was now, according to the writer, still there, covered in snow and halfway up a mountain, the docks fallen away and the sea so far below that it could no longer be seen. All that was left was a small glacier that made its way slowly through the valleys below. And so islands became mountains and people moved on.

The castle itself went through the most changes after the royal family left for their new home. The walls had always been thick, but now the Lord Steward, Lord Fetatheren’s ancestor, blocked every window partly with stone with the remainder filled in with very thick glass. Next the rooms themselves were reduced in size so as to make the fireplaces work better against the blistering winter cold. The summers at this point still brought rain, although the air was still cold and getting colder. The servant’s passages were the next thing to be sacrificed, they were blocked up and the huge cooking fires of the kitchen, which were never extinguished, had their flues channelled through the old corridors, warming the whole castle continuously throughout winter and summer.

Thick tapestries were commissioned to help insulate the cold stone, the fireplaces had their flues reduced as new inventions allowed them to produce the same amount of heat without the big, open, and above all draughty chimneys to the outside air.

The castle, and a proper title to go with it, was granted by King Dimcken’s grandfather for the long and continued service of Lord Fetatheren’s family to the castle and the realm. They had been the Lords of the Mountains for so long that it was hardly surprising.

Loki was just up to the section on the redesign of the gardens and slopes to help avoid landslides when the working day came to an end.

“Come Loki dear, put the book down and we will go outside for some skiing.” King Dimcken said, holding out a hand to him.

Loki obediently stood, but he did not put the book down.

“I will tell Fosxyr to put it in my chambers.” He said, carefully taking the King’s arm.

King Dimcken smiled at him. “You must be enjoying it.” He said.

Loki smiled a smile that was actually a little bit genuine. “Very much Husband, it is a fascinating history, your ancestor was very wise.”

“They said that, he could see the way the future was going, there was no point in remaining in such a
vile place.” King Dimcken said. “Although I must say that Lord Fetatheren’s family have transformed it into a much nicer place to stay than it could have been. They have quite tamed the snow.”

“I would never presume to tame such power, but we do survive reasonably well, Your Majesty.” Lord Fetatheren contributed as they walked from the workroom.

“Oh come now, the slopes are masterpieces Lord Fetatheren, much safer than going up to the High Mountains.” King Dimcken said.

He couldn’t let it go. Loki realised. He was fixated on the fact that Loki had left him for ten days.

Loki wondered how long it would take him to calm down, and what Loki would have to endure until then.

They skied for the rest of the afternoon, Musleen in particular was fiercely, almost recklessly heading down the more difficult slopes. His face was a mask of concentration as he easily completed each run.

Loki longed to join him, but King Dimcken wanted him to stay close. They skied over the easier slopes before working their way up to the medium level.

“My old bones won’t take the strain of the difficult ones.” King Dimcken said, sounding sulky. “I *used* to go down them like Musleen is doing, I was a fine skier once.”

Loki made a soothing noise as inside he raged. Was King Dimcken determined to find a problem with everything? Apparently so, he was in that sort of a mood. Unfortunately it fell to Loki to deal with it, a situation that was made all the worse by Loki not really being the sympathetic type. He was far more likely to tell someone to get off their arse and do something to fix their own damn problems. Nursemaid he was *not*.

Nursemaid he would have to be.

“Musleen has clearly inherited his talent from you Husband.” Loki said, trying to sound flattering rather than sarcastic.

“Oh he has, he has, his mother couldn’t- that is, I was always very good at all kinds of sport. Musleen has taken after me well. Camtan too of course, he’s a good boy.”

Loki forced a calm smile, although mentally he was on alert. In twenty years the King had not once mentioned his third wife. He *had* mentioned Dorgen’s mother, calling her an opportunistic bitch under his breath once, and he had fond memories of his first wife, whom he had genuinely loved, but never the third, never the ‘traitor’.

Something had happened while Loki was away, something that made the King think of his third wife, and become a limpet on Loki’s side. Sadly just asking was unlikely to yield any results. The King would just get angry which Loki did not want. He *wasn’t* angry at Loki right now, so whatever had happened had only involved Loki indirectly.

“Let us have a rest and a hot drink Husband.” Loki said instead.

He had learnt over the years that King Dimcken liked it when he suggested things or showed an interest, it made the King happier and less likely to explode at little things.

“Yes, yes that is a good idea, let us sit and relax in the sunshine, it’s growing quite weak as the
summer fades, soon the darkness will take up most of the day.”

Loki sat and removed his skies as the King ordered hot chocolate from the kitchens.

“Did you enjoy your camping trip?” King Dimcken asked him again.

He’d asked that a lot over the last day.

“Yes Husband, I thank you again for letting me go, you are very kind to let me have an adventure.”

Loki said.

King Dimcken visibly brightened. “It is my pleasure darling, I want you to be happy.”

‘Die quickly then, I'll be ecstatic.’ Loki thought as he smiled a rare, real, smile. But what he *said* was:

“And I am very grateful to you.”

The drinks arrived quickly, in the High Mountains it was almost permanently on the stove. Loki took a deep drink as the King sipped his and watched his two youngest sons and his grandsons ski the slopes.

“What do you think of Lyrren?” He asked softly.

This was it. Whatever had been on his mind was coming to the surface, Loki realised.

“He is quite nice.” Loki said carefully, trying to gauge the King’s mood without looking as though that’s what he was doing.

“He is an attractive boy, the maidens of the court certainly seem to think so.” King Dimcken said.

Warning bells were already sounding in Loki’s head, with that statement the volume increased dramatically.

“I never really paid much attention to the maiden’s talk.” He said. “Unless you believe there to be some kind of plot in play, we should tell Musleen.”

King Dimcken took another swallow of his drink. “You’ve never looked at him yourself?” He asked, voice hardening just a little.

“No?” Loki answered, trying to seem puzzled by the line of questioning. “He’s nice in his manner and being a prince he’ll always have the maidens running after him, you must have had your fair share of young women ‘accidently’ meeting you in every garden when you were his age.”

“I did.” King Dimcken said, still not looking pleased. Loki waited nervously, it did not take long. “I was told by Lord Eveilyr that you and he were rather close.”

Loki let his incredulousness show. “Is this the same Lord Eveilyr that knew nothing about his kinswoman’s activities with the Resistance? I have no objection to Lyrren as a person but we are hardly close, he spends his days in training with Occtir, I spend mine studying magic, or at least I did.” He let a little nervousness enter his voice. “You didn’t believe him did you Husband? I have always done my duty by you.”

King Dimcken looked a little alarmed. “Yes you have Loki of course, I never thought it might be true, it’s just a rumour of course, but the court was chatting, which is not good, we must face these rumours and defeat them, I will not have your reputation tarnished.”
“Thank you Husband, I would be most devastated if that were to happen.” Loki said, internally marveling at the stupidity of the court. If *he* had wanted to start a rumour he would have chosen either Musleen or Camtan, he spent the most time with them after all, but perhaps the closeness in age between himself and the Princes had been the catalyst. “I would never betray you like that. I was raised *properly*,” He added, for good measure.

“Perhaps Lyrren could go back to the capital for a while.” King Dimcken mused, looking over at Loki.

Loki met his gaze calmly. “Whatever you wish to do Husband I will support you.” He said.

“Perhaps not.” King Dimcken said. “It would not do to give credence to such ugly rumours.”

Four very long days later, King Dimcken finally let Loki out of his sight.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone was wondering what the fishing village would look like, take this place, stick it halfway up a mountain and then add snow.

http://wikitravel.org/en/Kayak%C3%B6y
Seventy Four Steps

Chapter Summary

Beware the Frost

According to Camtan, who was the most gossipy of all the royals, the King had asked Lyrren about the rumours and been firmly rebuffed. Further delicate inquiry had revealed that the instigator of the rumours had been nothing more than some maids, gossiping about how handsome Lyrren was and how attractive Loki was and wouldn’t it just be the most wonderful thing if they got together after the King’s death?

They were banished back to their families for ‘spreading malicious gossip’. Halfway home they were attacked by bandits, there were no survivors.

“I will have my men patrol the road.” Musleen had said when the news arrived.

“Don’t bother.” King Dimcken said gruffly. “Bandits happen everywhere.”

Musleen looked at his father silently for a few moments, but did not argue. The King had not been the slightest bit transparent, he may as well have just announced that the bandits were his own men.

“Yes Father.” Musleen said quietly.

Loki tried not to wince in sympathy. Musleen took his role as Protector of the Kingdom very seriously, the knowledge that his own father would just disregard the rules whenever he felt slighted weighed heavily on his young shoulders.

At least King Dimcken was in a better mood now. He had recovered from his possessiveness and was no longer unhappy with the sight of his eldest grandson.

Dorgen was something of a mystery. During their camping trip he and Loki had managed not to snipe at one another and by the end they had reached something of an unspoken truce. Loki’s sudden appearance in the workroom had seemed to have reversed that in a single stroke.

It might seem, from an outsider’s perspective, that Loki had finally managed to convince the King to let him watch, and thus monitor, the inner workings of the court of Vanaheim. And it only took him twenty years!

Dorgen was a patient man though, and he was clearly prepared to believe that Loki and Odin could be just as patient. However, after the public pawing Loki received at the hands of the King, as well as the way he eagerly accepted, and read, the book on the castle, Dorgen’s manner had softened slightly. It seemed that he was prepared to give Loki just a sliver of a doubt, not much, he was still watching closely, but it was still an improvement.

Loki was extra careful for a long while though, he did not want to fall under both the King’s and Dorgen’s suspicious gazes.

He spent the first few months at the castle skiing, reading, riding and training. He got used to pulling on thick coats and heavy boots when he wanted to go outside, and the hot chocolate by the fire at
night was one of his favourite ways to spend an evening.

Time past and the last of summer faded into autumn. The air grew colder still, and the heavy cartloads of coal and wood that had been coming up the mountain almost every day finally began to see proper use.

The wind began to blow, softly at first, but harder and harder as the days went by. There were reports of wolf attacks out on the hills as prey became scarce. Lord Fetatheren sent a large group of hunters out to track and kill them. Haewkýr volunteered to go, which Loki found strange, until they came back and reported that the wolf pack had apparently left the area of their own volition.

It was during the last few days of autumn that Loki and Musleen went on one of their cross country skiing trips. They had skied down to the bottom of the garden slopes and set out along the ridge that circled the mountain upon which the castle sat. The plan was to head around as far as the road before making their way back up.

Musleen was in quite good spirits, he had received a report from his head guardsman who had informed him that things were going well in the city. Also, and completely by chance Loki was sure, the same report had informed him that a young man had asked Daenceia to have lunch with him and been firmly rebuffed. Apparently she was focusing entirely on her espionage and seidr work, with no time for anyone at present.

Loki was in a reasonably good mood as well. For the last three days he had been fertile, and for the last seven he had been drinking the prevention tea like clockwork. It worked best when freshly brewed, and Fosxyr had become a world champion at bringing him a cup on time, regardless of where he was. Fosxyr used the simple method of brewing the tea, pouring it into his servant’s flask—a flask that was normally filled with water so that servants could rehydrate if they needed to without leaving their posts—and then taking it to where Loki currently was. More than once Loki had guzzled the tea quickly in the nearest toilet while the King sat in the next room, under the impression that his wife was merely using the facilities for a moment.

Honestly, it would be funny if it were not so serious.

In another few days though, Loki would have to tell the King that he was fertile. He was hoping to put it off for the first week, as he would only have to endure the King’s normal activities. Once King Dimcken was aware of Loki’s state he would likely increase his attentions, which was something Loki was dreading.

But for today at least, he was free of the man. Musleen and Loki had set out early and were not expected back until late afternoon. It was a day of total freedom, and Loki was in high spirits.

They were halfway around the ridge when the wind began to pick up.

Musleen frowned. “The weather mage said there would be no storm today.” He said.

“He may still be right, a bit of wind does not automatically mean a storm.” Loki pointed out, although he had to shout to be heard.

Musleen nodded, but was still frowning. “Let’s press on and reach the road, it will be an easier climb back.” He said.

The wind blew harder as they forced their way through the snow. It almost lifted Loki off his feet.

Thor had done that a couple of times in their youth, picking Loki up with the wind and dumping him on his bottom, mostly in jest, although once in the middle of an argument. Loki had used magic to
vanish all of Thor’s clothes and then left him to walk back to the palace naked. It had been that kind of a fight.

Normally though Thor was just being playful, and the landings were quite gentle. This wind did not feel like that wind. This felt dangerous.

High above them there was an enormous boom of sound. Loki and Musleen both looked up at the same time to see a huge chunk of snow break away from the mountainside. They watched with wide eyes as the snow went crashing down towards the castle, only to be manoeuvred by the carefully cut slopes into falling past it and down into a valley.

“That was spectacular!” Musleen shouted.

Loki nodded with a grin. The sight had been alarming at first, but it had soon become clear that the castle, and they, were safe.

They continued onward, the wind blowing harder every minute. Loki felt a strangeness to the air.

“There’s magic in this wind!” He shouted. “I can feel it!”

“We have to get back, this is not normal, and I fear we are not safe out here!” Musleen shouted back.

They struggled on through another quarter of a mile, it was exhausting, trying to fight the wind and the snow. They were both leaning on one another heavily.

“The road is another mile away!” Musleen shouted. “We’re barely making progress; at this rate we won’t reach it until nightfall!”

“They’ll be looking for the mage even now!” Loki yelled above the fierce wind, his face felt numb, Musleen’s lips were white with cold.

Loki grabbed him and pulled him into a tight hug.

“What are you doing?!” Musleen yelled at him. “We have to keep moving!”

Loki concentrated and pushed a little bit of healing magic into Musleen, raising the temperature of his skin a few degrees.

Musleen looked at him in surprise. “Nice one! Can you do it for you?!”

Loki took a moment to warm himself up a little. “We have to be careful, we could so easily get frostbite out here like this!” He shouted.

They continued on through the wind and the snow for another ten minutes or so.

Then the second boom came. It heralded the abrupt end of the wind, which dropped as though it had never existed. But it also heralded another avalanche.

This one was covered in magic. Loki watched with wide eyes as the snow lifted cleanly over the top of the carefully cut slopes and went charging down the mountain towards them.

“Run.” Musleen said, already turning. “Loki run!”

They turned and began skiing downward as fast as they could, trying to cut sideways out of the path of the falling snow as they went. It was moving at a terrifying speed, and the two tiny figures racing ahead of it were doomed from the start.
They had almost reached the side edge of the falling snow, but couldn’t quite make it out of its path. Musleen reached around and grabbed Loki tightly as the snow hit them, shoving them forwards and burying them at the same time.

It was cold, it was hard, and it was ruthless. They tumbled together over and over like ragdolls as the snow pushed them even further down the mountain. Loki instinctively locked his legs around Musleen and started trying to swim through the tumbling snow. He aimed for upstream of the flow, although how he knew where that was he had no idea, but he did, and he tore at the snow with everything he had as it pushed them relentlessly downwards.

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Loki opened his eyes as soon as the sound above them had stopped. They were buried in snow, and had to get out fast. It was dark, Musleen was pressed tightly against him and trying to move but was finding it difficult.

“Loki.” He hissed. “Help me dig an air pocket if you can, quickly, before the snow settles. It’ll harden like a rock in a few minutes.”

Loki’s arms were still partially above his head, he wriggled them as best he could to press the snow back from his face. It was already getting harder to move.

“Musleen.” He said softly. “I’m going to try and warm the snow to soften it, we may be able to dig our way out.”

“Alright.” Musleen whispered in the darkness. His breath was warm on Loki’s face.

Loki concentrated and pushed warmth into his hands, the snow around them began to melt, dripping water down onto them both. Loki managed to lower his hands down to his face and started making their little air pocket bigger. The spell made a soft yellow glow fall over them.

Musleen had a blood nose and was looking up at where Loki’s hands had been.

“Turn that off for a moment.” He said.

Loki obeyed, privately rolling his eyes at Musleen’s choice of phrasing while also marvelling at how he could do that at such a dangerous moment.

“There’s light above us, we are not too far from the surface.” Musleen said. “Do you think that with your magic we could dig our way out? It will take a long time for the rescue party to locate us, maybe too long.”

Loki nodded. “We have to try.” He said.

“Even if you can just break open an air hole to the surface.” Musleen said. “We’ll still have the cold, but we won’t have to worry about not being able to breathe.”

Loki was already focusing his attention upwards. He pushed the heat above them and melted the snow. Water rained down on their heads, but the light grew brighter. Musleen tried to wriggle upwards, but they were jammed into the hole, there was just enough room for them to breathe *if* they took it in turns.

The light grew brighter still, then the last of the snow melted and the weak sun shone in.

Musleen and Loki shared a grin of triumph, but it was far from over. They were completely stuck in
the snow, Loki couldn’t even move his feet and one of Musleen’s arms was locked behind Loki’s back.

“We need to stay calm, we have enough air now, so it is just the cold that we need to worry about.” Musleen said. “And being found before our blood freezes in our veins.”

“I can warm us from time to time.” Loki said, already pushing a little heat into Musleen’s body.

“We need to be careful.” Musleen said. “Is there any way you can melt the snow around us enough to wriggle free?”

Loki tried, carefully heating the snow at Musleen’s back.

The snow shifted suddenly, pressing Musleen harder against Loki in their little prison.

“Stop.” Musleen gasped. “It’s not stable enough for that. We’ll have to wait.”

So they waited. The minutes ticked by slowly as they grew colder and colder. Loki made a few minor attempts to warm them both up but each time the snow would shift or shake. Eventually he had to stop trying.

“How could this have happened?” Loki asked through chattering teeth.

“You said you f-felt magic.” Musleen replied, failing to keep his voice from shaking. “It m-might be an as-sas-sination at-tempt.”

“On who?” Loki asked, he was shivering now too, even his tolerances for the cold were giving out. “You, m-me, anyone on th-the mountain t-today. Th-they hap-pen, i-it’s a p-part of r-royal l-life.”

“Not in Asg-gard.” Loki said. “H-heimdall w-would s-see and y-you’d f-fail b-before y-you b-began.”

“U-until th-the d-day s-someone g-gets a-around h-him.” Musleen countered. “L-like th-the r-rebel m-mage.”

“Sh-sh-e w-was p-powerful.” Loki conceded, try not to think about how numb his body was. “I-I b-beat h-her.”

“Y-y-you d-did, y-you w-were a-amaz-zing.” Musleen said. “I-If th-they d-don’t c-come s-soon I’ll n-never s-see Daenceia a-again.” He said.

His lips were blue and despite the air hole, he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

Loki reached into his sleeve and tried to feel Thor’s knife, which he had tucked in there that morning. The thought of spending the whole day with Thor’s knife close to him had been lovely that morning, but now he struggled. He thought he could feel the shape of it, but his fingers were too numb to be certain. He *could* feel the blade of Odin’s knife pricking his other arm, which was just bloody typical.

“I’ll n-never s-see Thor a-again.” He whispered.

He was having the same trouble breathing. It was so *cold* and he just wanted to sleep, just sleep, just... go... to... sleep.

There was a noise on the edge of his hearing but Loki wasn’t interested. Musleen was already
unconscious, how long had he been…? But it wasn’t important, the darkness was nice, it took it all away…
Chapter Summary

Warm Arms in the Cold Night

Chapter Notes

Hi guys,

I made a bit of an error in the last chapter. I left a bit of plot out that really belongs there. I thought about trying to write it into this chapter but I couldn't get it to work. So I'm going to have to ask you to re-read the last chapter before reading this one. It's only a few paragraphs, but they kind of matter.

I'm really sorry, chalk it up to being worn out over the holiday period.

Oh and Happy New Year.

Loki was in a forest, the sun was shining through the trees as golden shafts of light, he could hear bird singing close by.

In front of him, on the grassy path between the trees, was Thor.

He was flanked by Fandral and Sif, with Hogun and Volstagg bringing up the rear. He looked up from picking his way through the forest debris and stopped dead.

“Loki!” He gasped.

“Uh, Thor, are you quite alright?” Fandral asked from his shoulder.

“It’s Loki.” Thor said and stepped forward.

He wrapped his arms around Loki, flooding Loki’s freezing body with heat.

“Thor?” He whispered. He could *feel* him, hot as a furnace, solid as the earth. “Oh Thor.”

“Loki, my Loki, my heart.” Thor whispered to him as they stood there. “You are freezing! Why are you so cold?”

Behind Thor, Fandral and Sif exchanged worried glances.

“Thor, there is nobody there, you are hugging air.” Fandral said tentatively. “We can stop and rest here for the night, in fact that might be best.”

“Loki is here, I can feel him.” Thor said into Loki’s neck, where he’d buried his face.

“Thor I’m so cold.” Loki whispered. “Warm me up, please warm me up.”
“I will my love, hold onto me, I will warm you.” Thor said to him, his breath huffing gently against Loki’s ear.

Loki stuck his freezing fingers up under the back of Thor’s shirt. Thor jumped slightly but didn’t stop him or let go.

“Fandral?” Sif said in a strange-sounding voice. “Thor’s shirt just moved on its own.”

“I know.” Fandral replied in the same kind of voice. “I saw it.”

“It’s Loki, he’s here.” Thor insisted stubbornly. Loki snuggled closer to him; the warmth of Thor’s body was sweet comfort to the chill that had reached his very bones.

“We’ll make camp.” Hogun said quietly.

He and the others set up their sleeping mats and started a fire as Thor stayed still, holding onto Loki for his very life.

“I love you.” Loki said, pressing his nose into Thor’s neck.

“I love you.” Thor replied simply. “I am waiting for you. But I am not idle, I am doing what I can for you Loki, I promise you.”

“You sent me rain.” Loki murmured, Thor’s heat was seeping into him, he already felt the chill in his bones receding, and his fingertips were growing warm.

“Every year without you is torture.” Thor whispered, Loki savoured the rumble in his chest.

“One day this will all be past us.” Loki said. His eyes were closed now, he felt safe here, in Thor’s arms.

“I won’t stop looking.” Thor vowed. “I will find the emerald for you.”

“I don’t need a gem, I need you, stay safe Thor, you have my heart, don’t you dare break it.” Loki said.

He was completely warm, the numbness of the cold was all gone, he could even feel the jolting of being put down – no, NO!

Loki tried hard to stay there in Thor’s arms but he felt the forest fade around him, leaving him lying on cold ice and snow, with the howl of the wind echoing in his ears.

Loki opened his eyes slowly. He felt warm, properly warm, but he wasn’t back in the castle, no, he was in a cave. He could see the icy ceiling above him by the flickering light of a fire somewhere out of sight.

He turned his head slowly and saw Musleen lying beside him. Musleen was white, his lips were red and looked burnt.

‘Frostbite.’ Loki thought and reached out a hand to him. He pushed a little warmth into Musleen’s body, trying to warm him without causing shock.

Musleen did not stir, his body was locked stiff from the cold. He needed healers, Loki realised, forcing the thought from his mind that Musleen was *very* pale, and *very* stiff.

There was a noise by the fire, which was too far for them to get any warmth from it. People were
talking. Loki froze in place as the sounds of their conversation reached him.

“You’re sure they’re dead?” Asked a male.

“If not, they soon will be, they’re frozen solid.” Said a female voice. “We’ll just leave them there and it’ll happen.”

“Do you have the finger?” Said the male.

“Right here, stick it in the box and I’ll teleport it to the castle.” Said the female.

Loki wriggled his fingers in his gloves, they were all there, he could feel them.

He glanced carefully over at Musleen. The Prince was missing his index finger from his right hand. His glove was gone, and his little finger wasn’t looking well either, as it had been left to lie directly on the ice.

Loki carefully reached into his sleeves and withdrew his knives. No doubt Musleen would want these two for questioning, but equally important was getting out alive, which they were unlikely to do with those two blocking their escape.

Loki shut his eyes for a moment, listening to the sounds of the two speakers, placing their location in his mind. Then, lightning fast, he rose to a sitting position and threw his knives, one two, and they were on the ground. The man was screaming, clutching his chest where the blade had landed, the woman was curled up around her stomach, moaning in pain.

Loki rose and ran to them, yanking his knives out viciously before kicking the woman in the head, knocking her out cold.

The man presented no threat, Loki couldn’t feel a scrap of magic in him, so he left him conscious as he ran back to Musleen and grabbed the Princes by the coat. He pulled Musleen closer to the fire and then pushed a little more heat into him. Then he finally worked up the nerve to check his pulse.

It was there, it was slow and weak, but it was there. Loki felt a tinge of relief, but a huge does of fear. Musleen was still alive, that meant it was up to Loki to keep him that way. He chanced a little more heat before turning to the man.

“If you want to live you will tell me who ordered this.” He said.

The man stared at him in shock.

“How are you not frozen?” He croaked.

“Magic.” Loki said bluntly. “Tell me who ordered this!”

“No, death to the King!” The man shouted. He was turning pale from blood loss.

“The King isn’t here.” Loki snapped. “We are, now tell me!”

The man shook his head stubbornly. “He is the King’s man, and you are his whore.” He spat. “He’ll suffer for this.”

Loki felt the rage build within him, he often felt like a whore, but to hear it said to his face was too much. He growled in anger and stepped closer to the man, whose eyes widened in fear.

“Tell. Me. Who. Ordered. This.” He said, raising a hand and making it appear to burst into flame. He could have actually made it burn, but that took more energy for the same effect. “Now.”
The man squeaked as Loki stepped closer, bringing the fire towards the man’s face. He was shaking with fear. “D-d-don’t.” He stuttered, staring into Loki’s eyes.

“I will keep you alive for *days* if I have to.” Loki bluffed, narrowing his eyes and snarling.

He reached out a gloved hand toward the man, who panicked. Fighting to crawl backwards even through the pain in his chest he shut his eyes tightly and screamed. “Lord Eveilyr! Lord Eveilyr! He wants the King dead, he wants you both dead before you reach his lands! He’s hiding something, please don’t hurt me!!!”

Loki straightened. “Fine.” He said. “Now you can shut up.”

He turned back to Musleen and checked his pulse. It was still present, but very weak.

There was a sigh from the man. Loki turned but it was too late. He watched as the man’s body slumped over into death. It might have been his wound, but a quick check of his hands showed that he’d swallowed a vial of liquid, poison, Loki assumed.

He turned and glanced at the woman, she was breathing shallowly and probably would survive much longer anyway with her stomach wound.

Loki threw some more wood on the fire and carefully pushed a little more heat into Musleen; the bloody stump where his finger had been started to bleed sluggishly.

Loki hunted around until he found some supplies and bound the wound, carefully wrapping the little finger as well, although it looked horribly damaged. Musleen’s finger was nowhere to be found, which meant it had probably been teleported to the castle already.

They had to get back there. Loki knew some healing magic, but he was no expert in reversing the effects of extreme cold. He knew to raise the temperature slowly, but beyond that he was lost.

He had to get help, but he didn’t even know where they were. A quick check outside of the cave revealed nothing but white in every direction, at least, as far as he could even see. It was night time, and the air was so cold that Loki had to retreat quickly as it felt as though his lungs were burning from it.

He took a deep breath to stay calm. He would call for help; he could at least let the people in the castle know that they were in trouble, even if he had no idea where they actually were.

A nasty thought crossed his mind. Even though it made more sense to contact someone like Haewkyr, King Dimcken would be upset if Loki didn’t contact him first. Even in life or death situations, the King made things difficult.

It didn’t matter. He’d tell King Dimcken quickly before contacting Haewkyr or the head of the castle trackers.

Loki took another deep breath and let his mind go.

He appeared in the castle right in front of the King, who yelped in surprise.

“Husband.” Loki said quickly. “Musleen and I are in trouble, we are in a cave somewhere but I do not know where, we were attacked by Lord Eveilyr’s men. Please send the trackers to find us, please. Musleen is in a very bad way.”

“Do you see any features around you that may help?” Said a voice from behind Loki. His image
spun and caught sight of Camtan, who was looking up from a map with Sofftia and Lord Fetatheren, who was speaking urgently to a servant.

“No, there is nothing but snow.” Loki said.

“There are dozens of caves around, we will stop checking under the ice but it may take a long time.” Lord Fetatheren said seriously as the servant left. “How long can you maintain your illusion?”

“Musleen doesn’t have a long time.” Loki said. “I can stay for a while, but I want to check on him again.”

King Dimcken came to stand by the others. “Is he injured?” He asked, his face lined with worry.

“He has some injuries, and he is half frozen.” Loki said. “I’m doing what I can.”

The door opened and the head tracker came in at a run, swiftly followed by Haewkyr.

“Your Grace, you say you have no clue where you might be?” He asked Loki immediately, barely stopping to acknowledge the royals in the room.

“There’s nothing, no large rocks or peaks that I saw.” Loki said. “But it is also night time, I can barely see out through the darkness.”

“Loki, I need you to do something very strange.” Haewkyr said seriously. “Go outside and piss on the ground.”

Loki blinked. “Alright?” He said.

“I have contacted the nearest wolf pack, they have your scent from one of your jackets, give them something to track. They won’t attack you; we’ll be right behind them if they scent something.” Haewkyr continued.


“Safer than letting them stay where they are Your Majesty.” Haewkyr said quickly. “I have explained matters and they are willing to help.”

Loki nodded. “Nature magic is a wonderful thing. I hope it works.” He said and broke the connection.

For a moment he was disorientated, but he crawled to his feet and stumbled back out of the cave. It was hard to get his winter robes out of the way, but eventually he managed to empty his bladder on the snow. He went back inside quickly, it was freezing out there and the warmth he’d gotten from Thor had faded, leaving the snow and ice to chill him once again.

Loki pushed a little more warmth into Musleen, ignoring the warning he got from his body as he pushed it past its limits. He had not eaten in a long while, he had been frozen once already and his connection to Thor, while wonderful, had sapped a lot of his magic, his reserves felt very low.

He glanced once more at the woman, she was dead. He wished he could feel something about that, but the cold was taking his strength.

He lay down next to Musleen, taking the side that was furthest from the fire, and pressed tightly against him. Outside he could hear the sound of the wind howling thought the mountains.

For the next hour Loki fed the fire, warmed Musleen with magic, and held on tightly as the cold
drove at him again and again. He stripped the man and woman of their cloaks and used them as blankets to try and stay warmer, but it was night time, and the air was far too cold to be held at bay by mere fur. He kept pushing warmth into Musleen, trying to fight the cold that sank down over them both.

There wasn’t enough fuel to last the night. Clearly the mage and her companion had been planning to move elsewhere, possibly through teleportation, as there was no sign of transport. The fuel ran out after the first hour, and Loki was forced to let the fire die.

The second hour was much worse as the cold crept into their bones. Loki ended up lying on top of Musleen in an attempt to keep them both as warm as possible. But even this did not stop his hands and feet from going numb.

This time Loki was awake when they were discovered. He heard a snuffling noise, followed by the sound of boots stamping on the ground and growing closer.

“Loki!” Came the call of Haewkyr’s voice, sounding alarmed. Loki tried to lift his head but his neck wouldn’t obey him, stupid neck. “Loki, can you hear me?”

The ground was moving, no, he was being shaken, but he couldn’t feel it, only his eyes told him so, stupid body, not feeling anything, stupid, stupid, cold, he was flying, no, he was being carried. Haewkyr was carrying him to blankets, lot of, on a sled, blankets. He was under, oh good, it was nice under the blankets. Musleen, where was? Oh, right here, beside him, when did that happen? Moving, they were moving, on the sled. What a good sled.

Loki slept.

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Loki woke surrounded by warmth.

He was also surrounded by blankets and furs, enough to almost bury him.

He tried to sit up, but his arms and legs felt too weak.

“Your Grace?” Said Fosxyr from somewhere on the other side of the blankets. “Are you awake?”

Fosxyr’s concerned face appeared in Loki’s vision. He looked down at Loki and then breathed out in relief.

“How do you feel?” He asked gently.

Loki tried again to move, but Fosxyr stopped him. “Don’t move yet Your Grace, you have been through a lot, just rest.” He said.

“How’s Musleen?” Loki croaked. He blinked in surprise at the sound of his own voice.

“He is beside you Your Grace, he was in a very bad way and the healers are still monitoring him closely.” Fosxyr said quietly.

It was true; the big double bed Loki was lying in had another occupant, the better to conserve heat. The room was boiling from the enormous fires in three grates, and Loki could see on the edge of his vision a healer mage leaning over Musleen and gently working her spells upon him.

“Will he be alright?” Loki croaked.
“They think so.” Fosxyr said, trying to smile, although his face was still very worried. “But he’s been injured, they… they cut off one of his fingers, and he’s lost another one to the cold.” His voice sounded as though it was going to break.

“He’ll be alright.” Loki croaked, trying to comfort Fosxyr as best he could. Fosxyr had raised Musleen, he loved the two younger Princes as though they were his own, the thought that one of them had suffered such an injury was devastating to the servant, who was fighting to keep the tears in his eyes from running down his cheeks.

“He’s alive.” Fosxyr said thickly. “He’s alive.”

He disappeared suddenly, but reappeared a moment later with a hot drink.

“If I help you to sit up, you should try and drink this Your Grace.” He said, sounding a little more under control.

He helped Loki sit up slightly, and held the cup to his lips. Loki took a swallow and pulled a face.

“What is it?” He asked.

“A nourishing brew.” Fosxyr answered. “Carefully designed over many years to ensure maximum nutrients in minimum fluid. Have some more.”

Loki complied, although the stuff tasted like dishwater.

“Bracing.” He said dryly as Fosxyr lowered the cup.

A moment later he was fighting to be free of the blankets as his stomach rejected the drink.

Fosxyr helped him reach a bucket and held him carefully as he vomited.

There was a healer by his side almost instantly. “Let me see.” She instructed and placed her hands gently on Loki’s heaving back. “Your body is still in mild shock, you should stick to water for a little while, but you need to try again with the soup as soon as you can, you are very weak Your Grace.” She said as Loki spat the last of the vomit into the bucket.

“I’ll fetch you some water.” Fosxyr said, helping him lie back down.

Loki was asleep before he got back.

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The next time Loki woke up it was night time, although the fires were still so high and hot that the room was well lit, only the dark outside the windows gave away the fact that it was night.

“Fosxyr?” Loki called out carefully.

It was not Fosxyr who appeared in his vision, it was the King.

“Loki, darling are you alright?” He asked. “Can I fetch you some water?”

“Yes please.” Loki said, startled to see the King at all. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the healers were still in the room, but they were staying out of the King’s way.

“I’ve been investigating who did this to you.” King Dimcken said as he brought Loki a cup. “Dorgen has taken over the investigation now, with Musleen’s guards, I’ve been here ever since, in
case you woke up.”

He helped Loki sit up slightly – not without difficulty, he was not as strong as Fosxyr – and held the cup to Loki’s lips.

Loki sipped the water carefully. “I feel weak.” He said as the King put the cup down.

“The healers told me that you had used your magic far past your normal limits, they think you may take a great deal of time to recover.” King Dimcken said. “But you saved Musleen’s life, Loki, I do not have the words to tell you how grateful I am, I do not believe that they have been invented, you saved my son, my dear boy. He is the one I love most, and I feared the worst for both of you. When his finger arrived on the castle doorstep, I thought he was gone, I thought they had killed him. But you saved him, you saved my boy. You just stay right there and recover my darling wife, you have shown tremendous courage and strength. You need to rest and recover now.”

“Yes Husband.” Loki said. “Husband?”

“Yes my darling?”

“Um, I was going to tell you after my day out, but my fertility period should be starting soon. But I feel so weak…”

“Do not worry about it Loki darling, you just rest and recover, there is plenty of time for a baby next time, it is far more important that you are well and strong. Now try to sleep again my darling, just rest.”

“Yes Husband, I will try.” Loki said, deliberately playing up the tremble in his voice as he let his eyes close again.

Well that was that taken care of, at least for another fourteen years.
Musleen took two days to wake up. He lay so still and silent by Loki’s side that in the night Loki would gently slide a hand to rest over his chest just to make sure his heart was still beating.

When his eyes finally opened, King Dimcken was there in an instant. He had hardly left the healer’s rooms since the two of them had been brought back. Most of the time he’d sat by Loki’s side and read to him, or sat quietly by the fire while Loki slept.

Loki slept a lot in those first few days.

Now he took Musleen’s undamaged hand in his and stroked his son’s forehead gently.

“It’s alright my boy.” He said in a voice so gentle that Loki was surprised to hear it. “Just relax, you are safe, you are with the healers.”

“Loki?” Musleen croaked. “Is he safe?”

“I’m here.” Loki said softly. Musleen turned his head, wincing as he did so. “We’re in together to preserve the warmth.” Loki added.

Musleen nodded very slowly. “Be careful.” He croaked. “I’m a cuddler.”

King Dimcken chuckled lightly. “I’m sure Loki will understand.” He said, reaching for a cup of water. “Here, try to sip it.”

Musleen managed a few sips before his head fell back down to the pillow.

“ ‘m tired.” He said.

“Then sleep my boy, it’s alright, we’ll be here when you wake up.” King Dimcken said gently.

Musleen was asleep a moment later, but it was a natural sleep, far better than the almost coma-like state he had been in.

Loki and King Dimcken shared a look over Musleen’s sleeping form.

“He’ll be alright Husband.” Loki said.

To his astonishment King Dimcken started to cry. “Yes.” He said through the tears that made their way down his cheeks. “I believe it now.”

He made his way to Loki’s side and wrapped his arms around him. Loki forced himself to hug the King back as the old man let his worries go.

“He’s so serious.” King Dimcken said after a few minutes. “So quiet, one day I looked up and my child was a man, ready and willing to take up the role of Protector. Camtan has my nature, but I do
not know where Musleen gets his. He has been such a strong pillar of my reign since his coming of age, I do not know what the realm would do without him. I do not know what *I* would do without him, my quiet thinker."

“He’s alright.” Loki said. “He’s very strong, he’ll face the new challenge of his lost fingers and come out of it even stronger I’m sure.”

“Yes, yes I am sure of it, when he next wakes I will have to tell him, as long as he isn’t still too tired.” King Dimcken said.

It was another hour before he left Loki to sleep. He had been horribly clingy these past few days. Loki endured it as best he could, reminding himself over and over again that *anything* was better than having sex with the King, even enduring his almost constant company.

Musleen steadily improved through the night. In the morning he was able to drink some of the nourishing brew, although his expression made Loki fight not to laugh.

“I’m sure they make it taste like that so that we fight to improve as fast as possible, to get back onto real food.” Loki said.

“I would not put it past them.” Musleen said, as once again King Dimcken came to sit by his son’s side. His expression was very serious.

“Musleen, my dear boy, there is something you must know.” He said.

Loki winced, this was not going to be easy, and he was surprised that the King had not left it up to one of the healers to deliver the blow, the man had more iron in his stomach than Loki had given his credit for.

Musleen frowned at him. “What is it Father?” He asked, letting his head fall back against the pillows, he was tired again.

“You were not just buried in the ice my son, you were attacked by criminals, they have given you an injury.” King Dimcken hesitated only slightly before plunging onwards. “They cut off the index finger on your right hand, and then left your hand to the ice, your little finger had to be removed as a result.”

Musleen turned his head slowly to look down at his bandaged hand.

“I can’t feel anything.” He said softly.

“The healers are still blocking the pain so that you might sleep.” King Dimcken said.

Loki bit his lip, if only he’d woken a little sooner, he might have – but it was useless to think like that, as uncomfortable as it was to witness, Musleen would need support as he processed the terrible news.

“I won’t be able to wield my sword.” He said slowly.

“No, not anymore, but you have your life my son, that is far more important.” King Dimcken urged.

Musleen was still looking at the mass of bandages that shielded his hand from the outside world. For a moment he looked devastated, but then he took a deep breath and his features smoothed out into the calm demeanour Loki knew so well.
“I will have to start training with my left.” He said simply. “It took me about ten years to be competent with my right, and half a century to be as good as I wished to be, I will set myself the same goal. I’m sure that I will be able to do it.”

His voice was calm and steady. Musleen was not a man to dwell on what could not be changed. Loki wondered how much of his calm manner was a front, but it was impossible to tell.

“I’m sure you will my son, you always do what you set out to, but for now I want you to rest, you need lots of sleep and nourishment to be well again, then when you are I will have the finest swordsmen in the realm come and be your tutors.”

“Oh no, don’t do that, Camtan falls into that category, and if there is one thing I never want to do it’s call my brother ‘master’, he’ll never let me live it down.” Musleen said. “Besides, I know *what* to do, I just need to go out and do it, many, many, *many*, times.”

“As long as you’re sure.” King Dimcken said with a gentle smile.

“I am Father, please, do not worry about me, I will be alright, although right now I think I would like to sleep again.” Musleen said. He was pale and his eyes looked exhausted.

King Dimcken nodded and left them both to rest. Now that they were both expected to recover he had gone back to some of his duties, although he still made time to see them multiple times every day.

In the dead of night, when even the healers were asleep and the world was totally silent, Loki woke to the sound of crying.

He lay still and didn’t move as Musleen struggled to cope with his loss. He was about to turn and offer what comfort he could when he heard the soft voice of Fosxyr.

“Hush my Moonlight, it’s alright, you will be alright, this is just a challenge, like all the others you’ve fought and won in your life. You will be alright.”

“I can’t write, I can’t fight, Fox I can’t do anything, there is so much I did with my right hand – “

“Don’t you be dramatic to me Moonlight, you will struggle to write and yes, you will not be able to balance a sword well enough to withstand a hard blow, but you are my quiet one, my stubborn one. You *will* rise to this challenge because you wouldn’t *be* you if you didn’t.”

“I know. I know, I just… I don’t know, I will never be whole again.”

“Close your eyes Moonlight and let me tell you a story.”

“Is it the one about how the things in the palace kitchen come to life at night and throw parties in the pantry?”

“Do you want to hear that one?”

“Maybe another night.”

“I’m going to tell you about a woman with golden hair, bright blue eyes and a will of pure steel.”

“And what did she do?”

“When the war came, there was a great power that turned Vanir against their kin. One of those affected was a young man who had gone into the market as a part of the young Prince Dorgen’s
visit. When the power came down, it turned everyone at the market into soldiers for the enemy, including the young man. They attacked the capital with a terrible vengeance, many people were killed or injured, it was terrible.

Months went by, and the attack became a war. Many people died, others were permanently injured, some by their own kin. It was truly a terrible time.

The young woman, who was still only a child really, having only just begun to show signs of the woman she would become, she was ordered by her father to stay safely in the now-shielded capital while he and her older brother went to fight. She defied them, for there was no one who loved the young man as much as she did. She left her home in the dead of night and went to the battlefield, where the shield-maidsens were training. She demanded the right to train along-side them. She was too young, and too common, but it was war, and they were desperate.

She was given a sword and began her training. They said it would take her over a year to become any good, but she knew she did not have a year. The nobles might try to avoid killing one another, but they had no such problem killing the poor commoners who had fallen under the spell of evil. She had to learn fast to get out onto the battlefield where she might find the young man.

She practiced every moment of every day, over and over. She rose early, slept late, fought against those with ten times her experience, and when she felt that she had learnt enough from them, she ran away in the night to the battle itself.

It a field of thousands, she found him, which was something her father and brother had been unable to do for months. When asked how later she said only that the fates must like a smartarse.”

Beside Loki, Musleen chuckled lightly.

“He was of course still under the terrible spell, and when she tried to reason with him he did a terrible thing.”

“What did he do?” Musleen asked softly.

“He stabbed her. His blade went right into her side. Only her training saved her, as she pulled to the side and he missed her vital organs. But even then, badly wounded and bleeding on the battlefield she did not give up. She bound her wound with cloth torn from her armour-padding and headed after him. When she caught up to him she hit over the head so hard that she knocked him out.”

“Ouch.” Musleen said.

“Ouch indeed, but it worked. When he woke up he was no longer under the spell. He was himself again, and was sent home as, like her, he was too young to fight in the army. That lasted all of five minutes before he returned and joined at a different recruiting station by lying about his age.”

“And the girl?”

“She recovered in a field ward and was sent home, but returned as soon as she was able. She was a tailor’s daughter, but she fought like a lion, she was quiet and serious and determined. Nothing stopped her when her mind was made up. She was your mother Musleen, and you are so like her that there are days when I think she’s still in the room. *That* is how I know you will be alright, because you get that same look in your eye when you’ve made your mind up to do something. You will one day be the greatest swordsman in Vanaheim, not the greatest left-handed swordsman, just the greatest, because you won’t ever settle for being second best. Now look me in the eye and tell me that I’m wrong.”
There was nothing but silence from behind Loki.

“I told you so.” Fosxyr said after a moment.

“Fox?”

“Yes Moonlight?”

“How do you know that story?” Musleen asked.

“The young man told me.” Fosxyr said softly. “Now get some sleep, you are still recovering and I won’t have them blame me for your delay in recovery.”

Musleen chuckled softly and settled further under the covers.

“Goodnight Fox.” He mumbled.

“Goodnight Moonlight.” Fosxyr said, equally soft.

Loki snapped his eyes shut quickly as Fosxyr went briefly to check on him before leaving the room.

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As soon as Musleen was deemed to be strong enough to have visitors, the healer’s room was inundated with people. The first to arrive was Camtan, who brought a huge basket of fresh cakes from the kitchens.

“There is no way that you are getting the right kind of food in here.” He declared, dumping the basket onto the middle of the bed and climbing on after it. “I have taken it upon myself to rectify that problem, have a sweet-cake.”

“The healers give us nourishing soup, it has everything we need.” Musleen said. He was propped up against his pillows with a book in his left hand. He set it down as Loki grabbed a cake.

“I’ve tried your nourishing soup and I did not approve.” Camtan said. “I would have recovered from my own ordeal far faster if I had been allowed a cake.”

Musleen rolled his eyes and took one, biting into it with a moan of enjoyment. “It’s got jam.” He sighed as he settled back against his pillows.

“Warm jam.” Loki agreed.

“See? I know what sick people need. I’d make a great nurse.” Camtan said with a grin as Fosxyr quietly put a tray of tea on the covers.

“Please take care not to spill anything Your Graces.” He said with a twinkle in his eye.

“Nogh problem.” Camtan said with a full mouth.

“I taught you better than that.” Fosxyr said as Loki struggled not to laugh.

Camtan forced down the whole mouthful at once and tried to look abashed. “Sorry Fosxyr, I will try harder.” He said, looking as though he had no intention of doing so.

Fosxyr rolled his eyes at them. He was a lot more free with the two Princes, Loki realised. But then raising them from a young age had almost certainly done its part in breaking down the usual class
Loki picked up a cup of tea and took a swallow. He was probably fine to leave the healer’s rooms and return to his own chambers, but he didn’t want to. The King might decide that a ‘reunion’ was in order and Loki was not yet out of his fertile time. Instead he faked tiredness on and off throughout the day and put up with the feelings of boredom that rose up in his at having to remain so restricted.

“What’s been going on while we’ve been recovering?” He asked Camtan.

“Dorgen took over the investigation with Musleen’s guards, they’ve gone over the cave with a fine-toothed comb and have a stack of evidence, except it doesn’t point to anyone.”

“The man said it was Lord Eveilyr.” Loki said.

“And it may well be, but there is nothing that actually links him to the crime. They’re trying to find something, anything. He does have a motive, although Father said he and his family are usually more subtle than this, they’ve never attacked the royal family directly, they just try hard to get out of paying their taxes or declaring trade and stuff like that.”

“That’s true, they aren’t the most loyal of subjects, but they have the self-preservation instincts of a strong coward.” Musleen said. “The closest they’ve ever come is the rebel mage, and they disowned her as soon as she got caught, I find it odd that they would want revenge for her.”

“So the investigation continues.” Camtan said with a sigh. “Father is anxious to find a culprit, he wants to execute someone.”

Musleen sighed softly. “That’s not always the answer.” He said quietly.

“It’s always Father’s answer.” Camtan said. “But I think it will take a long time to find anyone in connection with this, they were too good at covering their tracks, and the man could have been lying, or even under the impression that it was Eveilyr when it was really someone else, hiding behind his name.”

“I would like to have a look at what they’ve found so far.” Musleen said.

“Father said no.” Camtan said bluntly. “Not until you are well enough to be up and about.”

Musleen almost looked as though he planned to throw off the covers right there and then, but after a lightning fast glance at Loki he said. “I will just have to wait until I am well then.”

It occurred to Loki then that Musleen was *aware* of the fact that he was faking his slow recovery, and was choosing to play along to give him an extended break from the King. If they had been alone Loki would have hugged him in gratitude, as it was, he offered him another cake.

“Thank you.” Musleen said, taking one. “These really are good.”

“You sound surprised, brother, did you think I’d bring you stale ones?” Camtan asked him with mock offence.

“No, I thought you would eat them all before you got here.” Musleen shot back. “How is Roaseia?”

Camtan’s grin widened. “She’s getting into everything, absolutely everything, her nanny is always frazzled, and yet when Sofftia takes her she is as good as gold.”

“Reminds me of someone.” Fosxyr said dryly from the corner of the room, where he was making up barriers.
some more hot water bottles for the two invalids.

Camtan laughed. “She said her first word the other day.”

“Did she? What was it?” Musleen asked.

“Da.” Camtan said, preening slightly.

“That’s not a word.” Musleen said.

“It is when she’s looking right at me!” Camtan insisted. “She’s done it twice now, I claim first word.”

“Fine, I cannot wait to hear her.” Musleen said with a smile.

“I’ll bring her to visit if you like, Sofftia is anxious to come and see that you are both alright, and Dorgen almost fought me in the training yard for the right to see you first. Father told him no.” Camtan added in a more subdued voice. “He’s coming tomorrow.” He added, more brightly.

“Tell him I look forward to it.” Musleen said.

Loki did not comment, Dorgen had been less openly hostile to him these last few months, but he couldn’t honestly say he was looking forward to the man’s presence.

“Haewkyr wanted to come and see Loki as well, he’s going to write to your grandparents and he wanted to be able to say that he spoke to you. He has to wait until after Dorgen and Sofftia though. He practically climbed the walls when he found out.” Camtan said.

“Tell him from me that I’m fine, weak but fine.” Loki asked. “And no climbing walls.” He added.

Camtan grinned at him. “I’ll tell him, but I’m not convinced that he’ll listen. He cares a lot about you.”

“He’s family.” Loki said. “And he’s under instruction from our grandparents to look after me.”

“He was incredible when they were looking for you I know that.” Camtan said. “He spoke to the wolves, the birds, the wild alpecs, even the white foxes, and they supposedly don’t come anywhere near people. I’d never even *seen* one until he called out, then it turned out there were five of them all hiding in the snow.”

“Wow.” Loki said. “I knew he had wild magic, I didn’t realise just how strong he was.”

“I hope Father doesn’t decide to make use of it.” Musleen said, sounding tired. “He’s got a habit of pushing people.”

“He hasn’t mentioned anything like that.” Camtan said. “I’m sure he won’t try to make Haewkyr do anything too impossible.”

“Like what?” Loki asked, a little concerned.

“Like making him train all the horses, and the hunting dogs. Using wild magic gets results faster, but it doesn’t produce much loyalty. Or he could order him to bring in the wild animals for hunting.”

“That’s hardly the point of hunting.” Loki said.

“It depends on how frustrated he is.” Musleen said. “But hopefully he will have other things on his
mind and he just won’t think of it.”

“Hopefully.” Loki said.

He did not want Haewkyr to be used like that. The man gave the impression of having barely concealed energy, which most of the time was a bonus. But people like that could often hide things, like an enormous temper. Haewkyr had a habit of flirting with the King’s anger, the last thing Loki wanted was for him to be pushed over the edge.
Dorgen brought Musleen a stack of paper when he came to visit. He had obtained them from the old schoolroom where Sofftia had learnt her lessons as a child. They had on them all the different runes, drawn in a strange bubble-like style in different sizes starting quite large and becoming extremely small. Musleen thanked him warmly and put them to one side for the rest of the visit.

“I am glad you’re alright brother.” Dorgen said. He glanced over at where Loki lay. “And you too, Loki.”

Loki blinked in surprise. He had not been expecting that. He nodded to Dorgen in acknowledgement of his words.

“I have an apology to make to you Loki.” Dorgen continued. “I believed that you were sent here to further Asgard’s interest in our affairs. I was wrong, at every turn you have shown that you are not what I believed you to be, I am sorry for my treatment of you.”

Loki was stunned. For a second he just stared at Dorgen in shock before he remembered himself and stammered a reply.

“It’s alright, it’s fine, you weren’t to know.” He said.

Dorgen bowed his head to Loki gracelessly. “You have saved my sons and my brother. Without you Loki I would have half a family right now. If you have need of anything, I owe you much. Ask me and I will try to help you.”

“I thank you.” Loki said, still stunned at this change in Dorgen’s manner. But then Loki only had to watch how Dorgen spoke to his younger brother to see how much he loved Musleen. The relief in his face was noticeable, and he was very kind and encouraging when he spoke about Musleen returning to the training yards in future.

It certainly gave Loki something to think about. It seemed strange to just let go of the dislike he felt towards Dorgen, but the man had apologised and Loki had accepted. Thankfully Dorgen did not immediately try and make them best friends, choosing instead to focus most of his attentions toward Musleen, but he did not exclude Loki either, or glare at him.

Later that day, after Dorgen was gone, Musleen picked up the papers and began trying to wrote the runes inside the lines with his damaged hand. He had to balance the pen in a different way to how he
had been originally taught, and after only fifteen minutes he was struggling to keep it steady.

“This is going to be hard.” He muttered as he put the papers back down.

“You’ll get there.” Loki said. “You can already write, just not very elegantly, and not for long, but you’ll improve daily.”

“I know, practice will see me through. It is a little frustrating though I must admit.” Musleen said, looking disgruntled.

Loki instantly thought of Musleen crying in the night, but pushed the thought from his mind. Musleen did not need to know that he overheard everything.

“We’ll be able to leave here soon.” Loki said. “Getting back to your rooms will make you feel more positive about it I’m sure.”

“In a few more days, maybe a week.” Musleen answered him. “There’s no rush, and it is important to be fully healed so as not to suffer a relapse.”

“Thank you.” Loki said quietly a few minutes later.

“Every little bit helps.” Musleen replied without looking at him.

They were silent for a few hours as Loki read and Musleen alternated between taking up his writing again and resting his damaged hand. The two missing fingers ended in scarred bumps that he made no effort to hide. Musleen’s practical side would not let him be vain enough to constantly cover them, not when doing so would restrict what he still *could* do.

It was just after lunch when there was a loud knock at the door.

There was only one person it could be. Haewkyr strode into the room with a smile on his face and the smell of hay on his skin.

“I’ve been in the stables, but the hunting dogs said I didn’t smell too bad.” He said, seating himself on the bed with a grin.

“The hunting dogs think that horse shit is the height of scented sophistication.” Loki pointed out.

“I could go and shower?” Haewkyr offered.

“It’s alright, hay scent *is* rather nice compared to the smell of a sickroom.” Loki said. “How have you been?”

“Busy, very busy, His Majesty asked me to show him the white foxes, so I called to a few of them and they came close enough to watch, but they won’t come to the hand, they’re too wild for that. His Majesty seemed content though, he said he’d never seen one before and almost believed that they were a myth.”

“I’ve never even heard of them.” Loki confessed.

“They’re thought to be very rare, but of course they are also masters of disguise in the snow, so maybe there are thousands of them and we just never saw them.” Musleen volunteered.

“Somewhere in the middle of those two extremes.” Haewkyr clarified. “At least as far as they would tell me, they were a bit cagey even with me. They don’t trust easily.”
“I do not blame them, they are said to be extremely tasty with quite a sweet flesh, we have a terrible time catching them, but the wolves do not, or so I have read.” Musleen said.

“As long as I don’t have to hunt them.” Haewkyr said. “I can’t stand killing the smart ones.”

“White foxes are smart?” Musleen asked.

“Very, right up there with wolves, dogs, cats and h-horses.” Haewkyr said. “Not a good species to hunt, they’ll take it to heart.”

“So apart from showing the King the white foxes, what else have you been doing?” Loki asked impatiently. “We’ve been stuck in here for a long time, what’s been happening?”

“Well, I have written to our grandparents and assured them that you are fine. News of your near-deaths has reached the capital and caused mild alarm among the people, apparently the general feeling is that your attackers should hang, poor sweet Loki does not deserve to be attacked so viciously.”

“What about me?” Musleen asked in fake outrage.

“Rumour has it that a battalion of your guards were prepared to ride up here to avenge you, but were stopped by their duty. The people were most displeased to here you have been attacked, you’re known as the honest one, the true one, they were worried they may have lost your presence from the courts.” Haewkyr said.

“Oh.” Musleen said, sounding humbled. “They were right not to leave their posts.” He added.

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Loki returned to his rooms three days before his fertile time was due to end. Fosxyr immediately brewed him a cup of preventative tea, just in case. The King had completely reversed his earlier desire, at least while Loki was still so weak, but there was no sense in taking chances.

“Will he send for me do you think?” Loki asked Fosxyr quietly.

“There is no way to tell Your Grace, hopefully not.” He answered.

King Dimcken did not ask for Loki straight away, and he was able to write to the King with news of his ‘womanly nature’ a few days later, buying himself even more time.

But of course it couldn’t last, and when Loki reluctantly put pen to paper again to tell the King that his period was over, the reply he received made it clear that King Dimcken expected Loki back in his bed that night.

Loki bathed and dressed for dinner in a sombre mood. He had spent just over a month away from the King’s bedchamber. The thought of going back was terrifying. It would be bad, of course it would, King Dimcken did not like to ease back into things.

Dinner was celebratory, Musleen had returned to the training yard that day and had begun practising with his left hand. He had stubbornly persisted in pushing himself until exhausted, and now tried to stay awake as King Dimcken praised him for his strength and spirit.

“You’re very strong my boy, and very skilled, I have no doubt that you will be fighting again in no time.” He said cheerfully as Musleen’s head almost hit his plate.
“Thank you Father.” He mumbled. “I just need to get my strength back and I will do you proud.”

“I am already proud.” King Dimcken said, in a rare moment of warmth.

After dinner, when the three princes and Sofftia had left for their respective bedchambers, King Dimcken put an arm around Loki’s shoulders and leaned in close to give him a kiss.

“I want you.” He murmured against Loki’s mouth. “I want you so badly, I need you right now.”

He rose and pulled Loki with him to the bedroom, where he tugged roughly at Loki’s clothes.

Loki reluctantly undressed for the King and was pushed down onto the bed and smothered with kisses.

“So beautiful, missed you, want you.” King Dimcken moaned as he rubbed his hands all over Loki’s thighs and buttocks.

He pressed kisses everywhere, all down Loki’s legs until he reached Loki’s feet. To Loki’s horror, he planted a kiss against the sole of his left foot.

The soles of his feet were the only place left untouched by the inky stuff that King Dimcken seemed to leave behind whenever he touched Loki’s skin.

Now it seemed to flow over the sole of his left foot, covering one of the last clean places that he had left. And of course, when you have two of something, and they are symmetrical, it makes sense to do to the other what was done to the first one.

Loki had to watch, horrified, as King Dimcken moved across and planted a second kiss on the sole of his right foot.

He was covered. Every inch of him was coated in the inky stuff, inside and out. He felt as though he was suffocating, all he wanted to do was run to the bath and scrub himself until he felt clean.

But he couldn’t. He had to stay and endure the King’s attentions until it was over.

King Dimcken kissed his way back up along Loki’s right leg, moaning in pleasure at the feel of the soft, firm skin beneath his mouth and hands.

Loki stared at the ceiling and tried not to scream as, when King Dimcken reached Loki’s thigh, he moved across, took Loki’s penis in his hand and gently pressed a kiss to the tip of it before making his way up Loki’s stomach and chest, kissing and licking slowly as he went.

“I’ve missed you.” He huffed into Loki’s ear before he put both hands on Loki’s shoulders and tried to turn him over.

Loki complied, allowing himself one single expression of disgust as he pressed his face into the pillow below him.

King Dimcken proceeded to lavish the same attention onto Loki’s back, rubbing and needing Loki’s buttocks as he kissed and licked higher up.

After a few more minutes of this attention King Dimcken hooked his hands under Loki’s hips and raised them up, positioning Loki with his buttocks in the air and his legs curled up on either side of his body. His head remained downwards, and as the King reached for the bottle of oil by the beside Loki bit the pillow in horrified anticipation.
One oily finger pressed itself firmly into Loki’s anus, sparking a small cry from the pillow.

“Relax my darling, just relax, yes, good boy.” King Dimcken soothed in a lusty voice. Loki clamped his teeth down more firmly as the finger began to wriggle.

A second finger was pressed into his vagina, rubbing and wriggling about in an effort to slicken him. Loki reminded himself to breathe. There was nothing he could do but wait it out, it would end, everything ended one day, but the thought was not comforting. The horror always stayed fresh while his thoughts of comfort would fade in their power over time. He frantically tried to think of something else, anything else. He’d had a whole month without the King’s touch, surely that was something? It didn’t seem to matter now, as he was opened up by long, bony fingers.

Then the fingers retracted, which to Loki was even more horrifying than having them there, because he knew what was coming next.

The thick length of the King’s penis pushed into his vagina, making him gasp into the pillow. Loki could feel it pushing him open, stretching him painfully open. His month’s respite had left him unprepared for resuming their activities.

King Dimcken let out a loud moan of satisfaction as he jerked his hips forward, pushing all of himself into Loki’s body.

“Beautiful.” He gasped. “You are so beautiful like this.”

Loki bit the pillow a little harder, there were tears in his eyes.

King Dimcken took a deep breath and pulled back out halfway before pushing in again with a grunt. He thrust a few more times, until Loki’s body finally began to yield easily. Then he pulled out entirely.

Loki had only a second to wonder why, before he felt the slimy tip of the King’s penis press against his anus. He bit down hard on the pillow to muffle the cry of ‘no’ that slipped to the surface. He wasn’t allowed to say no.

The King pushed himself back in with a grunt. He worked his way inside with a few snaps of his hips.

“Oh Loki, oh Loki, oh my beautiful… Loki yes!” He gasped as he seated himself fully. “Relax my darling, my beauty, just, yes, that’s it.”

Loki was fighting to stay calm, he forced himself to take deep breaths as his body was opened up in an entirely new way.

King Dimcken rocked back and forth in Loki’s anus until he was slipping easily. Then, with a moan of delight he pulled out and pressed himself quickly into Loki’s vagina.

“Oh *yes*.” The King moaned as he thrust a few times before pulling out again.

Loki’s teeth tore the pillow as once again the King entered his anus. He wanted to beg the King to stop, but he couldn’t. He had to endure it. He reminded himself that the King had limited stamina, that he couldn’t last much longer, that it was all be over soon.

He was right, the King only made it through one more change before he moaned loudly and released his seed into Loki’s vagina. Then he slumped down over Loki’s back in, if he were not so bony, would have been called boneless respite.
Loki slowly let go of the silk between his teeth. There were feathers tickling his mouth.

“So beautiful,” King Dimcken murmured. “My beautiful wife.”

His breathing evened out. Beneath him, still impaled and lying with his bottom in the air, Loki frowned.

“Husband?” He said softly.

The King let out a snore on his back.

Loki’s frown deepened until his face almost looked ugly. The bloody old bastard had fallen asleep *on his back* *inside him* was that drool? Oh bloody hell he was being drool on.

Loki slowly worked his legs downwards so that he wasn’t in such a ridiculous position. He felt the King’s softened penis start to slip from him and breathed a sigh of relief. He tried to carefully work the sleeping King off him, but misjudged and the King slipped suddenly, falling to the side and bouncing slightly when he hit the bed.

Loki froze in fear, but the King only gave a loud snort and resettled. Not for the first time Loki was glad that King Dimcken was such a deep sleeper.

Loki climbed out of bed and bit his lip as he tried not to cry. He wanted a bath, but he couldn’t have one until the morning. He wiped himself with the edge of the bed sheets instead, although he still felt unclean.

He was covered now. Nothing remained untouched. He sat down on the edge of the bed and struggled not to sob even as the tears spilled over and began to trickle down his cheeks.

He was filthy, utterly filthy. How could Thor even *look* at him like this? Dreams were all very well, but the real Thor would be disgusted.

Maybe Thor could wash him clean? Every year when the rain fell Loki would wash his hands and face in it, in his mind he could feel the inky presence leave him, only for the King to cover him anew the next time they kissed or went to bed.

The dream Thor hadn’t seen it, or maybe he hadn’t cared, but the real Thor? How could Loki even touch him, infected as he was?

Those dark thoughts plagued him until he fell asleep, and then followed him into his dreams to torment him with visions of Asgard being swallowed up by an oily, inky substance that destroyed everything it touched.
Seventy Eight Steps

Chapter Summary

Moving On

The winter was harsh, and Loki got used to staying indoors as the wild winds blew hard outside. Every week a small caravan of supplies, messages and business for the King arrived on frozen carts and with even more frozen men.

More than one caravan arrived towing the previous one, which had run into trouble on the cold and icy road.

Inside the castle it was a haven of warmth. The fires roared all day and night and the royal family spent their time playing indoor games and keeping each other’s spirits up as snowstorms lashed at the glass.

Loki spent most of his time in the library curled up on a window seat as he read his way through the history and development of Vanaheim, and the unique flora and fauna that could be found throughout the realm.

Musleen spent a lot of his time there as well, patiently practicing his writing on smaller and smaller lines as the weeks went on. With the storms outside preventing him from entering the training grounds he could have been forgiven for becoming frustrated or angry, but his legendary patience came to the fore, and instead he would merely sigh every so often, stretch his fingers for a few minutes before returning to his task.

Haewkyr spent most of his time in the stables, checking on the horses, dogs and mountain horses to ensure that they didn’t freeze. The fact that the western window of the stables allowed him to look up at the library window was surely just a coincidence.

King Dimcken suffered terribly from the cold, and spent most of his time in the superheated workroom. Occasionally he would request Loki’s presence throughout the day, which meant that Loki spent most of his time reading while having his leg persistently rubbed in front of the King’s advisors.

Slowly the months passed, and the spring brought calmer weather and laughter throughout the castle as once more everyone was able to go outside and ski and play in the snow again.

King Dimcken was restless, he had spent almost a year at the castle and he wanted to move on. Only the obvious happiness of Musleen as he re-entered the training grounds and began to practice with his left hand prevented the King from ordering the court to pack up early.

Eventually though the summer came again and it was time to leave. Packing up was an event in of itself. Fosxyr and Femtchyr were running around for days taking care of Loki’s clothes and other items.

“I shouldn’t have packed so many books.” Loki said, trying to help them. “I barely read any of them, the library here was so full of texts I’ve never seen before.”
“We’ll handle it all Your Grace, why don’t you go outside and enjoy the warmer weather?” Fosxyr said with a smile.

Loki knew Fosxyr well enough to hear the dismissal. He gave Fosxyr a grin and left them to it.

Musleen was practicing again. He was going over the first training moves over and over again. Loki could see that he was inaccurate in his swings, but he persisted, trying to raise his arm as he tried again and again.

For a moment Loki thought about leaving him be, but instead he stepped forward and picked up a sword. He held it in his left hand and moved in front of Musleen.

“Feel like a match?” He asked.

Musleen regarded him for a moment. “We are going to look absolutely ridiculous.” He said at last.

They moved to the practice ring and lined up carefully.

“I’m not mocking you.” Loki said as they sized one another up.

“I didn’t think you were.” Musleen replied seriously.

“I just wanted to make sure you knew that.” Loki replied.

Musleen answered with a swing, which Loki dodged easily. He tried to bring his own arm up but the movement was clumsy and too wide. Musleen spun, easily ducked under Loki’s arm and tried to strike him from behind, but couldn’t make the strike land. Loki easily dodged and tried to retaliate, only to drop his sword as it hit Musleen’s blade.

He started laughing as he dodged away from Musleen, who pursued him while trying to smother his own chuckles.

Loki blew a hard breath out through his cheeks and launched himself under Musleen’s clumsy swing. He reached his sword and tried to pick it up left-handed, only to drop it again as he tried to swing it up to block Musleen, who tapped him with the flat of his blade.

“Got you.” He claimed, breathing hard with the effort not to laugh.

“I’m very good with my knives.” Loki said as he lifted the sword up from the dirt. “But swords are heavier, and balanced completely differently.”

“Excuses, excuses.” Musleen muttered, shaking his head for good effect.

Loki rose and held his sword out in front of him.

“Again?” He asked.

Musleen smiled.

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They left three days later. Sofftia hugged her father tightly on the castle steps.

“I’ll see you again after the rest of the Progress.” She said, blinking hard to hide her tears. “Little Roaseia will be talking by then.”
“Maybe we’ll be able to visit sooner, I’m sure we can get away at some point.” Camtan said, bouncing Roaseia on his hip.

Loki stood by King Dimcken as they took their leave.

“Thank you for hosting us,” he said, “and for letting me use the library, it’s such a wonderful collection.”

“The palace library is three times the size.” King Dimcken said with a frown.

“Of course Husband, it is very fine.” Loki said quickly. “I just wanted to thank Lord Fetatheren for his hospitality.”

“Yes, yes, of course. We are very pleased with you.” King Dimcken said. “But we must be getting on.”

Loki shot Lord Fetatheren an apologetic smile as he was led away to the horses.

Haewkyr was holding Lightning’s bridle and shot Loki a smile as he mounted up. Loki wished he could have spoken to him, but with King Dimcken at his side it was safer not to.

They had to ride for eighteen days before they would reach the next stop, a small manor that belonged to a minor, but very loyal Lord.

“We will be stopping there only two months.” King Dimcken said. “Lord Coainyr is very loyal to the crown, but he does not have a great deal of standing or income.”

“So we are staying long enough to give him honour, but not so long as to tax his resources.” Loki said.

King Dimcken nodded, pleased that Loki understood. “It is a burden for us to stay such a short time, we will barely be unpacked, but we must all make sacrifices on Progress.”

Loki nodded as he rode. “I understand Husband.” He said.

Camtan pulled a face over his Father’s shoulder; Loki carefully kept his own face blank.

“I, for example, have got sore legs from riding.” Camtan continued, in a perfectly serious voice.

“Yes, there is much we must bear,” King Dimcken said, oblivious to his son’s teasing.

The King grew tired shortly afterwards and retired to the carriage. Like a shadow, Haewkyr slipped between the various riders until he found himself by Loki’s side once more.

“How are you doing after so long out of the saddle?” He asked.

Loki shot him a determined look.

“Just fine.” He lied. His back was aching slightly but he’d rather be sore than sit in the carriage with the King.

“The head scout told me that after we leave the high mountains we’ll be riding through a snow covered forest.” Haewkyr said. “We may be able to stop for a while and have a picnic lunch under the branches.”

“A *permanent* snow covered forest?” Loki asked.
“That’s what he said. The trees are very strong, and they take the light from the sun and turn it into heat in their roots, which melts the ice just enough for them to absorb it as water and grow.”

“That sounds unbelievable.” Loki said.

“It’s not.” Dorgen said from beside him, he’d been talking to Camtan, but overheard their conversation. “I made a study of the phenomena when I was younger. They are quite extraordinary. I believe there may be a small amount of natural magic involved, the mage I asked to come with me said she thought she could detect something, but it was too small for her to feel the shape of. Perhaps you Sir Haewkyr, will have better luck.”

“I will certainly take a look. They sound interesting, Your Grace, I have not come across such a thing before.”

“But then you grew up on the tea fields did you not?” Musleen asked him. “It doesn’t snow down there at all.”

“No, but I’ve travelled, once or twice.” Haekwyrr said easily. “Just not far enough to see such wonders, apparently.”

Musleen raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment.

“Musleen.” Camtan said in a teasing tone. “Musleen, we’re riding again.”

“Yes brother we are.” Musleen said calmly.

“After so very long brother, riding, out in the fresh air, on the mountainside, riding.”

“Yes brother?”

“Doesn’t it just make you want to sing?”

“No brother.” Musleen insisted as the rest of the group began to laugh.

“Leave him alone Camtan, Musleen will sing when he gets bored enough on the road.” Dorgen said.

“That will never happen.” Musleen said.

“So what was that I heard the last time you went for a long walk then?” Dorgen asked. “Oh yes, that’s right, your smooth, deep voice bellowing out the songs of your childhood.”

“What?!” Musleen exclaimed as the others laughed. “That… that wasn’t me.” He said as the tips of his ears turned bright red.

“Because there are literally hundreds of men who can sing like you walking around in the forest thinking they are alone who just love to belt out the classics.” Dorgen deadpanned.

Musleen looked down at his saddle as the others laughed. His face had gone bright red.

“This is why I never tried to take to the stage.” He said. “Too much ridicule.”

“What are you talking about brother? We *love* hearing you sing.” Camtan said cheerfully.

Musleen shook his head and urged his horse to go a little faster so as to get away from them. Beside Loki, Haekwyrr stiffened, then urged his own horse forwards.
“What-?” Loki barely had time to get out before Musleen’s horse pulled to the left, almost throwing him off.

Haekwyr reached him in time and steadied the horse with his own alongside it.

“Relax my darling, relax, he just pulled a bit hard there, don’t you worry, you’ll get used to him.” He said softly to the horse, who, Loki would swear, shot Haewkyr a look that plainly said ‘would you look at what I have to deal with?’

Musleen was still red, but his face was no longer amused.

“Thank you.” He muttered to Haewkyr, but stayed determinedly out in front.

Haewkyr dropped back, still watching Musleen closely.

“What happened?” Loki asked, aware that he others were also watching Haewkyr.

“When he pulled up he forgot the weakness in his right hand, he pulled too hard left without meaning to.” Haewkyr said. “He’s alright, he just needs to bear it in mind until he gets used to his situation.”

Loki winced. Everything had changed for Musleen now, even things that Loki never would have considered, like using eating utensils, shaving, tying bootlaces for riding. It was not the big things that Musleen had trouble with, he could face those dead on and see them for the challenge that they were, no, it was the little things, like accidently pulling to the left because you forgot your right hand no longer had the same grip and strength to it.

“Stay back here.” Dorgen told them, before he nudged his horse up to where Musleen rode, a good five lengths ahead of them.

They spoke for some time, at one point Dorgen reached out and clasped Musleen’s shoulder in a comforting move. Loki tried hard to find other things to look at, so as to give them some privacy.

“Lord Coainyr is known for throwing parties here on his land.” Camtan said, breaking into everyone’s private thoughts. “I hope he shall throw us one, I want to spin Sofitia about on the dance floor for an evening.”

“You danced a lot during the winter.” Loki pointed out.

“Yes, with a single musician and a very small room. I want a party.” Camtan said. “With a band and a banquet and different wines-”

“That sounds like Hel to me.” Haewkyr interjected.

“I doubt it.” Camtan said easily. “Hel is not known for its wild parties. It’s more of a silent, sombre place with a dank atmosphere and nothing good to drink.”

“I’ll take it.” Haewkyr muttered, making Loki laugh.

“You must like *some* form of entertainment.” He asked.

Like the sun coming out from behind a cloud, Haewkyr grinned. “I like the country fairs.” He said. “Good food, great wine, no court politics and I can dance with any fair man or woman who will have me, none of this waltzing crap.”

Loki burst out laughing as Camtan looked horrified. “It’s not all waltzing!” He insisted. “Some of it’s
And all of it’s quite dull. You should come to the country fair down at Teialandsen Rise, then you’ll see what a real party should look like.” Haewkyr insisted.

“Alright then.” Camtan said. “One day I will, and you shall have the pleasure of nervously showing me around while trying to ensure that your fair can live up to the reputation you have given it.”

“Do I look worried?” Haewkyr shot back at him as Loki grinned between them.

****

Lord Coainyr greeted them in the courtyard of his manor. It was quite new, and not as large or as fancy as some of the more powerful Lords’, and it also had the disadvantage of only having a single primary bedchamber which meant that Loki had to share with his Husband for two months.

He tried to look calm and accepting as King Dimcken took his hand and led his up the steps to where Lord Coainyr was waiting nervously.

“Your Majesty, Your Grace,” he said, greeting them with a bow.

“Lord Coainyr, you are looking well.” King Dimcken said.

“Thank you Your Majesty, things are quite well at the moment. I have turned my workroom entirely over to the work of the realm, and my wife has planned a number of activities for you and your family, should you choose to partake in them.”

“Such as?” King Dimcken asked.

Lady Peinnyia curtsied deeply beside her husband and spoke.

“We have a banquet planned to welcome you to the manor tonight, and there is a lovely brook that flows through a clearing a short ride from here Your Majesty, I thought you might enjoy a picnic there one day, and a tournament of the guard is also arranged for a month’s time.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun, doesn’t it Loki dear?” King Dimcken said.

“Yes Husband, I’m sure we will enjoy it all very much.” Loki said, giving her a warm smile. She looked very nervous at having to speak directly to the King.

“Excellent, but for now we are tired and would like to rest and bath, especially if there is going to be a banquet.” King Dimcken said.

“Of course Your Majesty, of course, please follow me and I shall show you to your chambers.” Lord Coainyr said, bowing again.

The chambers were of a decent size, but still far smaller than the ones at the palace, and a little smaller than the ones at Lord Fetatheren’s castle. Normally Loki wouldn’t mind, but the constant presence of the King made Loki feel as though he was suffocating. He would have to find out if they had a library and spend his time there.

For now though he reluctantly joined King Dimcken in the bath. The King had not lost interest in Loki in the slightest, in fact in the years since their marriage he only seemed to have become more enamoured with him.

“My darling your hair is getting long again.” King Dimcken said, tugging lightly at the ends.
“I’ll have Fosxyr cut it tomorrow Husband.” Loki said.

One day he was going to have hair down to his arse, he vowed.

“Good, good, I like your hair, but it looks best when it’s cut short.” King Dimcken said, pulling Loki closer.

Loki tried not to look at where Fosxyr and Hieddenyr stood, waiting for further instructions. It was humiliating enough for everyone to know what he had to do, to have them *watch* some of it was even worse.

To his horror, he realised that the King had seen his uncomfortable expression. The King frowned, then turned to the servants.

“Go and wait outside.” He ordered.

They bowed and left quickly.

“There now, is that better?” King Dimcken asked, smiling at Loki as he worked a hand between his legs. “You don’t like being watched do you my love? I suppose I can understand it, although they are only servants, it’s not as though what they see matters.”

Loki tried not to look outraged at the casual way the King insulted both Fosxyr and his own loyal servant. Did the King not realise that they were people with thoughts and feelings of their own? Maybe they didn’t want to stand in the same room as a horny old man and his victim of a wife? Maybe it horrified them?

“I do not like them watching us Husband.” Loki said instead, trying to ignore the fingers that were teasing his entrance. “They might feel uncomfortable having to do so.”

“You care far too much about what the commoners think.” King Dimcken said, poking his fingers up further. “One day you will learn that they are not like us, they do not have honour, they’d probably enjoy the show, base creatures that they are.”

It was a good thing that Loki was a fantastic liar, because if King Dimcken could see on Loki’s face what Loki wanted to do to the King right now then he would never sleep easily again. But Loki kept his true thoughts concealed, and forced himself to submit to bath sex.

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The manor’s hall was a little cramped for the entire court. But the food was delicious, and served with hot mead and warm, honeyed milk.

King Dimcken was exhausted. The long day of travel and his insistence in taking Loki in the bath had worn him completely out. He ate well enough but began dozing in his chair soon afterwards as the others began to dance. Loki sat beside him and tried to look like a devoted wife.

He gently woke King Dimcken up when the King began to drool.

“Husband,” he said softly, pressing a hand to King Dimcken’s arm.

King Dimcken’s eyes shot open and he looked about him in alarm.

“What? Where? Oh, Loki dear, you have worn me out. I think I will retire for the evening.”

Loki made his best ‘disappointed’ face. “That’s such a shame Husband, but there will be other
feasts.” He said, “And a tournament in a month’s time.”

“Yes, the tournament, have you ever been to one Loki dear?”

“I’ve seen the mêlées back in Asgard.” Loki said, but King Dimcken was shaking his head.

“It’s not like that, you’ll see, you’ll enjoy it I’m certain.” He said. “But for now I am going to retire. You stay here and dance. Where are my sons? You should be dancing already.”

Camtan was on the floor with Sofftia, Musleen was calmly and politely dancing with Lady Peinnyia, who looked as though she was about to faint from the royal attention.

“Octir!” King Dimcken called out, spying his grandson alone. “Come and dance with Loki!”

“Yes Grandfather, of course.” Octir said, putting down his drink and coming over as the King kissed Loki goodnight.

“I will see you tomorrow my darling,” King Dimcken said. “Please try not to wake me when you come to bed.”

“I promise Husband.” Loki said, deliberately not saying how he could go in and jump up and down on the damn thing without the King so much as stirring.

King Dimckn took his leave from Lord Coainyr as Octir held out a hand for Loki’s.

“Grandmother Loki,” he said with a familiar twinkle in his eye.

Octir was the one who looked most like his mother. He was shorter than his brother and stockier, with a strong, square jaw and a large nose. On his it looked manly, and he was seen as the more rugged of the two princes. He danced fairly well, although he was a little heavy on his feet.

Talking was not easy. Octir was only a few years older than Loki, and as the second son he was also in the position of being a spare to the throne of Vanaheim, but as people he and Loki were quite different. Nevertheless, Loki tried.

“What have you been up to these past few days?” He asked, “We haven’t seen you riding with us.”

“My brother and I have been at the rear of the Progress, taking charge of the security there.” He said. “Uncle Musleen asked us to do so. He says we should take charge of men and show our leadership.”

Loki nodded. It had been twenty years since the princes had been rescued from their captivity, and it had taken them quite a bit of time to readjust after having been held for a year in fear and squaller. Musleen had been, after their parents, the most active in helping them to recover. He had given them duties and responsibilities and pushed them, gently at first and then with more force, to reassert themselves and to gain back their confidence.

“I’m glad to see it’s all going well.” Loki said.

“So far. We had a minor issue with infighting by two of the houses whose carts got a little too close to one another, but we settled it well enough. When we leave here one of them will be further towards the front.” Octir said firmly.

“Good plan.” Loki replied.

The song ended and they both stopped to applaud. Dorgen appeared beside them and shooed his son away as the next song began.
“You’re supposed to ask.” Loki pointed out.

His relationship with Dorgen was difficult to define. The man no longer treated him like pond scum, but, due in part to their different ages and activities, they were not friends either.

“May I have this dance?” Dorgen asked as they began the first steps together.

“It appears so.” Loki said.

“I received a letter from my wife today, she has sent you a gift.” Dorgen continued, “She thought you might enjoy it. If you have time tomorrow I can deliver it to you.”

“I’ll come by after the morning work is completed.” Loki said. “That way you’ll be free.”

“Very well.” Dorgen said as they skipped lightly down the line of dancers.

Loki paused for a moment, then asked the question that was on his mind.

“Will you be going home to see your wife at all?”

Dorgen’s face darkened slightly. “No. Father does not wish me to.”

Loki nodded in thought. Dorgen and King Dimcken did not like one another, they often argued, and Loki was sure that Dorgen only ate dinner with his father to keep up some semblance of family unity for the court. It would be a different Vanaheim indeed when Dorgen was finally crowned.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said.

“Because you wish me gone?” Dorgen asked him with a raised eyebrow, although the loathing in his voice was no longer present, he merely sounded curious.

“No,” Loki said, “Because I do not like to think that you are both unhappy being apart.”

“We have been married a long time, and we will be married for a long time still.” Dorgen said, “We will survive I am sure.”

The dance ended, and they bowed to one another.

“Take care Loki,” Dorgen said, “You have a difficult two months ahead of you.” And then he was gone, leaving Loki alone on the dance floor.

Musleen appeared by his side and held out a hand.

“Mother?” He asked with a slight smile to his serious features.

Loki took his hand with a grin. “Son,” he answered and they began the next dance.
A few weeks after arriving at Lord Coainyr’s manor, Loki, Musleen, Camtan and Sofitia with Roaseia, Dorgen, Haewkryr and Fosxyr accompanied Lady Peinnyia and her servants to the brook in the forest.

It should have been a river. The ice on either side of it stretched for half a mile, and the trees that grew through the ice were thicker than five men’s arm widths. If the realm ever warmed up again, the brook would become a torrent of water.

But it wasn’t. Today it was a light, babbling little thing with crystal-clear water that made its way through the forest.

The clearing was covered in snow. Sofitia set Roaseia down as soon as she could so that the little one could play. It was almost impossible to see that a child was present beneath the bundle of furs, and the adults fought to hide their smiles at her eager movements through the fluffy white snow.

Fosxyr laid out a large blanket and Lady Peinnyria’s servants began to set out the food. Haewkryr had a quiet word to each of the horses before letting them go and roam.

“That’s handy,” Musleen commented, “They will be back, won’t they?”

“They will. They won’t go outside of hearing range.” Haewkryr said cheerfully.

“You love horses don’t you?” Musleen continued as Haewkryr began to examine the trees.

“Hmm? Oh yes, what’s not to like?” He answered.

“I’ve never gotten the hang of rising astride like that.” Musleen continued, “Where did you learn it?”

Haewkryr shrugged, one hand still resting on the tree. “I never got the hang of side-on riding,” he said, “It takes all sorts to make a realm.”

Musleen raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Loki, who had heard their conversation, frowned in confusion at Haewkryr’s deflection of Musleen’s question.

“There is definitely magic in these trees, but it’s not natural magic, at least, not the kind I use.” Haewkryr said, “I can feel it like a spider web, thin and delicate, but strong too. I wouldn’t be surprised if the timber could be used to craft items with great magical potential.”

Loki placed a hand onto the tree and tried to feel the magic. To his surprise he felt the strands almost immediately. They seemed to reach out for him.

“This forest sprang up after the great freeze began and the ground no longer thawed.” Lady Peinnyia said with a smile. “The stories from long ago tell us that the seeds first came here via travellers, and that they came from a faraway land of ice and snow.”
“So Jotunheim.” Dorgen said.

Lady Peinnyia looked alarmed. “Surely not,” she said, “Jotunheim is a terrible place full of monsters, our beautiful trees couldn’t have come from there.”

“I do not know of any other place that is made of ice and snow.” Dorgen said calmly, “And should we not think more openly of the lands that surround ours? Surely Jotunheim has *some* redeeming features, its current King notwithstanding.”

Loki knelt down onto the blanket as Fosxyr poured them all cups of hot tea.

“If it were possible to remove the Jotnar from Jotunheim then I would quite like to go and explore one day.” He said.

“But me.” Fosxyr muttered, “It’s too cold here as it is.”

Loki grinned at him, they had not been able to speak freely since arriving, and he missed the servant’s cheeky manner. Their only interaction that had not been one of master and servant had been after Loki had collected his present from Dorgen. It had been sent from Frigga via Mulmyr and contained a tiny amulet with strict instructions.

That very night, after the King had fallen into his usual deep slumber, Loki had risen and gone to the living area where Fosxyr was waiting. He had drunk deeply from the soothing tea, and when it began to take effect, Fosxyr had carefully cut into the inside of Loki’s lower lip with Thor’s knife and pushed the amulet under the skin. He had tried to make the cut as small as possible, so that it would be easy to hide from the King’s eyes. A small smear of healing cream and the deed was done.

The amulet was spelled to prevent pregnancy. It would last, according to Frigga’s letter, for one hundred years, after which time she would try to send another. Loki burned the letter before returning to bed.

Now though Fosxyr was among friends, for the most part, and he was more relaxed and happy than he’d been for weeks.

Loki accepted the tea with a smile of thanks. “Are you sure Fosxyr? I would need someone with me to keep me out of trouble, and you seem like just the person.” He said with a rare sparkle in his eyes.

Fosxyr narrowed his eyes, although he couldn’t stop the humour in them from showing. “I think I’ll stay right here in Vanaheim, where it only snows in the south, and I don’t have to visit except when the court goes on Progress.” He said.

Camtan scooped up Roaseia, who squealed in delight. “You’ll have to come back some of the time, Fox, when Roa here visits her grandfather.”

Fosxyr sighed dramatically. “Very well,” he said, “For *her*.”

Camtan and Sofftia grinned at him. Dorgen smiled and leaned back on the blanket, and the corner of Musleen’s mouth turned up.

“Where would we be without you Fox?” Camtan asked fondly.

“I shudder to think, Your Graces.” Fosxyr said.

Lady Peinnyia watched the whole exchange with a slightly uncertain expression. She leaned in close to Loki and asked nervously. “Is it alright Your Grace? The way he speaks with them?”
Loki almost snapped at her for her attitude, before he remembered that she was very new to both her role as a Lady and as a member of the royal court.

“Servants are people,” he said, “They work for us, but what that means is that they come into our lives and, if we’re lucky, make them better for a long time. I remember how upset I was when my nanny left me, not because I needed her, but because she was family. I still write to her, and try to visit once a year, at least, before I left Asgard. Fosxyr has been a part of the court for a long time, they know and trust him. It is only when liberties are taken too far that it becomes inappropriate. They and Fosxyr all know where that line is for him.”

Lady Peinnyia nodded seriously. “My husband was always very hardworking.” She said, “But his elevation to nobility has been, well, no one tells you what you should do.”

Loki nodded in understanding. “Kind of like being a queen,” he said, “That’s why they gave me Fosxyr to guide me. You’ll be alright, just give yourself time.”

She smiled gratefully at him as Haewkyr rose and moved to the brook.

“There are fish here,” he said

“Yes, quite big ones sometimes, they swim upstream to breed.” Lady Peinnyia said to him.

Haewkyr reached down and calmly lifted a fish out of the brook.

“Shall we build a fire and have some lunch then?” He said as though he had done nothing special. “Loki? Let’s see if this wood can burn.”

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The tournament, held several weeks after the picnic in the forest, turned out to be a military exercise of some skill. The manor guards were pitted against one another in swordplay, archery and jousting, which Loki was unfamiliar with.

As an Aesir, Loki had been trained to ride up to the enemy swinging an axe, a sword or a staff, but he’d never seen such long poles used before. He’d read about the Vanir tactic of unseating opposing horsemen, but to see in live was exhilarating.

They should have looked ridiculous, they should have looked silly. The poles were massive great things, difficult to manoeuvre on the ground. It took incredible skill to aim them correctly while riding a moving horse, but the guardsmen seemed to manage quite well.

Each clash of lances brought one of three outcomes. Either the lances would shatter into a hundred pieces, one man would unseat another sending him flying through the air and crashing to the ground below, or both would be unseated and have to fight it out on foot in their heavy metal armour.

Loki sat by the King’s side and itched to just *try* it. He knew that he wouldn’t be any good right away, but with enough practice and time he could just see himself sending his opponent flying.

“Wonderful, isn’t it darling?” King Dimcken asked him.


“Musleen used to be fantastic at jousting.” King Dimcken said.

Loki glanced over to where Musleen sat, but the second Prince didn’t seem overly bothered, but then
only a few days ago he had successfully completed both his third level writing exercises and his first level sword exercises without making a single mistake.

“I should arrange a tournament with the palace guard.” King Dimcken said, “If you think this is exciting then they will be able to show you some real skill, especially those who have seen battle, now they are fearless.”

“That sounds wonderful Husband.” Loki said as two more combatants lined up to joust.

The flag dropped and they urged their horses into a gallop. Loki found that he was leaning forwards in his chair as they headed for one another.

Something was wrong, even with his limited experience Loki could tell. One of the men could not get his lance up in time.

The tip of the lance pierced his opponent’s horse, striking just in front of its leg. The horse collapsed as the guard jumped clear.

From the sidelines, Loki saw Haewkyr vault over the fence and run to the horse’s side. He dodged the violently kicking legs and grabbed the horse’s head.

The horse went still, collapsing into a deep sleep. Haewkyr began methodically working on the injury, yelling out for the local horsemaster to bring his medical kit.

King Dimcken scowled. “See? Not nearly as skilled,” he said, “Now we shall have to wait until the horse can be moved. They should kill it and drag it out of here.”

Loki couldn’t quite hide the horror in his eyes at the King’s callous attitude. King Dimcken seemed to see it, and took Loki’s hand in between his own.

“Loki my darling, they are just beasts, they work for us, they have their funny moods but they are just animals, there are always more.”

“I just don’t like seeing them hurt.” Loki said carefully. “And besides, Haewkyr will save that one if he can, and then all its training won’t have been wasted.”

“You make a good point my darling, it *is* tiresome to train up a new horse,” said King Dimcken, who had never done so in his entire life.

On the field, Haewkyr had extracted the lance tip and had closed over the wound. He roused the horse and carefully helped it climb to its feet.

“Your cousin is a skilled man,” King Dimcken said, “He could be very useful in the army.”

“He would be more useful in the palace stables,” Musleen said, dropping the pretext that he couldn’t hear them, “After all, we don’t want any of our horses throwing us due to injury.”

King Dimcken tightened his grip on Loki’s hand. “No, no of course not, he’s a good man to keep at court, very good.” He said.

Haewkyr led the horse from the arena, his face was pale and his expression almost sick. Loki wanted to ask him what was wrong but he knew that he wouldn’t be allowed to leave his seat. The tournament was partly in his honour after all.

The announcer made an apology for the delay and the next two men lined up to joust.
If there was one part of the Progress that did make Loki slightly happy, it was the fact that the ever changing scenery made time seem to move faster. They left Lord Coainyr’s lands after what seemed like a very short time and headed further north and west. They sent six months here, four months there; they stayed for almost a year at one Lord’s manor, as he had been growing extremely rich and powerful for quite some time. By the time they left his treasury had been quite depleted, and he faced a large number of years before he would be able to enjoy such power again.

The snow gave way to fields as they travelled, riding through different crops for different types of soil. Loki’s only regret was that he was unable to gallop along the highways, as to do so would reveal Lightning’s healed status to the King.

Haewkyr would take him out at night and let him run himself stupid. Loki wished that he could be allowed to do the same.

He got used to being a traveller. Different bedrooms, different setups, sex in unfamiliar beds. Loki thought he would have seen every major bedroom ceiling in the realm by the time the Progress came to an end.

Fourteen years after being buried by an avalanche, Loki confessed to the King that he was fertile.

He took no chances, and drank the tea whenever he could, just in case the amulet failed. King Dimcken really tried hard during those weeks to take him every night, which was almost enough to drive Loki insane, but at the end of the month Loki was once again able to write to the King regarding his womanly nature. He was so relieved that he could barely keep the grin from his face.

Eighteen years after the Progress began, the court arrived at Lord Eveilyr’s manor, situated by the fens.

They were to stay for a full eighteen months, during which time Lord Eveilyr would pretend that he was happy about it.

He greeted them in the courtyard with an oily smile.

King Dimcken smiled cheerfully back at him.

“Lord Eveilyr, how are you today?” He asked loudly.

“I am very well Your Majesty, very well. I welcome you to my humble manor.”

“Hardly humble Lord Eveilyr,” King Dimcken said, “You are the envy of half the court with your holdings here.”

Lord Eveilyr smiled again. “Your servants arrived a few hours ago and have been unpacking your belongings, I hope you find everything to your satisfaction.” He said.

“I’m sure we will. Eveilyr?”

“Yes Your Majesty?”

“You have not greeted my wife.”

“I do apologise, Your Grace, welcome to my manor, I have heard from a number of people that you like to read, I invite you to explore my library, it is most exceptional I assure you.”
“Thank you Lord Eveilyr, you are most kind.” Loki said.

Lord Eveilyr looked as though he’d bitten a lemon as he showed them inside.

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Lord Eveilyr’s chambers were extremely grand and exquisitely decorated. The walls and ceilings were painted with a variety of nymphs and spirits enjoying the forests and pools in which they frolicked.

Loki was pleased to discover that, although the manor had been heavily refurbished in the modern era, Lord Eveilyr and his wife had kept the old arrangement of having separate sleeping chambers.

Fosxyr had already set up most of Loki’s things and was waiting with a hot bath and a smile when he walked in.

“How was your ride today Your Grace?” He asked cheerfully.

“Long and a little dusty.” Loki answered.

Fosxyr grinned at him.

“And you enjoyed it?”

“Immensely.” Loki answered with a smile of his own.

He pulled his riding robes off and climbed into the steaming bath. A slight frown of confusion crossed his face.

“Fosxyr?”

“Yes Your Grace?”

“This bath seems rather small.”

“I did not realise you had been so spoilt Your Grace.”

“I’m not spoilt! I am merely noticing that Lord Eveilyr clearly likes thing very grand and this is the only not-grand room I have seen.”

“That is because of the bathhouse Your Grace.”

“Bathhouse?”

“I’ve no doubt that tomorrow you will be shown the wonders of Lord Eveilyr’s bathhouse in person, but for now I will merely tell you that it is considered one of the wonders of Vanahem. The King rarely uses it when he is here, although between you and me, I feel that the reason he stays away is because he may be a tad upset that he does not possess it. You will be encouraged to enjoy it as often as you like, and if I were in a position to give advice, I would advise you to do so.”

“That good is it?”

“Marvellous. The princes, when they were young, used to demand to play in there all day when we would visit.”

“You’ve tried it.” Loki realised.
“When they were young it was only prudent that they be accompanied in the water, so yes Your Grace, I am one of a very few number of commoners who have been granted the privilege of visiting the bathhouse for more than just work.” Fosxyr said with a fond smile of memory.

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy it then.” Loki said.

He finished bathing and got ready for bed. The next eighteen months stretched ahead of him, promising more distractions and diversions and at the end, leaving him eighteen months closer to Thor.

Every little bit helped.
Eighty Steps

Chapter Summary

The Bathhouse

The following morning, Loki had barely woken and was still rubbing the sleep from his eyes when there was a loud knock at his chamber door.

Fosxyr put the tea tray down and went to answer it.

“Your Grace, how nice to see you,” Loki heard him say.

Loki rose and peeked around the doorway to discover Camtan standing there in nothing but a robe and an odd looking, and rather skimpy, costume.

“Bath time!” He said cheerfully when he saw Loki.

“Bath time?” Loki asked.

“Bath time?” Loki asked.

“Fosxyr, didn’t you tell him about Lord Eveilyr’s baths? For shame.” Camtan said.

“I did indeed mention them, although I believe that His Grace was not expecting to be shown them so early.” Fosxyr said.

“Nonsense, we need to get there now before everyone else wakes up, the whole court can come and bathe, and they will. I imagine it will grow quite crowded in a few hours. Come on Loki, pull on your bathers and follow me.”

Loki turned to Fosxyr, who rolled his eyes.

“I’ll fetch your bathers.” He said.

“Bathers?” Loki asked as Fosxyr disappeared.

“You know, your clothes for bathing in?” Camtan said.

Loki stared at him.

“Traditionally, people bath naked, unless I’ve been doing it wrong.” He said.

Camtan shook his head.

“No, no, no, not in these baths anyway. These baths are for having fun in.”

Fosxyr returned with a robe and a pair of bathers across his arm. “Your Grace if you would like to get changed?” He asked politely.

Loki looked from one to the other, slightly bewildered.

“Alright,” he said, taking the clothing and disappearing into the bedroom.
After he was dressed Camtan practically dragged him down the corridors to their destination. Loki tried to keep an eye out as they walked through the passageways; he had not forgotten the attack made on him all those years ago. Dorgen and, eventually, Musleen, had investigated as thoroughly as they could but had been unable to conclusively prove that Lord Eveilyr was behind it. They had repeatedly warned him about remaining aware during their stay, although Musleen had told him that he didn’t expect Lord Eveilyr to try anything while the royal family was under his roof, as they could demand his very manor and lands as compensation for failing to keep them safe.

Camtan dragged Loki through one final door and then stopped, watching him closely to witness his reaction.

“That’s… a very big bathing room.” Loki said at last.

It was the size of an exercise yard, a *horses* exercise yard. There were pools of varying depth and shape, waterfalls, a special pool that had large waves, sprinklers, a steam room, a pool that bubbled constantly, and what looked very much like a series of slides with water running down them.

“It’s fantastic, Father came to visit Lord Eveilyr once when we were children and we spent almost all our time in here. Musleen even made it to the top of the wall!”

Loki followed Camtan’s pointing finger until he saw a rock-climbing wall with a deep pool below it and water trickling down from above.

“Lord Eveilyr is said to use it to keep in shape, it’s fiendishly difficult. Now, what would you like to try first?” Camtan asked.

“How about we show him the slides?” Musleen said from behind them.

Loki turned and shot him a grin.

“Really slides?” He asked.

Musleen nodded. “They’re very popular with everyone, we should try them now before the rest of the court gets here.” He said, untying his robe.

He too wore bathers, which were short-sleeved, tight-fitting and light in the water. They left very little to the imagination, especially, well, down further.

Loki carefully and a little shyly untied his own robe and handed it to a waiting servant.

Camtan immediately headed for the rounded rocks that made up the climb to the top of the slide.

“Come on Loki!” He called.

“Your Grace,” said another voice, a servant who had just arrived.

“Yes?” Loki asked.

“His Majesty has sent me to deliver a message, he wishes you to have lunch with him today, at midday.”

“Thank you,” Loki said, “I will meet him outside his workroom.”

He headed off after Camtan, who had already reached the top of the tallest slide and was getting ready to go down it.
“Slides are for children.” Loki said to Musleen as they climbed the rocks.

“Not these slides.” Musleen said confidently. “Have you never gone swimming in Asgard?”

“Of course, for exercises and, when on a hunt, to bathe in lakes and things. I’ve splashed about before but that was when I was a child.” Loki said.

They had reached the top of the slide.

“You will enjoy this I am certain.” Musleen said. Camtan was long gone. “I’ve yet to meet anyone who didn’t.”

Loki sat down on the slide at a gesture from Musleen. He had his doubts, but if both brothers thought that he would find it fun then they were probably right, they usually were.

He pushed off and let himself slide forwards –

And sped down at tremendous speed. He was buffeted from side to side and slid halfway up the side as the slide spiralled rapidly downwards. It ended with a splash as he hit the water below in a cloud of bubbles.

Loki surfaced, grinning, as Musleen came crashing down behind him. Camtan was already halfway up the rocks to the second slide.

Musleen looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“You were right. That was fun.” Loki conceded.

They raced to the edge of the pool and climbed out, laughing as they hurried to the next one.

Within an hour the first members of the court began to arrive in the bathhouse. Camtan was right in his prediction, as the people began to form lines to use the slides. Instead, Camtan pulled Loki into the bubble-pool for some relaxation.

“It feels so good on your muscles, doesn’t it?” He asked as he leaned back.

Loki grinned at him. “Yes, very.” He agreed.

“I’m going to have to leave you with Musleen in another hour, Sofftia is bringing Roaseia down and we’re going to take her to the little paddling area together.” Camtan said. “But don’t worry, Musleen will take good care of you, he did a thorough sweep of the bathhouse last night.”

It was strange to hear some kind of acknowledgement that all was not truly well, especially from Camtan, who always gave the impression of being blissfully unaware of plots or threats that may affect the royal family. But then again he was a prince, raised to look out for himself and be careful. His manner hid a keen mind, sometimes extremely well.

A shadow fell over them. Loki looked up to see one of the Lords of the court standing nearby.

“Your Grace, Your Grace, I was wondering if I might be permitted to join you?” He asked, his eyes sharp and calculating.

“We were just moving on.” Camtan said calmly, “So we won’t cramp you, come on Mother-Loki.”

Loki climbed out and left the Lord standing there, fighting a look of disappointment.
“They’re here now, and they will try to approach you, sadly there’s nothing we can do about it, just stay polite and move on when you can.” Camtan advised as they headed back to the main pool.

Loki nodded. “It a lot more informal here,” he said, “so I shouldn’t be surprised that some people would try it.”

They splashed into the water and surfaced, shaking the hair out of their eyes. Camtan grinned evilly and, just as Loki was looking around, splashed him hard with the water.

Loki yelped and began to attack right back. The two of them were laughing as the water went everywhere. Then suddenly, Camtan went under.

Loki blinked in surprise, but then Camtan reappeared with a huge splash.

“Musleen!” He yelled and dived.

Loki grinned and dived down after him. He could see Musleen swimming away through the water at a good speed as Camtan tried to catch him. Loki followed them and they all wound up on the other side of the pool.

Musleen was grinning, a rare sight indeed.

“Come on Loki, I’ll show you the waterfall,” he said.

“It’s somewhat hard to miss.” Loki pointed out.

The waterfall was indeed extremely large and noticeable, with a steady stream of water cascading down over the rocks to splash into the pool below.

Musleen shook his head at him.

“You haven’t explored it properly yet,” he said, “I’ll show you.”

Loki followed him to the base of the waterfall, where Musleen dived down and disappeared.

He didn’t come up.

Camtan shot Loki a grin and dived as well. He also did not reappear.

Loki took a deep breath and dived.

The water was full of bubbles from the falling water, but as Loki swam deeper it became clear. It also revealed a tunnel at the base of the waterfall.

Loki swam along it. It was quite wide, and not very long. He came up from a pool inside a cave. Musleen and Camtan were both standing on the rocks. Loki climbed out and joined them.

They were behind the waterfall. Light filtered in from gaps in the rocks, some the size of a small window, others no bigger than an arm’s width, and all covered by the falling water on the outside.

“We found this place when we were children.” Camtan said. “We insisted on having a picnic here.”

Loki looked around. There were a few glowstones set into the rock to aid the natural light, and a stone bench to sit on.

“I think Lord Eveilyr built this for his children,” Musleen said, “So that they might have a secret
place to play and have games.”

“Now it’s ours, at least, until we leave here.” Camtan said. “I don’t think anyone else has discovered it.”

Loki sat down on the stone bench.

“I like it,” he said, “It reminds me of a real waterfall, they often have caves behind them formed by the water. It’s nice to get away from the crowds.”

“We’ll have to come down early if we want to swim in relative privacy.” Musleen said. “It was nicer when it was a private visit.”

“It’s still nice.” Loki said, “I am determined to enjoy it.”

“Me too.” Camtan said, “Although I shall soon be very visible and approachable, Sofftia will be here any minute.”

“I think I’ll stay here for a while.” Musleen said. “I like the quiet.”

Camtan took a running jump, dived into the pool and disappeared back to the outside world.

Musleen came to join Loki on the bench.

“My men swept the manor last night.” He said. “They could find nothing, although that does not surprise me, Lord Eveilyr is unlikely to make a move while we are in his house, somewhere far away from him is far safer.”

“So I’ve been told.” Loki said, “I don’t suppose that we could go sneaking into his workroom at night and find some incriminating papers?”

Musleen gave him a smile, the light shining through the water was making his blue eyes sparkle an almost aqua colour. “You can’t be restless, not on Progress.”

Loki sighed. “I know, constantly changing things should keep me from getting bored, but there is a certain sameness about constantly changing, if that makes any sense. I’ve been thinking a lot about the capital, and about the Tower. I miss having lessons.”

“Haven’t you learnt it all already?” Musleen asked, only half joking as he ran a hand through his hair, the water had made his natural dark blond seem almost brown, and it stuck to his head and curled around his neck.

“I know a lot, but there’s always more.” Loki said, mentally telling himself off for noticing the way Musleen's bathers clung to his skin.

“You could have a look at Lord Eveilyr’s library, the family does have a talent for seidr.” Musleen said.

“Yes,” Loki deadpanned, “I know.”

Musleen winced gently. “Sorry.”

“No it’s fine, I’m fine, that’s all long in the past now.” Loki said.

“Lord Eveilyr does not seem to think so.” Musleen said, “Why else would he orchestrate such an attack on us both?”
Loki shrugged. “Maybe he’s just evil?” He suggested.

Musleen rolled his eyes. “And maybe that’s a far too easy explanation.” He answered. “We’ll catch him Loki, in time, something will come to light, someone will talk too much, or someone who knows something will become disenchanted with him. Just keep alert and we’ll both be fine.”

“I saw you in the training yards a few days ago.” Loki said, “You were holding your own against Camtan for quite a while.”

“Camtan is annoyingly good at the sword.” Musleen said, sounding both disgruntled and pleased. “I was never going to beat him, but I did hold him off for a bit.”

“For a lot,” Loki corrected, “You set yourself a goal of fifty years. You are not yet halfway there and already you are a force to be wary of, even if you are not quite to be reckoned with.”

Musleen smiled again, the tips of his ears had gone red at the praise.

“I just need to keep practising,” he said modestly. “Are you coming back?”

“Yes,” Loki said, getting to his feet.

They jumped into the water and swam back through the short tunnel. Loki had only just surfaced when he was grabbed around his legs and pulled back under. Beneath the water, Musleen gave him a cheeky grin and swam away as fast as he could.

Loki narrowed his eyes and swam after him, the game was on.

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Loki let out a yell as he was picked up from behind and thrown into the water. He, Musleen and Haewkyr had begun a game of stalking, and for the last hour they had carefully slipped around the pools trying to dunk the other two in the water. Haewkyr was winning. He was so damn quiet that he’d managed to sneak up on both of them multiple times and either throw them in or pull them under.

Musleen was better in the water, he could hold his breath for a long time and would silently come up behind one of them and grab their legs.

Loki was, unfortunately, losing the game. He was a strong swimmer, but he lacked Haewkyr’s natural talent for creeping barefoot, and Musleen’s for silent swimming beneath the surface.

Loki resurfaced and wiped his hands over his eyes to clear them when he became aware of a shadow across his face.

He looked up into the eyes of the King.

Loki froze in the water, horrified. His eyes guiltily found a clock on the far wall. It was twenty minutes past midday.

“I’m so sorry Husband.” Loki said nervously.

Did King Dimcken look amused? Or was Loki only hoping he was?

“I had them set lunch up in the dry area by the windows.” King Dimcken said and turned away.

Loki thought he saw the hint of a smile but he wasn’t sure. He climbed out as fast as he could and
frantically patted himself dry. A servant helped him on with his robe and he approached the King, who was reclining on a low chair.

“I am sorry.” Loki said again.

King Dimcken looked up and smiled at him.

“I will confess when I saw you had missed our appointment I was a little put out, but I saw you playing with Musleen and your cousin, you looked so beautiful in the water, I like to see you laugh.”

Loki carefully lowered himself onto the other chair as King Dimcken helped himself to some bread and olives.

“I won’t do it again.” Loki promised.

He wouldn’t either; he’d been careless and stupid for losing track of the time.

King Dimcken smiled at him indulgently.

“You’re such a good boy Loki, I can overlook one little mistake, now eat up, enjoy your lunch. You can tell me about your morning here.”

Loki took a piece of bread and some cold boar.

“Well, Camtan showed me around before too many people arrived. We went on the slides.”

“Did you enjoy them?”

“Yes Husband, they’re a lot of fun.”

“Then what did you do?”

“We tried the hot and cold pools, one after the other. Camtan challenged me to sit in the ice pool for ten minutes and I won, so he had to sweat it out in the steam room for ten.”

King Dimcken chuckled. “Naughty boy.” He said affectionately. “Where is he now?”

“Sofftia brought Roaseia down to play in the shallows, I think they’re still over there.” Loki said.

“Good, good, the little one will have a fine time playing in the water. What did you do then?”

“Musleen and I were trying to dunk one another when Haewkyr arrived, so we all started stalking each other around the pool.”

King Dimcken grinned at him, it was unnerving.

“Did you explore the waterfall? You like waterfalls don’t you? You always spend some time at the little one in the clearing when we go on the summer hunts.” He said.

“Yes,” Loki said, “Musleen and Camtan showed me it early on. It’s amazing, this whole place is amazing.”

“Yes, it is.” King Dimcken said, sounding slightly less pleased. “I was thinking of creating something like this in the palace, although grander, of course. And it must have something as a centrepiece, something very impressive.”
Loki glanced around the room and tried to think of something more impressive than what lay before him.

“I know,” King Dimcken said with a sudden smile and a lustful look, “A large statue of one of those mythical mermaids, one that looks just like you.”

Loki tried very hard to look pleased. Technically, this was a compliment, although the thought of being immortalised as a giant mermaid statue in the middle of a giant bathing area wasn’t exactly appealing.

“I shall commission it at once, it will take a long time to finish, but hopefully by the time we return from Progress it will be completed, and you can swim in it with Musleen and Camtan. I will sit in the dry area and watch sometimes.”

No, that wasn’t creepy at all.

“Thank you Husband, but I do not deserve the honour of such a centrepiece, surely a pretty maid could be found to model for it.” Loki said.

King Dimcken just beamed at him.

“You are so beautiful my love, I cannot believe that you can’t see it.” He said.

Loki blinked at him and turned away. He always felt uncomfortable when the King went on one of his declarations of affection.

“You are exotic, with your dark hair and green eyes, and yet you still possess the delightfully slender built of a Vanir, not at all like your Aesir half.” King Dimcken went on.

Loki frowned slightly, to his frustration he had never been able to achieve the kind of bulging muscles so desired by the Aesir. For the first time he really *looked* at the Vanir around him. It was true, they were all more slender. They did not lack in muscles, Musleen for example was extremely fit and healthy, and his muscles could clearly be made out through his very tight bathers, but he was not large like an Aesir, in fact it was Haewkyr who stood out with the way the water ran off his enormous bulging arms that looked so much like Thor’s…

Loki wondered what the hell was wrong with him. It was the bathers, it had to be. Best to keep his mind on other things, like the mad King sitting beside him.

“Odin really didn’t recognise the treasure he had with you.” King Dimcken went on.

“But you did.” Loki said before he could stop himself.

“Yes I did, you are beautiful, clever, talented, ah Loki darling you are perfect.” King Dimcken moved from his seat to share Loki’s, wrapping an arm around him possessively. “I want you right now.” He breathed into Loki’s ear.

Loki swallowed nervously. He had to obey, he always had to obey.

“Shall we go to your chambers Husband?” He forced out.

“What would you do if I didn’t want to wait and just took you right here?” King Dimcken murmured in Loki’s ear.

Loki froze in horror. No. Not that, not *public*. 
“I…I…I…” He stuttered nervously.

King Dimcken chuckled against him.

“Let us go to my chambers darling, you are so deliciously adorable when you are flustered.” He said.

Loki obediently followed the King back through the corridors. His heart was hammering in fear. Despite the King retreating into private, Loki still couldn’t shake the feeling that if he’d sounded eager or interested then King Dimcken really would have taken him in front of everyone.

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Six months after arriving at Lord Eveilyr’s manor, Loki was sitting for the sculptor who would be creating the giant mermaid version of him for the King’s bathhouse.

It was boring. He had to sit very still for hours on end as the sculptor took measurement after measurement.

That was why Loki had a clone do it while he read on the couch. Both the sculptor and his assistant had no idea, although Fosxyr had figured it out after only one day.

Loki calmly turned the page as the sculptor made yet another adjustment to his measurements. He had been sitting for the man for a week now, and was expected to do so for another one before he’d have enough to go on with back in the capital.

King Dimcken had made it clear that this was going to be a private bathhouse for royal family members and their guests only. Loki thought it was a waste of space for such few people, but he wasn’t about to argue the point.

He’d spent a lot of time in Lord Eveilyr’s bathhouse since arriving, they all had. Camtan didn’t let a day go by without a quick visit, even Musleen could be found there early in the morning or late at night, swimming back and forth through the deeper, larger pools. King Dimcken did not enjoy the swimming as much and only came down there to have lunch with Loki.

Haewkyr had discovered the wave pool and had been in some kind of heaven ever since.

Loki’s favourite place had to be the waterfall-cave. Even with all the people laughing and shrieking outside it was quiet and private. He’d spent some time there alone, just *being*, it was a good place.

Loki’s musings were interrupted by an arrow.

It flew in through the window, shot straight through his clone’s back and hit the sculptor in the thigh. Loki heard Fosxyr cry out in alarm as the servant ran to the windows and slammed them shut. Loki ran to the sculptor and began to use his healing spells, trying to stop the bleeding. The apprentice ran for the healers, Fosxyr ran for the guards.

Within minutes it was chaos. The sculptor was carried out under the instruction of a healer as guards filled the room and yet more ran to the place where the arrow must have come from.

Loki was instructed to stay on the couch, away from the windows. He sat there obediently as the guards ran about. He wanted to help, someone had tried to kill him and, if he hadn’t been so bored with sitting still, they may very well have succeeded.

Musleen arrived, looking stern and commanding.
“Loki, come with me.” He ordered.

Loki rose and followed him through the corridors to Loki’s chambers.

“I need you to stay here, I’ve posted guards all around you, sorry Loki but until we find out who tried to kill you we have to be cautious.” He said.

“I want to help,” Loki said.

Musleen looked truly sorry as he said “As much as I know you would be able to help us, Father would never let you, I’m sorry Loki, stay here please.”

Loki watched him go with a pout on his face. Fosxyr, who had accompanied him back to his chambers, sighed gently and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I’ve brought your book,” he said, “In case you wanted to finish it.”

Loki slumped into a chair. “Thank you,” he said, and held out a hand for it.

“I’ll make you some tea.” Fosxyr said.

King Dimcken arrived a few minutes later. He didn’t bother to knock, just pushed his way into Loki’s chambers and gathered him up in a tight hug.

“Oh my darling are you alright?” He asked.

“I’m fine Husband, the arrow missed me completely.” Loki said.

“Are you sure? You are not afraid now?” King Dimcken asked.

Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He *had* been a little startled, especially given that to fire that arrow the archer would need to be standing on top of one of the towers, which were not easy to get into, but he had recovered quite quickly. The only thing he really wanted was to help catch the would-be assassin, but that was impossible.

“I am well Husband, I promise.” Loki said as Fosxyr brought the King a glass of wine.

King Dimcken threw back the drink in a single gulp.

“I would feel better if you were to spend tonight with me.” He said.

Loki nodded, resigned to his fate. “Yes Husband, of course.”

“Musleen will find the man, and he will be executed.” King Dimcken declared.

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Musleen was furious. He had scouted the area, checked for tracks, interviewed anyone who might have seen something and even checked his extremely thorough spy network.

Nothing.

Lord Eveilyr was either a genius, or he was innocent.

So Musleen checked again, and again. He worked through the night, reading reports, following leads, instructing his men. He ran himself ragged trying to find the culprit. Who would want to kill
Loki? Lord Eveilyr did have a motive, but he was an old hand at court politics, he disowned his niece the second she was discovered to be running the resistance. Anyone else? Not really, Loki was popular with the people, popular with the court. Perhaps a family member of those that died? Although it was strange that they would blame Loki for that, not when the King had been so publicly determined to kill them all.

“I am at a loss Fosxyr.” He said to the servant.

Fosxyr had been dismissed for the night after Loki was safely in the King’s chambers. He had instead volunteered to help with reading some of the vast amounts of paperwork that Musleen handled every day.

“I had hoped, what with you both surviving the last attempt, that the mastermind would have given up.” Fosxyr said.

“Unlikely, revenge is not motivated by the ease at which it can be carried out.” Musleen said, “Although it is strange that after that first attempt there has been no other until now. It was common knowledge that we were spending a full year at Lord Fetatheren’s, perhaps that was enough time to learn the layout. It may have been impossible to do so with the other places. In which case it is relevant that they would try again here, we are also staying for a long period of time.”

“So it may not be Lord Eveilyr, but someone who wishes to frame him.” Fosxyr said.

“Perhaps. Or someone who is a part of the court, and is using our time here to learn the layout of the manor.” Musleen said.

“Odd though that Lord Eveilyr’s name was invoked by the first assassin, and the second attempt should take place on his lands.” Fosxyr said.

“He has done nothing out of the ordinary, he does not like us here but he is not resisting either, he knows the penalty of having someone from his house go rogue.” Musleen said.

“Perhaps we should not try to think of who wishes Loki harm, but who wishes Lord Eveilyr harm.” Fosxyr said.

Musleen smiled tightly. “Clever Fox,” he said.
Eighty One Steps

Chapter Summary

New Friends and New Complications

The rest of the time spent at Lord Eveilyr’s manor was surprisingly calm. Musleen had become lost in his investigations, even taking a few side trips out to destinations unknown, but apart from that things carried on as usual.

King Dimcken did instruct Loki to stay away from the windows, which only served to make him want to go to them more. It was frustrating, but not difficult to comply. He went walking out in the gardens instead, as long as the King was distracted by the work of the realm.

When the day finally came for them to depart, Lord Eveilyr threw them an enormous banquet. He spent the whole evening grinning merrily as he mentally counted down the hours until they were all gone.

Loki was feeling relieved as well. He wanted to move on away from this place, so that hopefully the King would relax a little, enough to let him look out of the windows at least.

Musleen was back from his wanderings, and he sat quietly by his brothers as the night wore on. Although Loki had gotten better at reading him over the years, there was no sign on his face that he’d had either success or failure.

It was frustrating. Loki just wanted to run away and scream into the air to let out all of his pent up feelings.

Instead he had to sit here and smile for the crowds. Sadly he was very good at it now.

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The next morning Loki was up bright and early. He couldn’t wait to get away from this place. Eighteen months was too long to be a guest in someone’s house even under normal circumstances, but to be kept away from the windows and to walk about constantly on edge had turned it into a nightmare.

He needed freedom, he needed air.

They set off not long after breakfast. The servants had already gone on ahead and were a few hours down the road. Loki rode alongside Haewkyr as King Dimcken snored away in the carriage.

"I have never been so glad to be moving." Loki confessed quietly.

Haewkyr grinned at him; he was riding bareback and catering along with ease.

"I understand the frustration," he said, "you need a hobby, something you can do while travelling, something that uses up your not-inconsiderable intellect."

"Such as?" Loki asked.
"Have you thought about writing?" Haewkyr asked, "You could write children's stories."

Loki gave him a look.

"What?!" Haewkyr exclaimed, "I'm helping."

"You're hindering, and doing a marvellous job of it," Loki said, "I will be happy just to move on I think, and try something new."

"You could take up weapons making," Haewkyr suggested, "knives and swords, maybe axes."

"The Dwarves have that covered nicely," Loki argued, "besides, I am not all that interested in where the weapons came from, although enchanting them sounds interesting."

"You should understand the whole process if you are going to work with it," Haewkyr said.

Loki closed his eyes and tilted his head back to feel the sun on his face.

"I know, maybe I will take a stroll down to the armoury one day, but that is hardly going to help me on the road."

"What about knitting?" Haewkyr suggested.

Loki shoved him in the shoulder, making him chuckle deeply.

"I'll find something of my own thank you." Loki said primly.

Haewkyr stuck his tongue out at him, Loki tried not to smile and failed miserably.

****

By contrast to Lord Eveilyr, Lord Kinndyr was all smiles as he welcomed them to his manor. King Dimcken had decided to spend eight months there, as, despite his loyalty, the King did not want Lord Kinndyr growing too powerful, especially as he would likely use that power to take advantage of Lord Eveilyr's drop in fortune.

Nevertheless, he smiled broadly at all of them and greeted them warmly as they walked up the grand staircase to the entrance to his home.

"Your Majesty, Your Grace, I am delighted to host you here at my home, please come inside and make yourselves comfortable. I have had a grand dinner prepared for you and the court in the dining hall."

There was a small flutter of delight at this, normally the arrival day was too hectic for such things, and many of the more minor nobles had taken to packing something for dinner in their saddlebags, as, unlike the royal family, they could not guarantee a meal from the kitchens.

Loki took the King's arm and followed Lord Kinndyr to the dining hall where Lady Nicceia, his wife, and Sirs Miarthyr, Ladughen and Smairken, his three sons, were waiting.

King Dimcken sat down and gave them all a warm smile.

"I can tell that we are going to enjoy our stay Lord Kinndyr," he said, "I trust though that you have some diversions for us, as we have just come from Lord Eveilyr and his magnificent bathhouse."

"Of course Your Majesty, sadly I do not have the luck of my family's manor being built over a strong
stream like Lord Eveilyr does, but we do have some wonderful gardens, a fiendishly difficult maze and there are always day trips to the fens and grottos nearby."

"That sounds wonderful, doesn't it Loki darling?" King Dimcken said.

"Yes Husband, I'm sure that we will have lots of fun here with Lord Kinndyr." Loki replied automatically.

"My youngest son Smairken has been awaiting your arrival Your Grace. He has heard that you like to read, he has a large personal library of seidr books that he is happy to share with you for the duration of your stay here." Lord Kinndyr said.

Was it Loki’s imagination or did Lord Kinndyr look slightly nervous as he introduced his son? Perhaps not, it was hard to tell.

Smairken lowered his head at being singled out as Loki nodded toward him in thanks.

"I'm sure it's very impressive. Do you practice magic Sir Smairken?" Loki asked.

"Only a little, Your Grace," Smairken replied, "I have not got a great amount of talent, but I enjoy the study for its own sake."

Out of the corner of his eye, Loki caught Lord Kinndyr sending a stern look towards his son. Something was definitely up.

The dinner was a good one and the drink flowed freely. King Dimcken got quite drunk and let his hand wander under the table, but thankfully he was too intoxicated to go further once the party was over.

Loki was shown to his room by Smairken, who volunteered.

"My mother was so excited that you were going to stay in her rooms," He said, "She moved out two weeks ago and had the servants clean it from top to bottom. I kept telling her that the servants keep it spotless for her anyway, but she couldn't stop worrying."

"I don't know why," Loki said, "I am certain that things will be perfect."

"She was so excited at your wedding." Smairken said, "She was fretting for days about her dress, and when she came home all she could talk about was how lovely you looked."

Loki forced an uncomfortable smile into his face, he didn't like being reminded of his captivity.

"I hope that now we will be spending some time together that I will not disappoint her," he said instead.

"I don't think you can," Smairken said, "Between you and me, she's a bit of a royal follower, she can name the whole royal family tree right back to before the mountains froze."

"Everyone needs a hobby," Loki said, although privately he thought she needed a better hobby than someone else's family tree, although from a historical perspective it might be interesting.

"Here we are," Smairken said, showing Loki a door, "Perhaps tomorrow if you wish I can show you my library."

"I'd be honoured," Loki said, and bid him goodnight.
Fosxyr was waiting inside and helped Loki to change for bed.

"It's good to be away from Lord Eveilyr," Loki said quietly, "I feel as though I can finally start to relax."

Fosxyr frowned, "They still haven't caught your attacker Your Grace, you cannot relax just yet," he advised.

"I know, I know, I won't be letting my guard down just yet, but I still feel safer now that I am away from his manor," Loki said, "And I know Musleen hasn't given up searching."

"No he hasn't, he's been very dedicated this past year. I do wish he could take a break, but he's practically married to his work." Fosxyr said as Loki climbed into bed. "He needs a woman." Fosxyr added.

Loki snorted with laughter. "Is that everyone's answer to poor Musleen's dedication?" He asked.

"I would like to see him settled, he'd make a good father, don't you think?"

"Definitely," Loki agreed, "I've seen him with Roaseia, he's a natural."

"A good catch for any woman," Fosxyr said mildly, "Or man." He added, looking pointedly at Loki.

Loki frowned, "Fosxyr-"

"You've been glancing in his direction rather a lot Your Grace, it started small but it is getting more noticeable." Fosxyr was completely serious now, and a little bit stern, he looked very much like a father concerned for his foster son. "I don't want to see either of you get into trouble." He added.

Loki shook his head, "I would never," he insisted, "And neither would Musleen, he likes women anyway, he likes-" He broke off suddenly, aware that he'd said too much.

Fosxyr looked at him with renewed interest. "He likes?" He prompted.

Loki bit his lip. "I'm not supposed to say," He said quietly, "But you have nothing to fear Fosxyr, we're just friends."

"Some of the looks you've given him are not those of a friend." Fosxyr said bluntly.

"I'll be more careful," Loki promised, "I don't want him Fosxyr, I only want one man."

He didn't say who, Fosxyr preferred not to know anyway. "I'll watch how I look at him." Loki promised.

"Why are you looking in the first place?" Fosxyr asked.

Loki bit his lip. Why was he looking? Because Musleen was something to look at? Something that wasn’t old and wrinkled up like a prune? Because, while his heart belonged to Thor and by the Norns he wished everything else did too, he was still a young man with hormones who wasn’t blind?

It’s not as though he’d ever act on it. Even if he could, Thor was waiting, and Loki wouldn’t let him down. But after forty eight years of suffering through his marriage, Loki just wanted a little look.

"I don't know," he said, “I didn't mean anything by it, I just... I'm lonely," he said softly, "I don't want to do anything with him, I just..."
"It's dangerous Your Grace, I know that you have endured much, and I know that you have a long way to go, but you need to be more careful, I know you well so I spotted it quickly, but there are others who are as perceptive as I am, and it will not be much longer before one of them goes and whispers in the King’s ear." Fosxyr cautioned.

"I'll be more careful." Loki promised.

"With Haewkyr too," Fosxyr added.

"I haven't-"

"Yes you have."

"... I have, haven't I?"

"I believe you when you say you were just looking, but His Majesty is not as understanding as I am, and it won't be you who will be punished in *that* situation, it's your cousin and friend who will face the noose."

"I'll stop. I will, I promise," Loki whispered, his face pale.

"Thank you Your Grace." Fosxyr said.

"Thank *you* Fosxyr, I'm glad I have you." Loki said as the servant put out the lamps.

It took Loki a little while to fall asleep, but after promising himself over and over again not to be so careless, he finally drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

****

The following day, Loki was visited by Smairken, who showed him to the seidr library.

There were over a hundred books in the little room, most of them Loki had never seen before.

"These are amazing!" Loki exclaimed as he scanned the shelves. His eye caught something interesting. "Are those ones on dark magic?"

"Yes, purely for intellectual research I assure you." Smairken said, "I have studied the history of magic extensively, and that includes the darker elements."

Loki moved back away from them, although he was itching to open one up and start reading. Dark magic was a controversial subject, on the one hand undoing dark spells required extensive study, on the other hand anyone who *did* study them was always under a tiny level of suspicion when something terrible happened. Studying them purely for intellectual purposes was not encouraged, it was all of the tarnish with none of the reward.

To Loki, that just made them more intriguing.

"You can read them in here if you like, I have a spare key I could lend you," Smairken said, "I know the attraction, and the reputation, of those books. Of course, I believe that knowledge is not evil, what you do with it is."

Loki nodded slowly. "I'll think about it," he said, not committing to anything. He didn't know Smairken very well and he wasn't certain that he could trust him.

Smairken opened his mouth to answer, but was interrupted by a knock on the door.
"Brother! I know you're both in there! Don't you monopolise the King's Consort! I have the marvels of the estate to show him, and I've been looking forward to it for an age!"

Loki looked across at Smairken, whose smile had become a little strained.

"My brother," he said, "He's nice really, but a bit boisterous."

"Brother!" Came another yell from outside the door.

Smairken shot Loki a look of apology and pulled open the door.

Lord Kinndyr's second son, Ladughen, was standing there beaming at them.

"Finally brother, I thought you were up to no good!" He exclaimed.

Of the three, Ladughen was the tallest and the biggest; he had a mop of unruly blond hair, bright blue eyes and very white teeth.

"I've come to give you a tour of the manor, Your Grace," he said with a bow.

"Oh, that's very, kind of you Sir Ladughen," Loki said, taken aback by his forward manner.

"Just Ladughen if you please Your Grace, I do not care for such formalities," Ladughen said.

Loki raised an eyebrow, but Ladughen just grinned up at him from his bow.

"Alright then, Ladughen," Loki said.

Ladughen rose and held out an arm. "I have been instructed to show you around, which is very fortunate as I was hoping to do that anyway. Would you like to see the manor library or the training grounds first?"

Loki looked at the extended arm and suppressed a feeling of annoyance. So many people treated him like a woman just because he was married to the King. Did they not see the man-shaped body standing in front of them? Did they think he was in some way feeble or incapable?

In Asgard Loki may have been slighter than the typical warrior, but at least no one ever treated him as though he ought to be wearing skirts. Even knowing that he could carry a child like a woman did not stop them treating him like a man.

Unfortunately he had to be polite. Maybe if he got to know Ladughen a little better he'd be able to explain his dislike for this treatment without causing offence or embarrassment.

He forced a polite smile onto his face and took the proffered arm.

"Anywhere you want to go first is fine, I have eight months to spend here, I am sure I will see it all," he said.

Ladughen beamed at him. "I shall show you to the training yards then, we can explore the maze afterwards if you wish," he said.

Loki turned to Smairken, "Will you join us?" He asked.

Now it was Ladughen’s turn to look put out. Smairken smiled tightly. "Sadly I must decline, but I will fetch you a key to my library, Your Grace, and leave it with your servant."
Ladughen led Loki away. As Smairken watched them go his eyes narrowed.

The training yards were well set out and large enough to accommodate a fair number of men.

"The swords are in here, the lances are here, and the maces, axes and spears are in here," Ladughen said.

"You have knife targets," Loki commented, spotting the targets lined up near to the archery range.

"Father had everything made for us to train with when we were young," Ladughen said, "Before he had three sons he grew up with five sisters, that area over there used to be a bower, with pretty flowers and decorative seats."

"Oh the horror," Loki quipped.

Ladughen laughed.

"It was for him, *his* father died when he was still young, grandmother ran the whole manor, and his sisters overran the place. He keeps most of it nice now for mother, but the training grounds he insisted upon."

Loki followed him towards the maze. It was made of stone, with ivy growing all over it.

"It's quite easy once you know the way," Ladughen said, "but I shan't help you unless you become very lost."

Loki raised an eyebrow, "I shall not need it," he declared, "I'm sure I'll find my way."

Ladughen grinned at him and winked, "I'll wait for the cries for help then shall I?" He said in a teasing tone.

Loki allowed some mock outrage to cross his features. "Then you shall be waiting a very long time," he said, fighting a smile.

They both shared a laugh, before Ladughen sobered.

"Your Grace, as much as I do not wish to speak ill of family... Smairken, he is... difficult sometimes, I would advise you to avoid him, or at least not to be alone with him in that library of his, he has a reputation."

The dark seidr, it had to be. Loki was reminded of how anyone who studied it came under suspicion.

"Has he ever done anything to deserve his reputation?" He asked, determined to form his own opinion.

Ladughen looked uncomfortable.

"He's got a mean streak," he said at last, "just be careful, please Your Grace. I would hate for you to have a black mark against your good name."

No Trouble, No Mischief.

"Of course, thank you for the advice, I know it cannot be easy for you," Loki said.

He would ask Fosxyr later if there was anything to Smairken's supposed reputation, for all he knew it was Ladughen whom he should be avoiding.
"Loki!" Came the sound of a familiar voice from across the yard.

Camtan was standing there with Dorgen. Loki headed over to them with Ladughen in tow.

"Father has decided that we should take a ride out to the lake for lunch," Dorgen said as they drew close, "all are welcome."

Loki nodded, "That sounds lovely," he said, noticing that Ladughen looked disappointed.

"No maze today," he said, seeing Loki's inquiring expression.

"Tomorrow is always available," Loki pointed out, "we can make up a group and try to tackle it together."

"That's a good plan," Ladughen said, sounding as though it was anything but.

Loki didn't have time to wonder about it because they were heading for the stables, where King Dimcken was waiting.

****

The key was waiting for Loki when he arrived back in his chambers. Fosxyr had left it safely in the top drawer of Loki’s bedside table. Loki sat down in one of the overly-fluffy, extremely lacy chairs and asked for some tea.

“Smairken showed me his library this morning, he said I could go and read in there whenever I wish,” Loki said.

“I know, he said as much to me when he delivered the key,” Fosxyr said.

“His brother, Ladughen, told me to keep away from him,” Loki said.

Fosxyr’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “That’s interesting,” he commented. “Lord Kinndyr and Lady Nicceia are frequent visitors to court, but their sons are not, I know very little about them. Did he say why?”

“Just that Smairken was a troublemaker with a mean streak. He studies dark magic, for historical purposes, or at least he claims,” Loki said.

“Perhaps it would be wise to steer clear of him,” Fosxyr advised, “as much as you realistically can, as a member of Lord Kinndyr’s family on his lands you cannot snub him entirely without just cause, and so far he has given you none. Although on the subject of steering clear, Musleen came to see me today.”

“I barely glanced at him all day!” Loki protested at once, “I promise Fosxyr, but I can’t ignore him either, that *would* be suspicious.”

“If you would let me finish, Your Grace, Musleen came to see me to deliver a warning. Specifically regarding Sir Ladughen, apparently Sir Ladughen was summoned to the King’s chambers last night after dinner, he does not know what transpired there, but the young Sir immediately cancelled his plans to go riding today and escorted you about instead. Musleen thinks you need to be careful, something is most definitely up.”

Loki looked at Fosxyr in silence. “What could it be?” He asked, “I’ve done nothing wrong, I’m sure of it.”
“It may be simply that His Majesty wishes you to have an escort who knows the lay of the land,” Fosxyr suggested, “But regardless, be on your guard with him, he reports to the King.”

Loki nodded seriously. He’d be the best damn King’s Consort in the world when Ladughen was around.

That night he dreamed that he’d been corrupted by dark magic and destroyed the whole of Vanaheim. He had just melted all the snow off the high mountains and was laughing in delight as everyone drowned when Fosxyr woke him for breakfast.
The next few days were thankfully fairly quiet. This was mostly due to the rain which came falling gently across the fens to soak the earth. The site and sound of the water running through the drainage systems mixed with that of the falling rain.

Loki spent his time in the library, curled up with a number of large books. He had tried to remain sociable, but ultimately distant, to the boisterous Ladughen and the quieter, more serious, Smairken, although in the last few days it was not their presence that was bothering him.

It was their mother.

Lady Nicceia was a simple lady with very little ambition beyond what she had already achieved: a good husband and three healthy children. She stood in constant awe of the royal family, whom she clearly believed to be some kind of superior specimens, and in particular she worried about Loki, dark, exotic, *Aesir* Loki.

Did he eat boar like them? Did he like wines? Did Asgard have fens? Did he need know about the dangers of losing the path and getting caught in the swamp? Was he warm enough? Asgard was warmer, wasn't it?

The worst part of her fussing was that it did not take place in front of Loki himself, but *around* him. The servants were constantly sent to ask Fosxyr about Loki's preferences and to make sure he had dozens of things he didn't actually need, and the woman herself had managed to memorise the entire Aesir royal family tree. Loki lived in dread of being asked about his great, great, great uncle's contribution to the world of sword fighting, or his great, great, great, *great* aunt's penchant for frilly socks.

He couldn't even name those people, but she knew every one of them and what they ate for breakfast.

So he lurked in the library and read his way through some of Smairken's seidr books. He had started at one end of the shelf and was determinedly reading his way through them in order until he reached the ones full of dark seidr. At least then he could claim that they were just the next one in line.

And he'd damn well keep telling himself that, thank you very much.
They intrigued him. Dark texts were for those who proved that they could handle them, those whose character was beyond reproach.

Back in Asgard, Loki wouldn't be considered old enough to tackle them for five centuries yet.

It wasn't as though he was planning to cast anything, he just wanted to know what it was that he wasn't allowed to know, desperately, he could barely read the other books fast enough.

"Your Grace, there you are," came a, by now, quite familiar voice, "I have heard that the rain will be clearing tomorrow, it will still be too wet to ride but we can go out and tackle the maze, would you like to come?"

Loki looked up from his book into Ladughen's blue eyes.

"Of course," he said.

Perfect Consort always attended the social events of their hosts.

Ladughen sat down in the chair opposite and smiled broadly.

"Prince Lyren and Prince Octir were quite eager to try their navigation skills, and I understand that Crown Prince Dorgen and Prince Musleen were also expressing an interest, we should have quite the group."

"That sounds good," Loki said.

Ladughen studied him with his deep blue eyes. He was undeniably the most attractive of the three brothers, which unfortunately he seemed to be very aware of. Loki found that he was reminded of Fandral on more than one occasion.

"Smairken suggested a game," he said, still watching Loki closely. "He said that we should divide into groups and have a race through the maze, first group through wins."

"But what about you, Smairken and Miarthyr? You both know your way through already." Loki asked.

"Smairken suggested that each group have one of us to lead you out when you eventually give up," Ladughen said cheerfully, "If we divide up into teams of two, with a guide for each group to make three then we should have a good game."

Loki nodded, "I'll be there bright and early," he said.

"Great!" Ladughen said, "You're in a group with Musleen, I'll escort you both."

As he left the library, Loki felt worry settle over him. He’d be alone for potentially hours with Musleen and the king's spy. What sounded like a good day had just turned into a stress-filled nightmare.

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The following morning, not long after breakfast, the small group assembled at the entrance to the maze.

"Now, even if you know the way it takes about two hours to complete," Ladughen advised them all, "so don't expect to be finished at all quickly. Also, the walls are made of stone, but some of them run on tracks and move about on a set schedule. *Don't* get in the way of the moving stone, there are
safety censors, but it would be better if no one took any chances."

Loki frowned, "These moving stones, do they block the path?"

"They do indeed, they change the way through every so often. It certainly makes things interesting," Smairken said from behind him.

"Right, I'll be with His Grace Loki and Prince Musleen, Smairken will be with Crown Prince Dorgen and Princess Sofftia, no Prince Camtan today? He's with the little princess? Oh well, next time then, and Prince Lyren and Prince Ooctir will be with Miarthyr," Ladughen said. "Are we ready to begin? Excellent, let's go!"

Loki noticed that Smairken looked disappointed as they all entered the maze. He saw Loki looking and quickly smiled.

"I was hoping to show you a bit of the manor myself Your Grace, but it seems my brother has monopolised your attention," he said.

"I'm sure there is much left to show me," Loki said as the group reached the first split in the path.

"We're going left," Lyren said before anyone else could speak.

Loki quickly glanced at the three brothers for a clue as to whether the two princes had made a good choice, but was confronted by three blank masks. Lyren, Ooctir and Miarthyr disappeared down the path.

"Shall we go right or straight?" Musleen asked Loki.

"Right," Loki said, as at the same time Sofftia said "straight."

"That worked out well," Musleen commented, and the two groups parted ways.

The walls of the maze were ten feet high and covered in vines and moss. It was lined with cobblestones and, after only a few minutes, it became almost deathly quiet.

They continued on for a little way until they came to another split in the path.

"Which way do you think?" Musleen asked, scanning the ground for signs that people had used one split more than another.

"I'm guessing that the rule of one-side isn't going to work in this maze, what with the moving walls," Loki said.

"Rule of one-side?" Ladughen asked curiously.

"That's where you put either your right or left hand on the wall and then walk along, you might go down every dead end, but you *will* get out, as you cannot double back as long as you keep your hand on the wall," Loki explained.

Ladughen thought about it.

"That's brilliant," he said after a moment, "And that also explains why Smairken never got lost in any maze, ever, in our whole lives. I've *seen* him walk by with his hand on the nearest wall and I just thought he had crappy balance!"

"Well now you know," Musleen said, "But you're right Loki, if the walls shift around then the one-
"Let's go right," Loki suggested.

"Why right?"

"The path looks friendlier."

"... Seriously?"

"Do you have a better way to work this out? We can't stand here forever, we'll lose the game."

"True, we can't lose the game, Dorgen is a terrible gloater."

They set off right.

"Is he really?" Loki asked Musleen quietly, "A terrible gloater?"

"Not really, but he will rub it in a little, you know, for the rest of our time here." Musleen answered with a straight face.

"We have to win," Loki said.

They reached another split, this time into four pathways.

"Now where?" Musleen muttered under his breath.

They searched for clues to the right way for a minute before deciding that the second path looked 'friendliest'.

It was close to an hour later when they encountered their first moving wall. They had just come around a corner to see it close in front of them, blocking off the path.

"Damn," Loki said, "a new dead end."

"How long before they move again?" Musleen asked Ladughen.

"They are all on their own sequence," Ladughen told them, "the time varies from as little as five minutes to as great as two hours."

Loki sighed, "We'd better head back and take the other pathway then," he said.

Another half an hour later and they ran into trouble.

Loki had chosen a new split and was heading down it, Musleen was giving the ground one last glance before following, when with a rumble the pathway between them closed up, leaving Musleen on one side, and Loki and Ladughen on the other.

Loki turned to Ladughen.

"Did you know that there was a moving wall there?" He asked.

"Of course," Ladughen said, "But I'm not allowed to help you."

"Telling us to stick together on one side or the other is not helping us win," Loki protested, "Now we'll have to wait for it to move again."
"Loki! Are you alright?" Musleen called from the other side of the wall.

"We're fine, we'll wait for you!" Loki called back.

"That wall may not move again for two hours!" Ladughen yelled, "You'll lose the game if we wait here for that long!"

"We'll lose anyway if Musleen isn't with us when we get out." Loki protested, "As he is a part of the group. We'll wait!"

"As you wish Your Grace." Ladughen said quietly.

Loki realised with a chill that he was refusing to leave without Musleen, in front of the man who would report this behaviour back to a currently suspicious King Dimcken.

Still turned to face the wall, he swallowed nervously.

"Ladughen! If I try another path, will there eventually be a way through for me?!" Musleen called out.

"Yes! There's always a way through, regardless of what combinations the walls take!" Ladughen answered.

"Go on then Loki, I'll try to get out on my own, and if I fail by lunchtime, Ladughen will just have to come and find me!" Musleen yelled.

"Alright!" Loki called out, "We'll see you later!"

He turned and continued down the path, trying to look disinterested in Musleen's fate.

Ladughen shot him a grin.

"He'll be alright, the maze isn't a dangerous place, the worst you can say for it is you might get a bit hungry and tired if it takes you too long. We'll see him at the end, you'll see."

"I'm sure we will," Loki said, trying to sound vaguely dismissive.

They continued on for a while.

"Your Grace," Ladughen said, "Have I done something to offend you?"

Loki paused, "No, not at all," he said.

"It's just that you haven't said a word to me all day unless I asked you a question first. I thought maybe I had done something to draw your ire."

Loki bit his lip gently, he had to be better than this, a perfect Consort was not rude to his hosts.

"I'm sorry, I was lost in thought," Loki said quickly. "I meant no disrespect."

"I did not think you were disrespectful Your Grace, I was worried that I had angered you! I've been told that I can be a bit of a forceful personality."

"No, no, you've been very friendly," Loki said, "I've just been distracted by..."

He paused, trying to think.
Ladughen looked at him seriously.

"I've heard about the attempts on your life Your Grace, Prince Musleen sent his guards all through the manor days before you arrived, they were very thorough."

"I don't know why they're targeting me," Loki said.

"You mean apart from being a member of the royal family? Some people are just insane," Ladughen said.

Loki forced a smile onto his face.

"The King does a good job of protecting me," he said.

"Of course," Ladughen said quickly, "I never doubted it."

They reached another split in the path and Loki turned left.

"You didn't even pause," Ladughen said, "Are you tired of the game?"

"No," Loki said, "I'd never be forgiven if I gave up, not with poor Musleen having to make it through on his own."

Ladughen grinned at him.

"I know I'm not meant to help you," he said.

"Then don't," Loki said quickly, clapping his hands over his ears theatrically, "I can't hear you."

"I was only going to say that you made a good choice. See, I waited until *after* you made it, no helping at all," Ladughen said.

"Well good, I'm going to win this thing if... what was that?"

They paused.

"It sounds like one of the other groups," Ladughen said.

They shared a look.

"Should we let them know we are here?" Ladughen asked.

Loki thought about it.

"Not if I'm on the right path we shouldn't," he declared and started creeping past where the voices were coming from.

After a minute they became more distinct.

"We should go left, left is more to the west, where the exit is!"

"And mazes by their very nature double back around all the time, we should go right and see what's there!"

It was Lyrren and Octir, they had to be on the other side of the wall.

Loki suppressed a smile at their bickering, they reminded him a little of when he and Thor would
disagree about where to go on a hunting trip.

Once past, they relaxed again and continued down the pathways.

"How many dead ends are there?" Loki asked.

"The moving walls create and destroy them, but there are between one hundred and fifty and one hundred and sixty at any given time," Ladughen said.

They turned the corner and walked into another split.

Loki glanced around before pointing at the ground.

"The left path looks more worn," he said.

Ladughen grinned, "I cannot say anything Your Grace," he said in mock seriousness.

Loki wanted to like him, were it not for the fact that he was the King's spy then they would probably be friends.

"Left we go," Loki declared.

From there they reached a frustrating dead end.

"That's a moving wall, isn't it?" Loki asked, already looking at the bottom of the wall in front of them for the sign of tracks.

"It might be," Ladughen said calmly.

Loki shot him a suspicious look, then turned back to the wall.

"I think we should wait," he said, "Just because the maximum time is two hours doesn't mean this one is going to be, and I think we're close to the way out."

"We're certainly on the right side of the maze," Ladughen admitted, but would not expand further on his comment.

Loki sat down carefully on the path.

"What do you do when you are not playing host, Ladughen?" He asked.

Ladughen flopped down to the ground easily.

"I am in the army, at least, I was. I came home after being injured, although now that I am well again I will be heading back," he said.

"When?" Loki asked.

"In seven months and three weeks, Your Grace. Father asked me to stay for the duration of your visit, he likes to have me around," Ladughen said.

"What weapons do you fight with?" Loki asked.

"The axe, I have a good strong arm and I can throw it quite far too, with good accuracy, and yourself Your Grace? I was told that you like to practice with weapons as well as magic."

Loki nodded, "Knives," he said, "I throw knives. I am also not bad with a spear, and decent enough
"Multitalented I see," Ladughen said with a smile, "Perhaps you would consent to show me one day."

"I would be happy to," Loki told him.

Ladughen smiled then and shifted closer, so that he was sitting next to Loki on the path.

"And what magic are you good at, Your Grace?" He asked, his voice low as he leaned in close, "Fire throwing? Potion brewing? You haven't brewed up a love spell in your time now have you?"

Loki looked up at him, only a few inches away...

...and vanished. Ladughen looked around, startled, to see Loki sitting on the far side of the path.

"Illusions," Loki said, fighting a smile, "You've been talking to my clone for the last half hour."

Ladughen looked back at the empty air beside him, then back at Loki.

"Most impressive Your Grace, most impressive," he said in wonder.

There was a sound like a rumble and the wall slid aside. Loki and Ladughen jumped to their feet and ran through the new opening and along the path. After a few minutes it became clear where to go next as the moss was gone, rubbed away by regular footsteps. They reached the end of the maze and ran out, grinning in triumph.

Musleen was waiting for them.

"How did you do that?" Ladughen asked him, astonished.

"You two were holding me back," he deadpanned. "The others aren't out yet, so I guess this means that we win."

"Excellent, let's start lunch." Loki said.

Camtan was sitting at the tables with Roaseia on his lap. He shot Loki a grin as they sat down.

"Did you have fun?" He asked.

"Oh yes, that was brilliant, although I'd love to tackle it alone one time, just to see if I can," Loki said.

"It's a little dull," Musleen reported, "No one to argue with, which is good, but no one to talk to either, which is bad."

"You didn't miss us did you Prince Musleen?" Ladughen asked him cheerfully.

Musleen regarded him with a smile that didn't *quite* make it to his eyes.

"Not for long," he said.

Something about the tone of his voice made Loki frown, but he was distracted by Lyrren and Octir, who ran out shouting in triumph only to scowl when they saw that they were second.

"Damn," Lyrren said, looking at them.
Octir shrugged, "At least we beat Father," he pointed out.

Lyrren immediately brightened, "There is that," he agreed and they sat down.

"If my wife disappears in your maze I will be sending in you both to find her," Camtan said to Ladughen and Miarthyr.

"They'll be fine, they have Smairken, they can't get lost," Ladughen insisted.

He was right, it took them another half hour, but eventually they appeared at the exit.

"Getting slow Father!" Octir called out.

"Losing his mind, it's a common complaint of the elderly," Lyrren added.

Dorgen sighed heavily, picked up breadstick and tapped them both over the back of the head.

"Abuse! Abuse!" Octir immediately chanted.

Sofftia sat down and took Roaseia into her arms.

"Hello my sweet girl, did you miss me?" She cooed.

"Da!" Roaseia exclaimed and fell into a fit of giggles.

"She missed you," Camtan confirmed.

Dorgen made himself up a roll of cold beef and salad.

"We should do that again, but as a group next time," he suggested.

"You just don't like coming last," Octir teased.

Dorgen shot his younger son a look.

"Perhaps I just missed your company," he said. "In my old age I need my sons around me."

Lyrren and Octir groaned in unison.

"You started it," Dorgen said mildly, before taking a bite of his roll.

"We should throw a wonderland party in there," Smairken suggested.

"That's a great idea!" Ladughen exclaimed.

"What's a wonderland party?" Musleen asked.

"It takes place in the evening. The whole maze is filled with lights and streamers, with servants dressed up as creatures from myths. You walk through the maze from entertainment to entertainment, of course you might get lost, or turned around, but that's half the fun," Ladughen said.

"It certainly sounds like a good time," Camtan said.

"We'd need some time to arrange it, maybe we should hold it to celebrate the midsummer, that's a few months from now, which should be long enough. I'll tell Father," Ladughen said.

"I'll tell Father, as it was my idea," Smairken said, a little defensively.
"Sorry brother, I did not mean to overshadow you, you can tell Father after lunch while I go to the training grounds with His Grace and the Princes," Ladughen said.

Smairken paused, caught. "I'll join you when I'm done then," he said, a little bitterly.

Loki felt a twinge of sympathy for him. Ladughen probably had no idea that he'd inadvertently left Smairken out. Thor had been like that when they were younger, he was so... energetic, so happy and sunny, and sometimes he'd forget that not everyone was as confident as he was, or as easy going, not everyone went through life like it was simple, not everyone brushed off every little slight that happened to them.

The best moment of Loki's youth had been when Thor turned around and remembered that he was there, and never forgot him again.

"Loki? Are you alright? You seemed lost there for a minute?" Musleen asked.

Loki blinked and found himself back in reality.

"I'm fine, I was just away with my thoughts," he said quickly.

Smairken might have a mean streak, but Loki definitely felt a kinship with him.

****

King Dimcken was in a cheerful mood that night. He kept giving Loki sideways glances at dinner, which could only be a bad thing. Sure enough he requested that Loki join him in his chambers after dinner.

Once in the bedroom he stripped Loki of his robes and began mouthing kisses along his shoulder and neck.

"Did you have fun today my darling?" He asked.

"Yes Husband the maze was very fun," Loki answered, trying to stay calm.

So far he had seen nothing out of the ordinary, but so many years of reading the King’s mood made him nervous. Tonight had shown all the signs of being something ‘special’.

"Musleen told me that you were separated from him about three quarters of the way through," King Dimcken said.

"Yes, but that just led to him beating us to the exit, so I guess we really were holding him back," Loki said.

King Dimcken led him to the bed and made him lie down.

"As long as you had fun, I want you to have fun," he said, running his hands over Loki’s naked body. "Open your legs for me darling, I want to see you."

Loki obediently spread his legs open and tried to relax. Maybe it would just be sex. Maybe he got it wrong and the King *wasn't* in a kinky mood.

King Dimcken smiled and began rubbing his fingers around the folds of skin flanking Loki’s opening. He seemed to be spending longer than normal on the surface.

"You’ve spend the last few days reading my love," he said. "I’m glad that you were able to go
outside in the fresh air.”

“Yes it was lovely,” Loki gasped, “you should have joined us,” he added. Clearly he had some suspicions to smooth over, it couldn’t hurt to make the suggestion.

“Maybe another time,” King Dimcken said, still pushing his fingers around Loki’s entrance. “I’ve been doing some reading myself you know,” he said.

“Oh?” Loki said, trying to ignore the feeling of being violated.

“Yes, you see I thought maybe that people like yourself were a little hard to get aroused, so I researched it. I did not find any evidence of such, but I did find a very detailed book on how to properly stimulate you.”

Loki froze in place. *What?*

King Dimcken was smiling, his fingers were rubbing… quite sensitive places now that Loki stopped trying to ignore the effort. In fact he could definitely feel his muscles twitching in response to the pushes.

To his horror, his penis began to fill.

No.

No, no, no.

Please no.

King Dimcken saw it and took the shaft in his other hand.

“Good boy,” he purred, and began to stroke.

Loki fisted his hands into the blankets. He didn’t want this, he didn’t want to be aroused, he didn’t want to be stimulated. He didn’t want to do this with the King.

But it was happening, the combined efforts of the stroking and rubbing was making him harden.

“You need attention paid to your sweet netherlips my darling beauty. I did not realise that that is where your sensitive place was. I am so sorry not to have found it sooner,” King Dimcken said, oblivious to Loki’s horror. “Just a little more,” he muttered and pressed more deeply.

Loki yelped as a spasm went through him. He was desperate for it to stop, but he knew it wouldn’t, not without him spilling his seed. He was completely hard now and King Dimcken kept up the double assault on his genitals until with a cry of despair, that to untrained ears could be a cry of pleasure, Loki spilled all over his stomach.

He looked down at the mess, then further down at King Dimcken, whose face was twisted into an expression of pure delight.

It was the most terrifying sight Loki had ever seen.

But it wasn’t over. King Dimcken kept pushing his knuckles against Loki’s flesh, he slipped one finger inside and pressed around until he found one spot in particular and rubbed it hard, making Loki whimper. Delighted, King Dimcken crawled forwards, lined himself up and pushed in, using his knuckles at the same time to press Loki on his most sensitive areas.
It took four thrusts, just four, and Loki’s muscles clenched in orgasm.

He let out a cry as he felt it happen, not even noticing the King spill at the same time, the effect of watching his pretty young wife come undone having been too much for his stamina.

Then it was over, and King Dimcken was lying on top of him pressing sloppy wet kisses against his mouth.

“There now, isn’t that better my darling?” King Dimcken huffed.

A response was required. ‘Drop dead’ would not be appropriate.

“Yes Husband, thank you Husband.”

His mouth moved and he heard the words but they seemed disconnected from him.

King Dimcken rolled off him and lay back. His breathing evened out and a few minutes later he began to snore.

Loki looked down at himself. There was seed on his stomach and it wasn’t the King’s.

How was it even possible to feel *more* dirty? He did though, he really did.

Loki tried to tell himself that orgasms were just muscle spasms, and that any muscle, if pressed or rubbed the right way could be made to clench and seize. It was a physical response to a physical stimulation. There was no attraction involved, no sudden desire on his part. It was all perfectly logical.

So why was he crying?

Perhaps it was better that he was made to do both kinds in the same night, that way he wouldn’t be clinging to some stupid false hope that he might avoid the second one. Yes, it was better that it was all over with. He had nothing left, but at least he knew that for sure.

It hadn’t even felt good. Wasn’t it supposed to feel good? The books said so, Fandral said so, common gossip said so.

Actually it had kind of hurt. Just like any other muscle spasm. He didn’t want to do it again, not ever.

He wanted to go home.

He wanted Thor.

But would Thor want him?
People can be Very Complicated...

Why did people get up every morning?

Well, they probably had something worth getting up for.

Or, if you were Loki, you had to do it because it would be suspicious if you didn't.

They would send for a healer, who would say that there was nothing wrong with him physically. Then they would check his mind, and then he would be in trouble, because he wasn't allowed to hate the King.

And he did hate him, he hated him a lot.

No Trouble, No Mischief.

All he had to hope for was that somehow Thor would still be able to love him.

Loki lay in bed under the covers. His breakfast was in the next room, as always, and he was supposed to get up and start the day.

In the months following King Dimcken's new discovery of how to make Loki respond 'properly', Loki had found it harder and harder to get up every morning.

He lay in his own little huddle of filth, which seemed to cling to him no matter what he did. It was warm under the blankets, warm and dirty, he could *feel* the horrible stuff surrounding him, contaminating his bedding, soiling his nightshirt.

If he didn't move, he couldn't spoil anything else. He'd just stay here in the filth and try to keep it contained.

Fosxyr was coming. Loki could hear the servant's footsteps. He was coming and Loki would get up, just like yesterday and the day before and every day before that.

The door opened. Loki ducked his head down under the covers. He didn't want to get up, not today, not any day really, but especially not today, he just didn't *want* to.

"Your Grace, breakfast is getting cold," Fosxyr said softly.

He had been there the morning after Loki had been forced to orgasm against his will. He had listened to the tears, held Loki close and tried hard to comfort him as Loki had broken down in tears.

Loki peeked out from under the covers.

Fosxyr looked the way he always did. Sometimes, right after he touched Loki's skin, Loki was certain that he could see the inky stuff clinging to the servant, but Fosxyr was always so meticulous with his clothes and appearance that maybe he cleaned it off when Loki wasn't looking.
It must be hard, being the personal servant of someone so disgusting.

"You need to rise Your Grace," Fosxyr said.

Loki frowned. "I'm sick," he muttered, "I don't feel well and I need to rest."

"Lady Nicceia has planned a picnic for today," Fosxyr said, "It would be a shame if you missed it."

Loki closed his eyes. "I don't care," he muttered, "I'm sick."

Fosxyr sat on the edge of the bed, getting his robe dangerously close to the filth zone. Loki pulled away a little, but the filth stayed behind, it's what it did.

He made a noise of protest as Fosxyr reached out and laid a hand across his forehead.

"Don't do that," Loki protested, pulling away.

He could already see the inky stuff smeared across Fosxyr's palm.

Fosxyr ignored him and laid his hand back on Loki's forehead.

"You aren't warm," he said, "Maybe you are overtired."

"Whatever," Loki muttered.

Fosxyr sighed and took a hold of Loki's chin, the way you would a naughty child to get their attention.

"Loki, I will make you a bargain," he said, "I will tell them you feel unwell and cannot go today if you promise to get up and dressed. You can spend today reading in the chair if you like but you cannot stay in bed."

Loki felt tears spring into his eyes.

"Alright," he said, "I'll get up."

Fosxyr nodded, "And I will tell them you cannot go today," he said.

King Dimcken sent the healer immediately. Fosxyr had a quiet word with her in the outer room while Loki settled into his chair.

"He's just exhausted. All the travelling and parties have worn him out. If he just has today to rest and relax I'm sure he'll feel a lot better."

The healer nodded in understanding. "Sometimes a day off is just what you need," she said. "I'll check him over as the King commands, but he can have today to rest."

The healer was kind, and checked Loki over quickly, but thoroughly.

"You are low in energy," she said, "and your blood pressure is a little low. Are you eating well?"

"Yes, quite well," Loki said.

He'd barely touched his breakfast for months, he only ate lunch when he was in company, although dinner was always with the King and he had to eat or it would arouse suspicion.

"Well in that case I think you just need a good rest," the healer said.
Her expression softened.
"Your Grace? Is everything alright with your family?" she asked.

Loki blinked, what?
"Yes?" he said, wondering why she was asking.

"If you will forgive me from saying so, you have seemed down these past few months, there are those in the court who have seen it. If there is something bothering you, there is no shame in it. A difficult emotional time is just as damaging as a difficult physical one, and am here to help if you need it."

Loki clenched the pages of his book a little tighter. He wanted to scream at her. His family was fine, it was *their* bloody King that was causing all his anguish.

"No, they're fine, I'm fine, just a little tired," he said.

The healer nodded. "If you need me, you can send for me at any time Your Grace," she said.

It was clear she didn't believe him, but she took her leave without saying anything further on the subject.

Fosxyr made him some tea, then carefully stood in front of him and waited for acknowledgement.

Loki tried to ignore him, he didn't want to talk about it.

Fosxyr did not move.

Loki glanced up from his book.

"What is it Fosxyr?" he asked.

"I think your grandparents should visit you," Fosxyr said.

"They are on the completely opposite side of the realm. It is far too far a journey for them," Loki said, "I wish it wasn't," he added softly.

"I know they write to you," Fosxyr pressed.

"Yes, every week," Loki said, "They are very good to me."

"They love you, they would make the journey if you needed them," Fosxyr pressed.

"It's too far, they are not young men. I can't ask them to do such a thing," Loki snapped.

It was impossible, and what made him truly angry was that he wanted them to do it so badly that he was almost upset with *them* for being old.

That was stupid. He had Haewkyr and Fosxyr, he would manage without them.

Fosxyr sighed gently, "What am I going to do with you?" he said fondly.

Loki didn't answer, and thankfully Fosxyr stopped pressing the issue.

Loki spent the morning finishing one of the seidr books and getting halfway through another. He was almost at the dark seidr books now, they were only a few volumes away.
He wondered if there was a spell in them somewhere that would kill King Dimcken without detection, either by healers, Musleen and his guards, other mages, Heimdall or Odin.

Probably not, but it was a nice dream.

The group arrived back from their picnic in the early afternoon. Loki could hear their horses stamping about the yard. He sighed softly and turned the next page. Tomorrow he would have to join them again, Fosxyr would not make him another deal like he had today.

Someone was yelling. Loki frowned and put his book down. Yes, outside, there was definitely the sound of yelling.

He went to the window and looked down, below him, he could see Musleen carrying Camtan into the manor. Dorgen was walking, but his face was creased with pain, and several guards were helping to carry the King. Lyren and Octir were helping Smairken to walk, and Lord Kinndyr was carrying his wife, who was unconscious.

Something had gone very wrong.

Loki turned and ran to the outer chamber, startling Fosxyr, who was dusting the tables.

"Something's very wrong, they're all sick," Loki said quickly.

They ran to the healer's chambers, where the poor woman was trying to heal the King while her assistants were trying to juggle the sheer number of others.

"Poison," she said flatly, "Not from bad food, it's cold-oak."

One of the assistants ran to the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of medicine. She poured a measure for the King which the head healer forced down his throat.

Behind him, shaking with illness and panic, Loki saw Sofftia. She was holding Roaseia in her arms. Roaseia was twitching madly.

The assistant was already pouring a measure for Dorgen when Loki grabbed her arm.

"The baby, do the baby, she's in a bad way," he said.

"Protocol-" she began.

"Do the baby or both parents will kill you!" Loki snapped.

"As will I," Dorgen croaked, turning his head to look at where Roaseia trembled.

The assistant ran to her side and forced the antidote down her throat. The head healer was still tied up with the King, but she motioned for one of the other healers to tend to Roaseia.

Loki looked around him. Fosxyr was already tending to Camtan and Musleen, he was holding a bucket for each of them as they tried to purge the food from their stomachs.

Loki scanned the room until he saw another bucket and grabbed it. He went to Sofftia's side and held it out.

"Come on," he urged.

She didn't need much prompting, she was already shivering with the poison. Loki held her steady as
she vomited.

The bottle was getting low. Dorgen had been dosed, as had Lyrren, Musleen and now Camtan. Ooctir was not sick, although the assistant wasted valuable time in trying to dose him anyway.

"If I get sick later, do me then, help those who are suffering *now*," he snapped at her.

Sofftia was given some next, Loki held her steady as she swallowed the foul-tasting stuff.

"Roa," she gasped, "Where's my Roa?"

"Right here, beside you," Loki said quickly. "She's being seen to."

Sofftia didn't relax until she could reach out and hold Roaseia's little hand in hers.

Lady Nicceia was given the next dose and coughed hard at the taste. She wasn't as bad as the others.

Smairken was the last to be dosed, and he almost missed out. The bottle was almost empty by the time the assistant got to him.

The worst three affected were the King, Camtan, and Roaseia. Once they were stabilised, the healers began working carefully on the others.

"Loki," Musleen said, "take charge of the guards and have the food checked. We need to know who did this, whoever they are they had access to the kitchens, or at least to the food before we ate it."

Loki was startled, putting him in charge was hardly something the King would approve of. Of course the King was currently unconscious, although regrettably expected to make a full recovery.

"I will do it right away," Loki said and headed downstairs.

The guards were clever enough to have guarded the food, and the head guard had already sent for a mage to examine it. Loki tested the food with his own magic and detected something odd in the bread.

"A staple food," Loki said. "Most of the people would have eaten it, little Roa loves it, she'll eat a whole roll with butter for lunch and nothing else if she were allowed."

"What kind of a poison is cold-oak?" Loki asked. "A liquid or a powder?"

"A powder, Your Grace," the guard said.

"I'm sorry, what was your name?" Loki asked him.

"Lolyalen, Your Grace," he replied.

"I can only detect it on the surface of the bread, it must have been sprinkled on," Loki said. "That means it happened after baking, but when? We need to lock down the kitchen, if it was applied there then there may be some left, and the dusting flour should still be there."

"Yes Sir, Your Grace, at once," Lolyalen said, giving Loki a salute.

Well that certainly made a change.

The kitchens were locked down and searched, but no trace of the poison was found.
"If it was dusted on when the bread was made this morning then there should be residue around," Loki said. "Unless it was cleaned up immediately afterwards, where is the rubbish taken?"

The cook showed him and the guards to the kitchen compost pile. Loki scanned it with his magic, trying to detect the minute traces of poison that may be there.

"Nothing," he muttered. "Not a trace. That means it was probably added afterwards."

"At least the rest of the court is safe," Lolyalen commented.

"Yes, that is a relief," Loki said. "We need to interview the servants who were in charge of the food."

"They are in the guardhouse, awaiting your attentions," Lolyalen reported promptly.

Loki felt a smile come to his face. Musleen's guards were well trained.

"You don't really need me do you Lolyalen?" he asked as they walked.

"Royalty often get results that we do not Your Grace, as they command greater respect," he replied.

"So, no, not really, just for a few specific things," Loki said.

They reached the guardhouse and Loki went inside. There were two servants sitting in separate corners, watched over by the guards and looking miserable.

"Names?" Loki asked in a stern voice.

Now was not the time for softness.

"Onneen Your Grace."

"Twaoyr Your Grace."

"There has been a poisoning, it was in the food that you were in charge of. Do you have anything to say at all?" Loki asked them.

They were both silent, Onneen started to cry.

"What is it?" Loki asked him.

"Is our mistress alright Your Grace? I know it is disloyal to think of others besides His Majesty, but she is our *mistress*," he said.

"She's fine," Loki told him. "She was only mildly affected."

He looked relieved.

"She sent us away so that they could have some privacy. I saw no one about in the clearing, no one at all, Your Grace," he said.

"And you?" Loki asked Twaoyr.

He shook his head. "No one Your Grace, I swear," he said.

Loki narrowed his eyes at them.
"You do realise that you are the prime suspects, don't you?" he asked. "You were alone with the food when you brought it from the kitchens to the horses, you escorted it to the clearing with them, *you two* are in big trouble."

They looked at the food, Onneen was trying not to cry.

Loki waited,
...and waited,
...and waited.

"Um," Onneen said softly.

"Yes?" Loki prompted.

"There is, well, that is to say, um, well..."

"Tell me now or face the noose," Loki said.

Onneen looked wretched as he said:

"Sir Smairkken has good reason to hate His Majesty, and you Your Grace, and his Grace Prince Musleen."

"And why is that?" Loki asked.

Onneen looked at the floor, Twaoyr was staring determinedly at his feet.

"You killed his wife, Your Grace, the Lady mage who was the head of the rebels, the niece of Lord Eveilyr, Sir Smairkken was her husband," he said.

Loki froze. Smairkken? The husband of the rebel leader? What was it that Fosxyr said to him once? Something about those two families?

'Every generation they're not marrying each other they trying to kill one another.'

"So I fought his wife and killed her, and he is somewhat upset about it, and so tries to kill the royal family," Loki said.

Both servants were staring at the floor, they looked miserable.

"You will stay here," Loki commanded and left the guardhouse.

"I don't understand it," Loki said when they were out of earshot. "Smairkken was poisoned as well."

"Common move if you don't mind me saying so Your Grace, he's less likely to come under suspicion this way. Was he very badly affected?" Lolyalen asked.

"Not very," Loki said. "His mother was also ill, although Miarthyr and Ladughen were not.

"A small amount of cold-oak is survivable, if he only ate a little then he could be sure of being alright, very ill, but alright." Lolyalen said.

"I need to speak to him," Loki said, "preferably with Musleen in the room."

"How was His Grace when you saw him?" Lolyalen asked.
"He was weak, but recovering," Loki said.

"He has had a difficult time on Progress," Lolyalen said.

Loki smiled at him. "He's tough though, he'll pull this too," he said.

Lolyalen nodded. "Oh, we know Your Grace, it'll take more than a poisoner to take our Prince down."

Loki headed to the healer's chambers and sought out Musleen. He was asleep, but Smairken wasn't.

Loki took a deep breath and headed over to where he lay.

Smairken looked pale, and he looked up at Loki from beneath heavy lids.

"How are you Your Grace?" he croaked out.

"I'm feeling better," Loki said, "and yourself?"

"I'll live," Smairken said.

"Yes," Loki said, "you will."

Smairken frowned at the tone in Loki's voice.

"Is there something wrong Your Grace?" he asked.

Loki looked down at him. He looked so ill, it was hard to believe that he held such a fierce grudge.

"I know about your wife," he said, getting right to the point.

Smairken's eyes widened in shock.

"You think I did this," he whispered, jumping quickly to the right conclusion.

"You have a reason," Loki pointed out. "You had access, so tell me why it couldn't have been you."

"Ask me under a truth spell, I had nothing to do with it." Smairken said, struggling not to pass out from the poison.

"Truth spells are difficult things, you'll spend a lot of time in jail before you get questioned under one," Loki said.

Smairken coughed heavily. His face turned ugly.

"You are going to murder me for nothing. I knew she was getting in over her head but she wouldn't listen to me and leave it, you can't attack the royal family and expect to come out alive, although you could've at least given her a proper trial!"

He broke off into a fit of coughing.

"She attacked me from a distance," Loki said seriously, "I never even knew who she was, all I knew was that I was fighting for my life. Believe me, Musleen and I would both have rather she had a proper trial."

Smairken scowled again. "I know better than to stand against them Your Grace, I learnt my lesson years ago when the King jailed me, I would not do it again, I value my life too much for that, I'll just
Loki frowned. Smairken seemed so sincere, of course that's what a guilty man would try to do as well.

"You have enough money to defend yourself with truth magic if you need to," he said. "So let us assume that you are innocent for the moment, who else had access to the food, who might hold a grudge against the royal family? Remember, you are helping yourself by helping me."

"I will be found innocent regardless," Smairken snapped, "so you can go and find this man alone. I for one would like to give them a medal."

Loki turned away from him in anger. He stomped out of the healer's chambers and headed instead for Musleen's.

"Musleen has all the paperwork for the people here doesn't he?" Loki asked as he walked.

"Yes Your Grace, although I do not remember seeing where Sir Smairken went to jail." Lolyalen said.

Loki read the files on each member of the family. Sure enough, Smairken's time in jail had not been recorded.

"How?" Loki demanded of Lord Kinndyr, who looked almost like he'd been poisoned himself he was so pale and shocked.

"I do not know," he said quietly. "I really do not know."

Sir Smairken was taken into custody as a precaution as soon as he was well enough. Musleen was back in his feet within days and he quickly took over both the investigation and the work of the realm, sparing poor Octir, who had been the only one left well enough to do it.

"You've done just fine," Musleen reassured him as he read through the paperwork.

The poisoning had been quickly hushed up, with 'bad meat' being the reason that the royal family lay in the healer's chambers. It was better that way.

Musleen still insisted that Loki accompany him on his own investigations into the crime.

"You've been working on this from the beginning, I need your input," he told Loki as he caught himself up.

Together they went over a number of things, including how Smairken had managed to purge his record.

"He bribed the records keeper," Musleen reported flatly after the arrival of one of his special couriers. "The record keeper removed the file before sending it to me for my security checks. He has been disciplined."

"He's right about the truth spell, I mean, if we take him to trial for trying to poison the royal family, his father will pay for the best seidr money can buy. If he did it, then he must have some powerful spells in place to fool such a thing," Loki said.

"He does have all those magic books. How long would it take you to read through them and see if he *can* cast such a spell?" Musleen asked.
The tantalising thought of the dark seidr books flashed across Loki's mind.

"A few days, if I really concentrate on it," he said.

"Good, can you do that while I try and figure out why someone else might have both a motive and the means to carry this out. You never know, he may just be telling the truth," Musleen said.

It took Loki a week to read through all the dark seidr books, during which time Dorgen, Lyren and Sofftia recovered, as did Lady Nicceia and Smairken, who was locked in the guardhouse while he was under suspicion. Loki had to endure a thousand apologies from a crying Lady Nicceia, who begged him not to think badly of her family. He assured her that he did not as Ladughen led her away. Ladughen had been of great help during the investigation, he stated plainly that he believed in his brother's innocence and wished to assist in any way possible to help prove it. Loki ended up spending quite a bit of time with Ladughen while researching the dark magic.

It was fascinating, even knowing that he was reading for a purpose and couldn't linger on any old spell that took his fancy Loki still found the books to be compelling. But the one thing he didn't find was a way to counteract a truth spell.

"If he knows a way, it's not in the books," Loki reported.

He was feeling a little brighter. Occasionally he would remember that the King wasn't dead and a bolt of fear would stab through him, but for the last week or so he had been almost his own man again, it felt good.

"He's got the motive and the means," Musleen said. "I don't suppose that you could cast a truth spell on him now and either condemn him or clear him?"

Loki shook his head. "I'm not skilled enough in mind magic, you need to do the post-graduation years to manage that. I can try and read his mind? Except that it's illegal."

"For good reason," Musleen said, "although it's bloody frustrating at times."

Another few weeks went by, Camtan recovered, but wasn't really seen by anyone as he remained in the healer's chambers with Sofftia and Roaseia, who was still struggling. Lord Kinndyr went above and beyond trying to make up for the lapse in security. He admitted that he knew about his son's time in jail, but as Musleen did not raise it as an issue he believed that Smairken would just be watched. He did ask his son Ladughen to remain behind while the court visited in order to help keep an eye on his brother, as they were close as children and Lord Kinndyr believed that Smairken wouldn't attempt anything while his brother was there.

Smairken insisted on his innocence.

"It is not a crime to object to the rulers of the realm, as long as you don't act on your objection in a way that violates the law," he said slyly while sitting in the guardhouse jail. "I will be found innocent, and your poisoner will have gotten far away."

Three and a half weeks after the poisoning, King Dimcken was recovered enough to return to his chambers. Loki went to attend him with a heavy heart.

"Husband, I am so glad that you are well again," he said, coming to sit on the couch beside King Dimcken.

King Dimcken put his arm around Loki's shoulders and pulled him close.
"It takes more than a little poison to get rid of me," he said grandly. "I understand the culprit is in custody."

"Smairken is suspected of being the poisoner, but Musleen is not sure," Loki said. "He's declared that he is willing to be placed under a truth spell, and that to do so will prove his innocence."

King Dimcken's eyes narrowed. "Only if he gets the chance," he muttered.

Loki stared at him in horror, surely the King would allow the proper processes? What if Smairken *was* telling the truth?

King Dimcken saw his expression and smiled in a superior kind of a way.

"Oh my sweet young wife, you have so much to learn," he said gleefully, "as does Musleen, sometimes he is far too honourable."

That afternoon King Dimcken went, with Musleen and Loki in tow, down to the guardhouse to speak to Smairken himself.

"I understand that you plead innocent, and yet you will not help capture the real culprit?" King Dimcken said, standing quietly in front of the bars.

Smairken sneered at him.

"Why should I help you? I may not have tried to cause your death but I am not exactly unhappy that someone else tried."

King Dimcken nodded seriously. "We'll just have to execute you then," he said mildly.

"I will be found innocent at the trial," Smairken said breezily.

"What trial?" King Dimcken asked pleasantly, in a tone that Loki had learnt to recognise meant serious trouble for someone.

Smairken frowned.

"The one I'm... supposed to..." he trailed off and looked at the King with growing horror in his eyes, "you can't," he said, "Father will object, the other nobles will stand against you, you can't just randomly execute someone!"

King Dimcken just stared at him in cold silence for a long moment, then he leaned forwards.

"If I give the order," he said quietly, "my guards will come in here and end your life before your father hears so much as a squeak. Then I will tell him that you escaped and as such have a bounty on your head, and then, you smug little boy, I will have a mercenary bring in your head and tell everyone you tried to kill him when he went to apprehend you. Your father will not like it, but you will be dead and he will have no avenue to follow. I am the King, child, and I can make this happen, do not doubt it."

Smairken was still staring at him in shock. Musleen looked uncomfortable, as did Loki. As an interrogation technique it was brilliant, except for the fact that the King was not bluffing.

Smairken had gone very pale.

"I didn't do it," he said, "I swear I did not. I don't know who could have done it, the only other people there were all family, and everyone knows that I am the tainted one."
King Dimcken nodded slowly.

"I suggest that you think harder boy, because if I do not find another suspect then you are it," he said and walked out.

Musleen and Loki ran after him.

"You won't really do it Father, will you?" Musleen asked carefully.

"He's guilty, I'm sure of it, but I will of course take him to trial, if he manages to get out of it though I will have to arrange something. What he did was despicable." King Dimcken said brutishly.

Musleen and Loki exchanged a glance behind his head. There was nothing they could do about it if the King decided to kill Smairken, except find the real culprit and prove his innocence.

Later that day, Lady Nicceia asked if the wonderland party might still go ahead, to celebrate the King's recovery.

King Dimcken said of course it would, they had everything to celebrate now that the assassin was in custody.

Loki privately thought it was distasteful to celebrate while little Roaseia was still in the healer's chambers, but that was nothing compared to the disgust he felt when King Dimcken ordered both Camtan and Sofitia to join them.

Camtan almost refused, but was talked out of it at the last minute by Musleen.

"He's in quite the mood, he almost died, don't push it," he hissed to his brother as Camtan stormed along the corridor in a very rare temper to the King's chambers. He relented with only a few dozen feet to go.

"Perhaps we could slip away once the party begins," he said.

Musleen nodded. "You're good at climbing, get on top of the walls to the maze and you'll find your way out easily," he said.

Camtan gave him a look.

"What?" Musleen asked, his ears turning red.

"You cheated, didn't you?" Camtan said.

Musleen's cheeks flushed.

"I kept an eye on Loki, I do not trust that Ladughen, not when I know he is reporting to Father," he said.

"You followed them through the maze?"

"I did."

"And?"

"Loki did well, but he needs to be careful," Musleen reported.

"You keep an eye on him, I'll keep an eye on Roa, and maybe we'll manage to get through this,"
Camtan said.

****

The wonderland party took place a few nights later as planned. Everyone dressed up and headed out to the maze. The whole court was invited and, until the 'bad food' incident, had spoken of nothing else for months.

Loki was dressed in deep blue, with silver embroidery. He was on the King's arm and trying to look as though he was having a good time.

The pathways in the maze varied in width, but most of them were wide enough for a small crowd to gather. There would be dancing in the centre, and food and drinks throughout.

Musleen had brought in mages for the investigation; they were now employed double checking every bit of food and drink being served just in case the poisoner tried again. King Dimcken had not been told about this, as he was still convinced that Smairken was guilty.

Ladughen appeared in front of Loki wearing a robe of dark purple. There were stars embroidered onto it.

"Your Majesty, Your Grace, welcome to the wonderland," he intoned.

King Dimcken beamed at him.

"This is a wonderful idea for a party, I look forward to trying everything," he said.

There was music, there were illusions, and there was food and drink of every kind. Slowly, as the night wore on, Loki managed to relax just slightly. It was possible that the assassin was long gone by now, and that tonight was just another party with nothing to worry about.

He checked all his food and drink with magic, just in case.

He begrudgingly checked the King's food and drink as well; as a death, poisoning was not considered natural causes.

It was well after midnight when King Dimcken finally waved him away and told him to go and explore. The King had found a place to sit and relax with some of the older lords, but he was happy for Loki to go and move about.

"You young things should be up and about all night, go on and have fun," he said.

Ladughen was nearby and held out an arm for Loki.

"May I escort you Your Grace?" he asked.

Loki saw Musleen hovering in the background.

"Thank you Sir Ladughen, you are very kind," he said.

They wandered through the maze for a while, stopping at the various entertainers and musicians. Ladughen kept up the chatter, telling jokes and trying to distract Loki from his worries.

“How can you be like this?” Loki asked him at last. “Your brother is in jail, suspected of attempting to assassinate the King, how can you laugh?”
Ladughen became serious. He looked around, then pulled Loki away from the crowds and into a side path. Loki could still hear the sounds of the celebrations, but it was private enough for a serious conversation.

“My brother is innocent,” Ladughen said earnestly. “He’s got a mean streak like I told you, but he’d never do something so drastic. He learnt to respect the law when he was younger, he may not like it, but he’ll obey it. He will be found innocent at his trial and let go. I know that Prince Musleen is still looking for a suspect, and he’ll find whoever did this. In the meantime, everyone survived, is that not reason enough to celebrate?”

Loki looked at him seriously. “Roaseia is still sick,” he said.

Ladughen nodded. “I know, but the healer said she’ll be well in another week or so, she has survived, she is getting care. I saw her parents here earlier, if they are not worried then why should I be?”

Loki desperately wanted to tell Ladughen the truth; that King Dimcken would execute Smairken if Musleen did not find the culprit, and that Camtan and Sofcia were here under sufferance and had slipped away hours ago to be with their child. Ladughen was happy because he was ignorant. Loki would have given a great deal to be just as blind to the truth of the world.

“You have a point,” he said instead, “there is much to celebrate.”

Let him have his falsehoods, why spoil the man’s evening?

Ladughen leaned in slightly.

“Are *you* well, Your Grace? You have been so busy with all of this, and so worried about your family.”

Loki frowned, what did Haewkyr have to…? Oh, he meant the royal family. Even after so many years Loki still didn’t think of them as his own. There were his friends, and then there was their father, his husband, but they weren’t ‘family’.

“I’m well Ladughen, thank you for asking,” he said. “Perhaps I worry too much.”

“Perhaps you should try to worry less,” Ladughen said. “Of course, it must be difficult being married to the King. That should make you worry all the time.”

Loki looked at him, shocked.

Ladughen put on a knowing look.

“I’m not blind Your Grace, although sometimes I wish I could be, he is a very old man, and you, if I may be so bold, are a very young one, with likes and dislikes and… tastes of your own. I do not believe I am mistaken when I say I have sensed reluctance from you when he pulls you into his arms.”

Loki turned away and started walking back to the crowds.

“You should mind your observations,” he said, rattled, “they do you no good.”

Ladughen caught him by the arm and stopped him.

“Loki,” he whispered, “don’t you want to just relax for one night?”
He leaned down and pressed his lips against Loki’s, pushing him back against the stone walls of the maze.

****

A very long time ago now, Thor and Loki had been bare handed fighting in the training grounds. Loki had been losing to Thor’s superior strength when he had made a move that had won him the match rather quickly indeed.

Thor had blown up hugely and refused to admit defeat to a ‘cheater’. Loki had gone to his room to sulk about it, and Thor had limped to the healer’s wing to ensure nothing was damaged.

Afterwards, when the pain was gone, Thor had come to Loki’s rooms to talk to him.

“It’s not honourable Loki, surely you can see that?” he said.

“You said the only rule was no *permanent* injury. Are you *permanently* injured Thor?” Loki had asked.

“It was a coward’s move Loki.”

“In a real fight, which we were meant to be having, would you refrain from using everything at your disposal Thor?”

“I would not do that, if you wouldn’t want it done to you then you shouldn’t do it to others, it lacks honour.”

“I can’t help but feel that you would prefer not to be smashed in the head with a hammer, and yet you practise doing just that to others every day.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Um.”

“Well?”

“Um… it just is!”

In the end they had compromised. Thor had continued to refrain from ‘dishonourable’ moves in battle, but learnt how to better defend himself from them. Loki… had helped Thor learn the proper defences.

****

Which is why, so many years later, when Loki rammed his knee between Ladughen’s legs, he not only did a very good job of it, he also felt no sympathy regarding the result.

Ladughen made an interesting noise and fell over onto the ground. Loki looked down on where he lay curled up around himself.

“I am your *queen*,” he hissed dangerously. “I am not a pretty young whore that you can just *take* because you like the look of me. I am married to your King who *you* claim to have great respect for. Not only will you not lay hands on me again, if you so much as *glance at my reflection* I will go to the King and tell him what you have done. I have tried to be polite to you as my host.
here, but no more. You take far too many liberties and they are *not welcome*.”

With that he stormed back to the crowded area and tried to calm down.

Another man who just took without thinking, did nobody ever think to *ask him what he wanted?* How was that hard?


“I’m fine,” Loki said, his tone bitter, “But stay with me please, I need someone I can trust.”

Who cares if he was supposed to be careful, at least Musleen wasn’t trying to have sex with him.

“Lord Kinndyr,” Loki said as they walked through the crowd, “has been very unlucky in his sons.”
Eighty Four Steps

Chapter Summary

...Even if They Are Good

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, at this point I want to point out that the years will be passing much faster than before. This is because the rebels are gone and the assassin is caught. Loki's 'job' is done, so the fact that he has to hang around for so long afterwards is devastating to him.

I hope you still enjoy it with the faster pace.

The party was winding down in the early hours of the morning. Camtan and Soffitia had mysteriously reappeared long enough to be seen by King Dimcken before claiming tiredness and leaving officially.

Loki was wandering through the pathways, listening to the sounds of the people who had gotten lost throughout the night. The servants were being lined up in preparation to go and fetch them all.

Musleen walked silently alongside him. Both men were lost in their respective thoughts.

The arrow came out of nowhere.

It shot straight at Loki’s heart, in the darkness, he reacted too slowly…

… but someone else did not. Haekwyr leapt from above and caught the shaft in his hand, stopping it a split second before it slammed into Loki’s chest.

Musleen pulled his sword from his belt and ran towards where the arrow came from. Loki tore after him, followed closely by Haewkyr.

Just around the corner they caught up to the attackers. Two men and a woman, two men and… Lady Nicceia?

The first man swung a sword at Musleen’s head. Musleen caught the blade on his own and they began fencing. The second man tried to stab Loki, but he knocked the knife out of the man’s hand and slammed him into the wall.

Lady Nicceia, no longer looking like the star-struck woman she had been for the past six months, raised her hands and shouted a word.

“Joteri!”

Time seemed to slow down, Musleen and his opponent almost became frozen in the air as Lady Nicceia calmly picked up the fallen dagger and approached Loki with it.
“You little whore,” she said, pointing the dagger at him. “You scum, rotten Aesir with your bewitching ways. All the ladies think you’re *so* precious. You are nothing but a murdering little thug. You killed my grandchild you slut!”

She swung the dagger at Loki, slicing him across the arm. Unable to move quickly, he frantically tried to find a way to break the spell.

The words she’d shouted, he had recognised them, but where from? Where had he…?

The dark seidr books. He’d *seen* this spell in one of the book!

“No more getting away,” she hissed, looking at him with a delighted, and utterly mad, expression.

The counter spell, he’d read the counter spell, what was it? What was it?!

“Aesari!” Loki managed to force out, throwing his magic behind the spell.

Lady Nicceia’s spell shattered, she lost her grip on the knife and it went flying away into the darkness as the spell’s energy was forced back through her. Loki ducked under her arm and shoved his elbow into her ribs.

Musleen and his attacker continued their fight as though it hadn’t been interrupted. Haewkyr grabbed the second man and slammed his fist into his face.

Lady Nicceia threw a spell at Loki, who blocked it and returned with one of his own. She ducked it, letting it hit the wall behind her with a mighty explosion.

Musleen blocked a strike from his attacker and was forced backwards from the blow. The man came closer, swinging again.

Haewkyr tried to reach Lady Nicceia, but the second man threw himself at Haewkyr’s legs and they went down.

Loki ducked a spell and returned fire, hitting Lady Nicceia straight on, but she managed to block its full impact and stayed conscious, although she was thrown off her feet.

Musleen was pressed hard back against the wall, the attacker closed in for the kill. Musleen’s right hand found the dagger that had been dropped by Lady Nicceia, his two remaining fingers curled around the handle.

Haekwyr punched the second man again, this time he stayed down.

Loki forced Lady Nicceia to her knees, he pushed his magic around her, trying to capture her in a spell.

The first attacker stabbed forward with his sword. Musleen caught it on his own blade, forced them both to the side and stabbed the knife upwards into the man’s chest. He almost lost his grip from the impact, but managed to hold on with his two fingers as the blade slid through the tough flesh.

The attacker fell down dead as the guards finally reached them. King Dimcken was puffing behind them, as was Dorgen who immediately went to his brother’s side.

Lord Kinndyr saw the sight before him and went pale.

“Nicceia?” he said softly, his voice broken.
Sir Miarthyr, his heir and, apparently, only good son, put an arm on his father’s shoulders and held him tightly.

Lady Nicceia was still fighting, she hadn’t even noticed the crowd, so caught up in her desire to kill Loki where he stood.

One of the guards tried to reach her but was blown back by the forces of the energy. They were forced to stand around and watch as two powerful mages battled for victory.

Loki won. It took great effort and great skill, none of which was visible to the untrained eye, but he managed to get his magic through hers and unravel every protection she had.

Then he knocked her unconscious with a flick of his wrist.

Only then did he look around and see the small crowd before him.

“Loki, darling are you alright?” King Dimcken asked, coming forwards and reaching for him.

“Careful Father,” Musleen said quickly, “If the magic is still about you might get hurt, let’s all go inside so that Loki can calm down.”

King Dimcken stopped inches away from Loki, who did his best to look worried.

“I’m sure I’ll be alright very soon Husband,” he said.

It was a lie, he was fine right now, magic didn’t actually work like that, but Musleen had said it and he wasn’t about to call the second son of Dimcken a liar.

The guards took the second attacker and Lady Nicceia into custody. They released Smairken while they were there. He stared with wide eyes at the sight of his unconscious mother being carried into the cells.

“There has to be a mistake,” he said flatly. “Mother is… flowers and embroidery, she’d never attack someone.”

“Son,” Lord Kinndyr said with tears in his eyes as he led Smairken out of the guardhouse and back into the manor, “I need to tell you about your mother, I need to tell all of you.”

Lady Nicceia had not been all flowers and embroidery, at least not in her youth. She had travelled the realms, she had studied magic, and she had been taken over by the terrible Thanos during the last war. In that time she had killed hundreds, if not thousands of people using her magic, and afterwards she had never been the same.

“I married her anyway, I had proposed to her just before the war began, I felt it was my duty to keep my promise,” Lord Kinndyr told his three sons, who sat in silence in their father’s study. “She wasn’t the same, all she ever talked about was gardening, or clothing, or court gossip, trivial things. It was as though her mind had gone somewhere else, somewhere where it didn’t have to think about the terrible things she’d been forced to do. She seemed harmless, and not incapable of living a proper life, although she was no longer the woman I had fallen in love with, there was no fire in her anymore. She was broken.”

He began to cry.

“So what unbroke her?” Smairken said, asking what the other two brothers were thinking. “Or rather, what broke her further?”
“I do not know,” Lord Kinndyr said, wiping his tears on his sleeve, “but she will pay for it with her life.”

****

“The death of Smairken’s wife,” Musleen said to the royal family, who were gathered in the King’s chambers. “That’s what started Lady Nicceia on the road to madness.”

Loki was tucked under the King’s arm and trying to look as though he didn’t mind.

“She said I killed her grandchild,” Loki said.

Musleen nodded seriously, he looked uncomfortable.

“Loki…” he began.

“She was pregnant, wasn’t she?” Loki asked, already knowing the answer.

“When the healer’s report came back on… on…”

“The pieces of her, I know she shattered, they would have studied the pieces,” Loki said, “and one of those pieces… one of those pieces was a child?”

“Yes, still very small, but Lady Nicceia studied healer magic, she must have known about the pregnancy, I do not even know if Smairken did.” Musleen said.

Loki bit his lip and tried not to let the guilt that was settling on his take hold. He had been under attack, he had been fighting for his life, if there had been a way to stop her without killing her he would have taken it.

But still, a child, it was an innocent, and it was dead by his hand.

“So first she tried poison?” Dorgen asked, “But when that failed she attacked you both outright.”

“But I didn’t go to the picnic, I was feeling unwell,” Loki said. “Why would she go through with it when her prime target was missing?”

“Because she wasn’t trying to kill us then,” Musleen said. “She was trying to protect her son. He is the one with the criminal record, and he is the one we jailed, making it impossible for him to be responsible for the subsequent attack.”

“Even if some of us had died, killing Loki later would have been proof that Smairken was innocent, in addition to his desire to use a truth spell at his trial.” Dorgen said. “She must have been thinking clearly to be able to plan all that, and yet I do not think she is mentally competent, there’s something about her that is just… wrong.”

“She will hang regardless,” King Dimcken said. “She is a traitor, and there is only one punishment. We will send her back to the capital, to the courts, and they will sentence her to death. Lord Kinndyr will pay for her transport and trial costs, he has been more trouble than Lord Eveilyr ever was.”

Musleen looked as though he wanted to argue, but he held his tongue as King Dimcken pulled Loki in for a tight hug.

“I’m glad you’re alright,” he said in Loki’s ear. “You will stay here with me tonight.”

“Yes Husband,” Loki said.
As the rest of the family left for the night, Loki tugged lightly at Musleen’s sleeve.

“Good work with the sword,” he said, “and with the dagger. You held your own.”

Musleen gave him a smile as his ears turned red.

“The first battle is always the hardest,” he said. “I know I can really do it now, it’s not just an impossible dream.”

“Next on the list is Camtan, beat him in the yard and there’ll be no stopping you,” Loki said.

****

The remaining time at Lord Kinndyr’s manor was tense and uncomfortable. Lord Kinndyr himself left to accompany his wife to the capital to face trial. Her magic had been locked inside of her and she spent most of her waking hours screaming for Loki and Musleen to die.

Miarylry took over the duties as the host of the manor. He was polite, but distant, with good reason, Loki thought.

Ladughen left to go back to the army. King Dimcken gave him a new set of armour and a fine sword made by the palace sword-smiths. Loki didn’t say anything, but he was privately furious that the man would be given such honours, but then again the King didn’t know what Ladughen had tried to do, and Loki wasn’t about to tell him.

Smairken spent his time in his own rooms. Loki no longer went into the seidr library, it would have been far too awkward. He sent Fosxyr to return the key, including a note that stated that he was sorry for everything that Smairken had been through.

There was no reply, but then Loki did not expect one.

****

They left on time and headed further west towards the border estates. It took them three days to be fully clear of Lord Kinndyr’s lands, and when they passed through the tall gates that marked the entrance to his territory, everyone breathed a slow sigh of relief.

That night, while staying in an Inn in a town along the road, King Dimcken pulled Loki into a hug. He had been extremely pleased with Loki in particular for months, ever since the night of the attack. There were more smiles, more hugs and more gifts than Loki had seen in months.

It was unsettling.

“You’re a good wife,” King Dimcken said to him, giving him a few kisses.

“Thank you Husband,” Loki said, wondering how long it would take the man to fall asleep.

“You’re faithful to me, aren’t you darling?” King Dimcken asked.

Loki froze, where was this going?

“Yes Husband, of course,” he said.

“I know, you left poor Ladughen in a very bad way,” King Dimcken said, sounding thrilled.

Loki clenched his teeth in frustration.
“He told you about it?” Loki asked, startled. He’d known Ladughen was the King’s man, now he was finding out why.

“He did,” King Dimcken said.

“He took liberties, I am *not* some common flirt,” Loki said.

“No, you are of noble stock, you are much better than the commoners,” King Dimcken said.

“I don’t know why he would even do that,” Loki said. “I would never even consider it.”

“I told him to, I heard some reports about you flirting with others when I was not around, I wanted to know if it was true, I know now, my darling, that you are a good boy, although I do wonder why you didn’t tell me about it.” King Dimcken said.

King Dimcken had set him up. Ladughen had gone along with it, although he likely had not been given the choice, and now Loki was in trouble because he hadn’t told King Dimcken about the night in the maze.

Fucking *bastard*.

Still, after so long Loki knew what the King liked most about him, which did come in handy sometimes. He gave a little pout and tried to look young and just a *teensy* bit spoilt.

“I didn’t want to bother *you* with something so *stupid*,” he said petulantly. “It’s not his fault he was born with his brain under his robe, and given what I did to him I was certain he would learn his lesson.”

King Dimcken chuckled and gave Loki another kiss. “Calm down my sweet boy, he was acting under orders, and it’s all alright now, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Loki wanted very badly to scream at King Dimcken that there was a great deal to worry about with what had happened, starting with the King asking another man to try and seduce his wife and working up from there.

But he couldn’t. No Trouble, No Mischief. Just let it go.

He let it go.

****

The mood among the royal family got lighter in the months that followed. With the assassin in custody, they were able to relax for the first time in years.

The Lords on the plains were warm and welcoming. One after the other they hosted the court with banquets, picnics and, once they got out far enough, hunts.

Twelve years and a very long way out from the capital, the good farmland became arid and gave way to long, yellow grass.

There was big game on the plains, large, tusked rindots and fast cats like hateech and Noilasti. One Lord in particular, named Lord Evaerdeenyr, owned an enormous stretch of land dedicated to big game. He would often arrange tours for visiting nobles so that they could try their hunting skills, for a fee. His sons, Elomeren and Fulddyr, and his daughter, Kaltmissia, would take the nobles out camping for few weeks or so, long enough for them to try to take down something impressive.
It was hotter here than in the fens, and much more so than the mountains. Loki wore his thinnest robes and he was still sweating lightly as he made his way down to the training grounds for a pre-arranged sparring match with Musleen.

Haekwyr was there as well, lounging in the shade.

“Good morning,” he called out as he saw Loki. “I thought you might like to go for a ride after your match, if it’s not too hot for you.”

Loki didn’t like the heat, but he’d never let it stop him from riding with Haewkyr, when he set Lightning to an illicit gallop, he felt almost free.

“Sounds good,” he said, as Musleen approached him with two swords.

They faced off against each other, Loki held the sword in his left hand. He’d started doing it back when Musleen was relearning his techniques as a way of letting him spar against an equal opponent. Without meaning to, it had resulted in Loki learning to fight with the sword equally well with either hand.

Well, almost.

They came together with a clash. Musleen pressed his weight against their locked swords, but Loki managed to break away and swung down for Musleen’s side. Musleen dodged it easily and stabbed forwards, forcing Loki back.

“You’re supposed to be giving me a challenge,” Musleen said.

Loki’s eyes narrowed. He pulled back out of range and very deliberately, changed hands.

Musleen saw what he’d done and grinned.

They came together again, this time Loki was the one to press the advantage. Musleen kicked out, forcing Loki to jump back to avoid his foot, and broke the lock. They thrust and parried for about ten minutes, wearing each other down. They were evenly matched when Loki used his right hand, and it showed.

Eventually Musleen managed to slip under Loki’s guard and disarm him.

“Good match,” Loki said, breathing a little heavily.

“Yes it was, thank you,” Musleen said, clasping Loki’s wrist in acknowledgement. “I don’t suppose you want another one?”

Loki grinned, “Let me have a drink first, then we’ll go again,” he said.

Haewkyr meanwhile had collected a bow and was lining up in front of the targets.

“This is a very large archery range,” he commented as Loki and Musleen helped themselves to water.

“The hunting is their biggest industry, it makes sense to have so many as the hunters needs to practise often. The range is longer than normal as well, so that the strongbowmen can practise,” Musleen said.

Haewkyr drew back and let fly, his arrow hit the centre of the target.
“Damn!” he exclaimed.

“What’s wrong with it, you hit the centre?” Loki asked.

“I know, but I was aiming for the one next to it. I’m out of practise, although to be fair I was never very good at archery anyway,” Haewkyr said.

“More of an axeman, were you?” Musleen asked.

To Loki’s confusion, Haewkyr paled at the words.

“I’ve never really been much of a fighter,” he said, sounding rattled.

Musleen pretended he didn’t see the reaction and headed back to the yard.

Loki opened his mouth to ask Haewkyr what was wrong, but Haewkyr grinned at him.

“Musleen is waiting Loki, knock him on his butt while I sort out my archery skills,” he said.

Loki turned away, but not before he vowed to find out what had just happened.

****

The King wanted to go on a hunt. Lord Evaerdeennyr arranged a three-week camping trip in the hopes that His Majesty might catch something.

Half the court wanted to go, taking down big game was not common and very exciting, but Lord Evaerdeennyr put his foot down and culled the numbers to acceptable levels.

Musleen was going, Dorgen was staying, Loki was going (the King was not going to spend three whole weeks away from him, oh no, couldn’t have that), Camtan and Sofftia were staying, and packing.

They had asked for and been granted permission to go and visit Sofftia’s father in the mountains, it had been almost thirty years since they had been there last, and Sofftia missed him terribly.

“We’ll wait until you get back before we leave, but then we’ll be gone for a year, it’ll take that long just to travel there and back,” Camtan said at dinner one night. “We’ll meet you at the Waterfall.”

Loki shot an enquiring look towards Musleen, who said, “The Waterfall is the short name for The Falls of the Spritefolk, it is the largest waterfall in Vanaheim, and on Lord Purddleen’s land.”

“It’s said to be almost magical in appearance,” Camtan said, “I’m looking forward to finding out, I’ve never been to Lord Purddleen’s before.”

“It is spectacular,” King Dimcken said, “I look forward to taking you,” he added, just to Loki.

Regardless, the Waterfall was still a year away and for now the only thing Loki was worried about was his arrows.

Big game required thick, metal arrows that were fired from the back of a specially designed, moving carriage. King Dimcken climbed onto the back of one and sighted down the special cradle that held the arrow.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” he called out to Loki, who waved to him from the ground.
“Magnificent,” Loki called back.

King Dimcken beamed at him, and climbed back down with difficulty.

“After I take down my kill, if you want to try it out you may,” he said, in a rare acknowledgement of Loki’s more masculine side.

“Thank you Husband, I would like that,” Loki said, fanning himself against the heat in the air.

In addition to being an incredibly warm environment normally, it was also summertime, and the temperature was incredible. Thankfully it was a dry heat, Loki dreaded to think how he’d cope if the air was humid.

King Dimcken seemed to manage quite well, but then he was so thin and bony that keeping him warm was a real challenge. For the first time in a long time the King was not wearing furs over his robes.

The hunt left a few days later. Everyone had, in addition to their horses, a pack mule with enough supplies to see them through. Loki rode beside Musleen and Haewkyr, who had managed to talk his way into the party by pointing out how important it was to keep the horses in top condition while out in the heat.

King Dimcken was being pulled in a carriage, not the hunting one, his own, more luxurious one. To a number of people’s surprise, Lord Evaerdeenyr had not considered this a problem, and once out on the road they soon saw why.

A road had been laid out into the plains, an actual road. It was cobbled and everything.

“Why?” Loki asked as they rode down it.

“I get a lot of Lords and Nobles coming to hunt Your Grace,” Lord Evaerdeenyr said, “and I find they often prefer to take their own carriages.”

He rode off to the head of the line to ensure things were going well. Haewkyr waiting until he was gone before snorting.

“In other words, there are a lot of people who want the thrill of the hunt, as long as they don’t have to get dirty,” he said to Loki.

Loki glanced around quickly before frowning at Haewkyr, there wasn’t anyone close by who Loki didn’t trust, but Haewkyr should have kept his voice down, if what he said reached the ears of the King then King Dimcken might decide to take it personally, which would not end well.

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It took three days to reach the main campsite, where the majority of the servants would wait for them to return each day. The area had rough huts and lodges to stay in, and a small stream flowed nearby that would provide them with fresh water.

King Dimcken was in a fine mood as the sun went down, he sat around the big campfire that the servants lit and cheerfully chatted away to the lucky Lords and Sirs who had been allowed to come on the hunt. There was drinking and, later on when the drink started working, loud boasting. Haewkyr was in fine form, singing loud songs about long-ago hunters and their famous kills.

Loki sat by the Kings side and tried to look happy. In such close quarters with the rest of the court he
was almost permanently on display, and the stress was getting to him. What made it worse was that Fosxyr wasn’t there. Lord Evaerdeenyr had stated quite clearly that his own servants were trained to go on the hunt and that Fosxyr was, if anything, a liability. He’d said the same about Hieddenyr as well, but the King had brought him anyway, stating equally clearly that his servant’s presence was non-negotiable, and that he could also take care of Loki, so he was practically essential, see?

Lord Evaerdeenyr knew when to back down, and so Hieddenyr waiting back in their hut with only the flying insects to keep him company.

They stayed up late by the campfire, watching the shadows jump and listening to the sound of silence as the plains went to sleep.

The next morning was a flurry of activity as Lord Evaerdeenyr woke everyone up just before the sun rose to get ready for the day.

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For the first week there was no good game to be seen. They did watch a herd of wild horses stampede, and in the distance they saw a mighty Naflat herd lumber by. The sun beat down on them all day, and more than a few people had to be taken back to the campsite by the servants for rehydration and rest.

Loki still didn’t like the heat, but he got used to it. He especially liked the fact that it was too hot to have sex, even the King didn’t seem disappointed, and would just satisfy himself with a few kisses at night.

It was during their second week that they spotted the wild Noilasti making their way through the long grass.

The hunters sat taller in their saddles. Musleen tightened his grip on his bow, he was eager to test his archery skills after having to learn a whole new technique for controlling the arrows. He now held them between his two remaining fingers and his thumb.

Loki’s heart began to beat faster in excitement, he carefully raised his own bow and waited for the signal.

Lord Evaerdeenyr was watching the herd closely as they walked down towards the lake. The enormous males were watching their surroundings carefully, but the special robes the hunters wore made them blend into the background.

King Dimcken was on the carriage, sighting down the length of the mighty bow. It wasn’t actually necessary for the Loinasti, having been designed to take down the much larger rindots, but no one was going to tell him that.

Lord Evaerdeenyr let out a cry and the King fired. The arrow struck one of the males across the shoulders, wounding him. The herd took flight as the hunters rode forwards, yelling in excitement. Loki got Lightning up to a gallop, hoping that in the dust and confusion King Dimcken wouldn’t notice.

Musleen was close by, and out of the corner of his eye Loki saw him let loose his arrow. It struck one of the lead loinasti in the back, taking it down. The rest of the herd scattered across the plains. Loki, overcome with excitement, took off after one of the larger males. Lightning seemed to know what he wanted, and together they tore away from the group.

Loki had his arm up and his bow ready, closer, closer, almost there…
He let fly with his arrow and whooped in joy as the loinasti went down. He’d hit it in the neck, and when he pulled up alongside it, it was already dead.

Loki turned and looked over his shoulder at the rest of the group. They were a little way away, still chasing the stragglers as the rest of the loinasti turned and… headed… right… for… him.

Loki urged Lightning into a gallop and took off away from them, he tried to get out of their path rather than outrun them, which would have been dangerous and stupid. Lightning was breathing heavily as he sped up to his true speed.

It was breathtaking, it was exhilarating, it was almost freedom…

For the briefest moment, Loki didn’t want to go back. He wanted to go and go and go forever and never stop running.

But he had to, Lightning was a real horse, for all that he was fast, and he couldn’t run forever. A fact that was brought home abruptly when Lightning bucked and kicked out his back legs, almost throwing Loki off.

He managed to stay on though, just.

The loinasti ran past behind him and Loki wheeled around to watch. His kill got a little trampled, but it didn’t look too badly damaged.

“Loki!” called a familiar voice.

It was Haewkyr, he rode up, covered in dust and sweat, the pants he wore so as to ride astride were clinging to his muscular thighs.

“I’m here!” Loki called, “I’m fine.”

“Glad to see it, I saw what happened,” Haewkyr said.

“Did the King?” Loki asked quickly, fear stabbing through him at the thought. If the King thought he had been in danger then he’d be banned from participating.

“If the King thought he had been in danger then he’d be banned from participating.”

“I don’t think so; you were lost in the dust,” Haewkyr said. “Now get off Lightning, he needs to be healed.”

Loki dismounted immediately. “What’s wrong with him?”

“A loinasti swiped at him as it went past, he gave it one hell of a kick though, didn’t you feel the impact?”

“I felt him rear up, I was trying too hard not to fall off to notice anything else,” Loki said.

Haekwyr murmured some soothing words to Lightning as he began to heal the horse. Loki took his bow and stood guard, to be on foot in the plains was to invite disaster.

“He’s alright,” Haewkyr said softly after a minute, “he’s had worse, and this time he knew why it happened.”

Loki frowned, Haewkyr sounded almost vulnerable.

“Haewkyr, what?” he began, but was interrupted by the arrival of Musleen and Lord Eaveerdeeny,
who looked concerned.

“Are you alright Your Grace?” he asked, looking Loki over from where he sat.

“I’m fine, I made a kill,” Loki said, pointing at it, “but Lightning got injured, Haewkyr is healing him.”

“Haewkyr has finished healing him,” Haewkyr said, swinging back up on his own horse. “We’d better see about heading back, the servants can bring the kill in can’t they Lord Evaerdeenyre?”

“Yes, yes look they’ve seen it. That’s god, we must head back to His Majesty,” Lord Evaerdeenyre said.

Loki mounted Lightning again. “Thank you Haewkyr,” he said, and they rode back to where the King was waiting with a small frown of worry on his face.

“Loki, darling, I lost sight of you, are you alright?” He asked the moment Loki came into view.

“Yes Husband I am very well,” Loki said with a polite smile as they dismounted at the centre of the group. “It was all very exciting, wasn’t it?”

“It was indeed Loki darling, indeed. I feel quite overcome by the excitement,” King Dimcken said, his eyes sparkling as he pulled Loki in for a kiss.

Over King Dickmen’s shoulder, Loki saw Haewkyr stick his tongue out. Musleen kicked him in the shin, and he quickly straightening his features into something more suitable for a court member.

“The campsite will be celebratory tonight!” King Dimcken declared happily, with his arm around Loki’s waist.

He was right. Everyone was cheering and celebrating the kills. Seven loinasti had fallen altogether, no juveniles either, which was always a danger when the dust grew heavy.

Loki’s kill was one of the more impressive ones, and King Dimcken kept looking at it while squeezing Loki tightly.

“My clever, talented wife,” he said as the servants worked quickly to skin the beasts before the heat caused decomposition to set in. “You shall have a coat made from its skin.”

“Thank you Husband,” Loki said, “although I do not think I could wear it in this heat, I shall have to wait until we return to a cooler climate.”

Despite his elation, the King grew tired early. He had expended a lot of energy during the hunt that day and, with a few very intimate kisses, he bid Loki goodnight.

Loki went looking for Haewkyr. Something wasn’t quite right and he wanted to know what it was.

Haewkyr was drunk, very drunk. He was singing bawdy songs with some of the other horsemen. Loki stood there until they noticed him.

“Your Grace! Have you come to join us?” Haewkyr asked him, slurring heavily.

“I was hoping to speak to you, but now is not the time,” Loki said.

Haewkyr blinked slowly, “I’ve always got time for you Loki you know that,” he said.
He was serious, but the drink affecting his head was too much of an interference.

“I know, but I’d rather talk to you later, goodnight Haewkyr,” Loki said.

He turned and headed back to the main fire.

“That young man has a few problems,” said Musleen from the shadows, “and I think being on Progress is bringing them to the surface.”

“You realised that earlier than I did,” Loki said, not bothering to turn around. Musleen joined him a moment later.

“I checked the records of everyone who joined us on Progress, his record stated that he’d been in the army, except that he denied it. Now, there are a number of reasons why a man would fail to acknowledge his military past, I just wanted to know what his was in case it was something I ought to be worried about.”

“You can trust Haewkyr,” Loki said.

“I know, once I realised that I stopped pursuing the matter, but I feel that Haewkyr has a demon or two to face, and the time to face them is coming. After the plains we will travel to the very edge of the realm, where the border guards are stationed. I knew that Lyrren and Octir would have to face their fears there, given that was the place they were snatched from, but I think staying in a military camp is weighing on Haewkyr’s mind. I would dearly like to know what happened to him, but I do not feel it is my place to ask. Perhaps you can, he is closer to you and I would hate to see a good man get into trouble, his worries are making him reckless.”

Loki thought quickly about how Haewkyr had stuck out his tongue in what was potentially the full view of the court. He had always held the King in contempt, but he’d never been so careless before.

“I will try to talk to him,” Loki said, “if I get the opportunity.”

“I will make you the opportunity,” Musleen promised, “once we are back at the manor I will keep Father in his workroom so that you can find and talk to Haewkyr alone. But be careful, rumours and gossip are nasty, horrible things.”

“I know,” Loki replied dryly, “I’m the one who keeps getting linked to every attractive young man in the court.”

“You think I’m attractive? Good to know,” Musleen deadpanned and disappeared into the night before Loki could summon a reply.
Four days after returning from the hunt, Loki managed to arrange to go horse riding with Haewkyr. Haewkyr had grumbled about it due to the heat, but he recognised Loki’s need to get away for a while and so relented.

"We must take plenty of water," he cautioned.

Loki nodded, "Whole bags of it," he said, feeling vaguely guilty. Haewkyr had no idea that the real reason for their ride had nothing to do with Loki or his marriage to the King.

They left early, promising to be back before the heat of the day set in properly. Four guards accompanied them, riding just far back enough to keep an eye out but not so close as to hear their conversation.

Loki took no chances though, and as soon as they were well down the road he turned Lightning off to the side and led Haewkyr away from the road.

Haewkyr watched as the guards continued to ride on, obliviously following two clones.

"We'll follow them at a greater distance," Loki said to him, "so that they don't get into trouble for losing us."

They waited for a moment before getting back on the road. The backs of the guards could still be seen, but they were well out of earshot.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Haewkyr asked. "Are you alright Loki? Has anything happened?"

Loki took a deep breath.

"You've almost gotten yourself into trouble a few times recently," he said. "You have to be more careful or you will get into trouble, you may even have an 'accident'."

Haewkyr scowled, "I can't stand the way he paws you, and you just let him Loki, I know you are in an impossible situation, but I don't know how you can stand it!"
It was a good thing that Loki as shielding them from the guards, because that last sentence was almost shouted.

"I have to stand it," Loki said quietly, "I don't have a choice."

"But surely-"

"No. There is no surely, I have no choice, Odin swore an oath to me, one that he must keep, which means I must let this happen."

Haewkyr looked at him in confusion.

"But why?" he asked, "What is so important that you let yourself be pawed like that?"

Loki took a deep breath. Could he trust Haewkyr?

Yes. He knew the answer before his mind had finished forming the question. He could have told him years ago, and perhaps he should have. But he was telling him now.

"Thor," Loki said.

Haewkyr's brow wrinkled in confusion. "Your brother?" he asked.

"My betrothed."

Haewkyr’s eyes widened in understanding.

“Oh,” he said.

It was a difficult conversation. Slowly, and with more than a few tears, Loki told Haewkyr everything. He told him about the day he and Thor had realised that they were made for one another, that terrible meeting with Odin where Loki was sold to an old man for a peace that was already won, and the oath Odin made, the terrible oath that prevented Loki from doing so much, from being *himself*.

When he was finished he glanced over at Haewkyr through watery eyes.

Haewkyr looked thoughtful.

“So I can’t kill him then?” he said at last.

“I’m afraid not,” Loki said.

Haewkyr sighed dramatically. “Oh all right then, I’ll cancel the raid.”

Loki’s mouth twitched as Haewkyr asked, “Do our grandparents know?”

“Yes they do, they know everything,” Loki told him.

“Of course they do,” Haewkyr said. “So we really are all waiting for him to die?”

“It looks like it,” Loki said.

"I'm so frustrated by him," Haewkyr said, "Every time I see him I want to hit him, and not just for you, although it's mostly for you. He has no idea the damage he is doing, how much trouble he's causing for his heir. When he dies there will be some major changes, everyone can see it, they are
ready for it, the rebels were ready for it, but he just won't go, and then there's you," he added, looking at Loki fondly. "Everything he does to you just makes my blood boil."

"You're not alone," Loki admitted, "but you do need to be more careful. I don't want to see you in trouble Haewkyr."

"And I don't want to be in trouble, but sometimes-

"That's not all that's bothering you though, is it?" Loki cut in quickly, "Because you were much better at hiding your feelings before, but lately you've been slipping up all over the place."

Haewkyr suddenly looked hunted.

"No," he lied, "I'm fine."

"Liar," Loki said evenly. "I'm pretty good at hiding my feelings Haewkyr, I can spot it in others, you're worried about something and it's affecting you badly enough to cause dangerous slips. Tell me, maybe I can help?"

Haewkyr scowled. "You can't help," he said, "No one can help."

"Please Haewkyr," Loki said after a minute.

Haewkyr looked up at him, his eyes were hard.

“Alright,” he said, “but only because you trusted me.”

He took a deep breath.

“I joined the army,” he said, almost spitting the words out. "It's what third sons *do*. I join it and I trained and I was the best damn axeman in my troop."

"What happened?" Loki asked softly.

"War," Haewkyr replied simply. "Not like the big war that almost destroyed us, and did destroy a lot of people," the both thought briefly of Lady Nicceia, "but the war with the trolls on Niflheim."

Loki felt his heart leap, Thor had fought in that war. He mentally scolded himself for getting distracted as Haewkyr continued.

"We ride horses Loki, we train with them, feed them, a man learns to take care of his horse, a warrior is not ready to go to war unless he proves he can handle his horse alone, without stableboys. I learnt easily, I helped others, the horses got to know their riders, they learnt to trust them, to love them, and then... then they rode into battle, and the troll attacked them, and the horses fell. Of course the warriors had to get up and keep fighting, but that meant they left the horses... alone, wounded, dying, in terrible pain and they were all alone. Their rider wasn't there; there was no comfort, no care. They had been abandoned and they didn't know *why*.

Haewkyr was in tears, his whole body shook as he relived the horror of knowing what the horses felt.

"They're herd animals Loki, they belong with others, other horses, but other people too. They died alone, and I felt it, all of it, every strike and every broken limb. I couldn't fight. I collapsed right there on the battlefield, I tried so hard to save them but there were too many. So I... I gave them peace," he finished, his voice barely a whisper. His eyes were looking into a place Loki could never go. “I had
to give them peace, and then they were gone and the last thought they had was of their riders, wondering where they were.”

Loki carefully reached out a hand and tentatively touched Haewkyr's shoulder.

"We're getting closer to the border," he said softly. "Was that where you trained?"

Haewkyr nodded. "They didn't disgrace me," he said hoarsely. "They sent me home but I wasn't disgraced. The healer said my nature magic needed better control, so that I could block out the pain. He said it was my commander's fault for not making sure I was fit for battle. He's a good commander; he shouldn't have been blamed for my failing."

"Is he still there?" Loki asked.

"As far as I know; I didn't go back, even when I learnt how to control it better. The sight of an injured horse makes me shake all over. I'll never be of use in battle again," Haewkyr said sadly. "I will never defend my home, or win honours the way I dreamed of doing since I was a child."

Loki didn't know what to say. He put his hand on Haewkyr's big shoulder and squeezed it carefully.

"You have a long life ahead of you," he said at last. "Never say never, and don't blame yourself for something you couldn't control."

The corner of Haewkyr's mouth turned upward gently.

"I'll try to control myself better," he said, "and you can tell Prince Musleen to stop trying to goad me into talking, don't think I didn't spot the hints he was dropping. He knows I was in the army, doesn't he?"

"He knows everything about everyone," Loki said. "Believe it or not he only wanted to protect you."

"We need to catch up to the guards," Haewkyr said suddenly. They had slowed down to the point that the guards were just dots in the distance.

"Yes we do, thank you Haewkyr, for telling me, and *please* don't do anything that will get you into trouble with the King, I need you alive and whole." Loki said.

"I promise I will control myself better," Haewkyr vowed, "Anything to get you through this and back to your betrothed."

They got themselves up into a canter and caught up. Loki carefully let the glamour fall.

"I've come far enough in the heat I think," he said. "Let's go back and cool down."

"Yes Your Grace," Haewkyr said evenly.

The guards turned about obediently, oblivious to everything that had happened around them.

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Despite not liking the heat normally, Loki had a special fondness for this one. It drained him of energy, it made him sweat constantly, and it left him weary when he hadn't done anything more energetic than climb some stairs.

The reason that he was fond of it was that it had the same effect on the King.
Since arriving in the plains the number of times the King had been too exhausted to do more than kiss him goodnight had increased greatly. A whole week went by once without more than a quick snuggle. Late at night King Dimcken would strip Loki naked and run his hands over his firm legs, taut belly and hard chest, but would then mutter that it was too hot for vigorous exercise and roll over to sleep on the other side of the bed.

There had only been one time when King Dimcken had been determined to have sex, and after dinner one night he made Loki join him in the bathroom.

“Come in here my love, that’s it, climb down,” he instructed.

The bath was empty of water. It was nothing but a tiled, waist-high basin big enough to hold four people in reasonable comfort.

It currently also held several pitchers of cool water.

King Dimcken picked one of them up and gestured Loki closer.

“It’s too hot to play,” he said lustily, “so we must cool ourselves down.”

He raised the pitcher and poured some of the water over Loki’s naked back. Loki gasped as it hit him, it may not have been icy cold but he was so hot that it still made him arch away from it instinctively.

“Good boy,” King Dimcken murmured, moving to the front and pouring some more.

The cool water splashed around Loki’s feet, the King had plugged the drain so that they would end up with an inch or so of water in the bottom of the bath, once he’d finished pouring it all of course.

“Kneel my darling,” he breathed, eyes wide at the sight of Loki’s naked, dripping body.

Loki knelt, he tried to tell himself that he had been fortunate them past few months. He had been touched, but not raped. Of course it couldn’t last.

He really wished it could have lasted.

King Dimcken poured the remaining water over Loki’s head. It flowed down over his chest and thighs. Loki pushed his wet hair out of his eyes and looked up in time to see King Dimcken grab the second pitcher.

“On your hands and knees my darling, yes, like that, enjoy the water, it’s lovely and cool isn’t it?” King Dimcken asked as he poured more water slowly onto Loki’s back and over his bottom.

It trickled down in between his buttocks and dripped off the end of his penis.

“Yes Husband it feels lovely,” Loki said.

‘Hurry up and finish, please just get it over with,’ he silently pleaded.

King Dimcken was in no rush. The bathroom was cooler than the other rooms, although still extremely hot, and he proceeded to pour the cool water over both of them until there were goose bumps on Loki’s skin.

At one point he swung his leg over Loki’s back and sat like a rider on a horse as he poured the water over himself. Loki looked at the tiled floor beneath him and tried not to think about anything.
Eventually King Dimcken instructed him to turn over, and proceeded to rub him until he slickened.

They had sex in the puddle of water; Loki stared determinedly at the ceiling as the King slobbered all over his mouth, he could feel the water splashing gently against his buttocks with every thrust.

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About a year later…

The Falls of the Spritefolk were found in the middle of the plains. They fed the largest river in Vanaheim, also called the Spritefolk, which wound its way through the plains, eventually reaching the sea in the north.

Loki stood by the edge and watched the water thunder past him. The falls were so high that from the top you couldn’t see the bottom.

These were the same falls that, apparently, Loki’s grandmother had gone over in a raft just to prove that it could be done.

‘I am related to crazy people,’ Loki thought as he stood there.

Haewkyr was leaning on the protective railing a little way away, he saw Loki’s look and shot him a grin.

Loki wandered closer.

"Our grandmother is insane," Haewkyr said conversationally.

"I came to that conclusion," Loki replied.

King Dimcken was sitting on one of the viewing seats with a frown. Camtan and his family had been due to return four days ago, but they were late.

Loki looked over just as the King looked up at him. King Dimcken’s expression stayed annoyed, and Loki’s heart began to beat faster in response. He glanced apologetically at Haewkyr.

"I'd better go to him, there's no sense making it worse," he said softly.

Haewkyr nodded once in understanding. Since their talk just shy of a year ago he had been more restrained in front of the King, although the trail of broken axes in the training yards had increased as they neared the border.

Loki turned and headed to King Dimcken’s side.

"It's beautiful Husband," Loki said as he approached, "Truly magnificent."

"Huh," King Dimcken grunted.

Loki sat down carefully next to him.

"Should we have a picnic here? I can ask the servants to bring us lunch."

King Dimcken huffed, but gave no other sign of acknowledgement.

Loki felt a slight twinge of annoyance, Camtan had been held up by a storm raging over the fens, he had sent a messenger on ahead to let his father know, he'd done everything he possibly could to let
them know that he was alright.

But he was late and the King was annoyed.

Loki sat in silence for a while. Musleen was in the distance in some kind of zen-like trance as he watched the falling water. Dorgen was walking with his sons along the viewing path, speaking to them privately.

The bad mood seemed to radiate off the King's body, affecting everyone nearby.

Loki got up and went to the railing again. He was very aware of the King's gaze on his back. None of this tension would be happening if Camtan had not been held up by the storm.

"Loki," barked the King.

Loki turned and tried to look polite.

"Yes Husband?" he asked.

"Are you going to have a picnic or not?" King Dimcken asked in an annoyed, sneering kind of tone.

"You did not seem inclined toward it Husband so I thought I would not bother," Loki said.

They had an audience, Haewkyr was watching from the railing and Musleen had turned around. The servants and courtiers were keeping well back but watching closely.

"You thought you would not *bother*," King Dimcken repeated. "And where would we eat then?"

"Back at the manor Husband," Loki replied, trying to keep his voice even.

He hadn't done anything wrong, but the King was in a bad mood and Loki was his chosen target.

King Dimcken glared at him.


Loki came closer, trying not to look as terrified as he felt.

King Dimcken grabbed Loki's arm and pulled him down onto his knees in front of him.

"If you want a picnic, you can have a bloody picnic," he hissed. "Should I do all your thinking for you?"

Loki shook his head; he was trembling slightly from fear. He'd never been the target of the King's temper before, he'd suffered greatly as the method by which the King released his rage, but he'd never been the one at whom it was directed.

"I'm sorry Husband," he whispered.

King Dimcken sneered and looked away.

Loki stayed on his knees, unable to figure out if he was allowed to get up or not.

King Dimcken looked back; Loki shrank backwards from him slightly before he could stop himself.

The King sighed, and his rage seemed to lift from his shoulders almost like magic.
"Get up," he said softly, reaching out a hand to help Loki onto the bench beside him. "I'm not really mad at you, you know that don't you?" he asked, patting Loki's hand.

"Yes Husband," Loki said, still nervous.

"I want to see my boy, and my dear granddaughter, I haven't seen them in a year and I miss them so."

Unlike Lord Fetatheren then, who had to wait forty years between visits.

"When I got Camtan's letter I was angry, he had to stay with Lord Kinndyr while the storm passed. I do not trust that traitor."

Lord Kinndyr had been a loyal subject for all of his life, his wife had faced trial and been found criminally insane, a fact that had not made King Dimcken happy as he had wanted her to be executed. She was being treated in the capital hospital and as far as Loki knew Lord Kinndyr had been staying in the capital ever since, leaving the management of his lands to his son, Miarthyr.

Unfortunate he may be but traitor he was not.

"Camtan only stayed there a few extra nights," Loki said carefully, "He's already well away from there."

"Yes but he was delayed, I don't like that they are still on the road when they should be here," King Dimcken said sulkily.

"They're expected tomorrow," Loki said, "we can have a special dinner to welcome them back."

King Dimcken put an arm around him, "That is very thoughtful, you can arrange it when we return today. For now, send the servants for a picnic, it *is* a good idea."

Loki forced a smile onto his face and called over one of the servants.

The picnic was surprisingly cheerful. King Dimcken's dark mood had past and he was smiling at everyone as they ate. He kept an arm around Loki's waist the whole time and occasionally fed him bites of food. Loki's many years of marriage had taught him much about the King's behaviour and what it meant. One thing King Dimcken would sometimes do, instead of asking for what he wanted, was to do to Loki what he wanted Loki to do to him. After the third time Loki reluctantly picked up a piece of bread and returned the gesture.

The King wound up lounging with his head in Loki's lap, licking Loki's fingers with every piece that he was fed and looking extremely relaxed.

Loki found it disgusting, but at least King Dimcken wasn't angry anymore. His mood had been so dark it was almost beyond sanity, and it had lifted just as quickly. The fact that everyone went around pretending that it hadn't existed was like a mass delusion.

But when pointing it out was likely to get you killed, what choice did anyone have?

After the picnic King Dimcken wanted to go for a walk, and so Loki had to walk with him along the viewing path while holding onto his hand. They didn't say anything, just admired the breathtaking sight of the falls.

"We'll journey down to the bottom next week," King Dimcken said as they reached the end of the path and looked at the rocks below them.
"Is it a day trip or a camp?" Loki asked, still nervous from before.

"A short camp, a day to get down there and another to get back up, we'll spend a week down there, you can go swimming," King Dimcken said.

He paused and turned to look at Loki.

"I was annoyed earlier," he said. "I let my temper rule me, you know that I love you, don't you darling?"

"Yes Husband," Loki said.

"I didn't like seeing you so afraid."

"I'm sorry Husband," Loki said, "You were very, um, intense." A thought struck him suddenly, "I should hate to have been one of your enemies. You must be a fearsome foe."

King Dimcken looked pleased at his words. "I would say that I am, when properly roused," he said, sounding proud. "I would never hurt you though my darling."

"I know Husband," Loki said quickly, not believing it for a second. "I know."

Camtan, Soffìia and Roaseia arrived late that night; they had decided to travel on through instead of stopping at an inn.

"We wanted to try and make up some time," Camtan said as he greeted his delighted father.

"Now, now my boy, there was no need for that, getting here safely is far more important than not being late," King Dimcken said with a pleased smile.

Unseen by anyone with the distraction of Camtan's arrival, the wine in Loki's glass flash-boiled into powder.

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Loki enjoyed his trip down to the floor of the waterfall very much. He had always been quite good at rock climbing, and at several points along the path there was no other option.

King Dimcken was lowered on a specially made chair. He did suggest that Loki join him, but Musleen managed to talk him out of it.

"He'll be perfectly safe with all the ropes, if I can make it down with two missing fingers I'm sure Loki can manage it," he said, "we'll all help him if he needs it."

“Well, alright then, but you must stay right beside him the whole way,” King Dimcken instructed.

The falls turned out to land inside a large cavern, which had been created over the millennia by the falling water. They climbed down inside of it and set up camp on a rocky outcrop. Glow-lanterns were used to create light, although nothing could be done about the noise, which was spectacularly loud.

The falls hit the bottom almost violently, but a little way along the river widened and the water slowed enough for them to go swimming. The river exited the cavern over a mile away, and everyone was cautioned by the local lord against swimming too far from the light.

“It’s not that you can’t survive - if you keep your head above water you’ll be washed out down-river
and we’ll pick you up - but the journey will be in total darkness, and trust me, it is highly unpleasant.”

Loki splashed about in the water with the others as the King watched from the outcrop. Camtan and Musleen began a game of trying to dunk one another and they quickly roped Loki into it as well. Then they all tried to swim as close to the waterfall as possible, only to be pushed back by the strength of the water before they got too close.

King Dimcken sat and watched them with a smile on his face. He turned to one of his servants and gave him specific instructions as he watched the young men splash about.

When they returned to the manor a week later King Dimcken gave Loki a pair of enormous and elaborate diamond earrings. He didn't apologise for his behaviour, but the gift was meant to do the same job. Loki forced a smile and thanked him, taking care not to act afraid of him, as that was a sure-fire way to get into more trouble.

He wore the earrings to dinner that night, and tried not to feel embarrassed at the ridiculous spectacle that he made.
Five years after visiting the falls, the court arrived at the far-lands. They were now on the very edges of Vanaheim. The land beyond was wild, untamed, and for the most part, unexplored.

It was mostly forests.

Loki stood up on the wall of the fort, although what they were protecting against he did not know. Their arrival yesterday evening had been too full of the bustle of travel for him to ask anyone.

The commander, a tall, middle-aged man with a stern bearing, had welcomed them all warmly. They had eaten dinner in the large hall before going straight to bed.

Loki was stuck in with King Dimcken again. The fort had little comforts and no spare space that could be converted into a second bedroom. The warriors were all sleeping outside in tents while the court members were installed in the barracks.

The wind blew gently, ruffling Loki’s hair. The far-lands were a desolate place, and, as he looked out at the wild area beyond Vanaheim’s border, Loki found himself longing to head out into that desolation, to explore and travel and leave civilisation itself behind him.

There was the sound of footsteps, and Loki turned to see Haewkyr crest the top of the wall.

“You should have a coat,” he said. “It’s cold up here.”

“I don’t feel the cold easily,” Loki said, giving him a smile.

Haewkyr just nodded in response.

“How are you feeling?” Loki asked gently.

“Tense,” Haekwyr said honestly, “my old troop is scattered now after so long, they made their way up the ranks, and some of them are here.”

“Have you spoken to them yet?” Loki asked.

“No, I don’t know what to say. I know that I was dragged off the battlefield by one of my best friends, I know that *they all* know that. I saw my old commander earlier, inspecting the tents, he was demoted because of me and he hasn’t yet regained his old status.”

“So you’re hiding up here instead of talking to him?” Loki challenged. “He may hate you if he chooses, but it was *his* fault for not recognising what could happen, that’s a part of being a commander, and you never know, he may be happy to see you well.”
Haekwyr looked uncomfortable. “It’s all very well to say,” he said, “but to do is another thing entirely.”

“I can’t make you,” Loki said. “I’ll just stare at you until you feel guilty enough to go and do it.”

“Curse you,” Haewkyr said, but his tone was light. “I will go then, and find out what they think of me.”

Loki watched him as he climbed back down the steps to the ground.

“Good luck,” he whispered at Haewkyr’s retreating back.

****

Haewkyr was not the only one who had demons to face at the fort. It was from here that Princes Lyrren and Octir had been kidnapped by the resistance.

They had been taken from their beds in the middle of the night. The commander, and indeed all of the troops, had been spelled to believe that they had gone home. Instead they had been shackled, transported in crates, threatened, confined and, on one or two early occasions, tortured.

The year of their imprisonment was long gone now, but the scars had freshly opened once they were back at the place where it all began.

Lyrren walked around the fort grounds slowly, trying not to jump with every noise. Octir was sweating despite the chill as he sat with his old friends.

Dorgen stayed close by during the early days at the fort, keeping an eye on his two children.

Musleen inspected the weaponry, Camtan tried to beat the warriors at archery, and the King sat inside and wrapped himself in furs.

Fosxyr climbed up onto the wall around mid-morning with a jug of hot tea and a teacup hooked onto his belt.

“Having fun Your Grace?” he called out.

Loki had not moved from the wall since he climbed up there early that morning, he was wistfully dreaming of exploring the wild.

“It’s so beautiful,” he said.

“Deadly places often are, more’s the pity,” Fosxyr said, pouring Loki a cup of tea.

“I feel better in quiet places,” Loki said, “there’s something about empty nature that soothes my spirit.”

“I wish I felt the same Your Grace, but all I can think about is how much I miss cobblestones,” Fosxyr said.

Loki smiled at him. “You are a city-dweller through and through aren’t you Fosxyr?”

“I would very much like to be,” Fosxyr replied, giving the packed earth inside the fort the stink-eye.

Loki sipped the tea, it tasted good.

“Maybe one day I can go and see what’s beyond the border,” he said quietly.
“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Fosxyr said, “Thanos is supposed to be waiting out there, explore the known realms Your Grace, I assure you that they are sufficiently deadly, and no man has yet to see it all, there are plenty of wild places left that do not require you to go out *there*.”

Loki looked at it again.

“It looks so peaceful,” he said, “what if Thanos is long gone and we’re sitting here in fear instead of forging new pathways?”

“Asgard’s protection is just metres beyond the fort Your Grace, if Thanos was gone then surely they would lower it,” Fosxyr said.

Loki looked out at the forest again. After a moment to ready himself he reached out with his magic. Sure enough there was a feeling of power crackling against his mind. He withdrew hurriedly.

“Pity,” he said softly.

“Loki!” Came the voice of Haekwyr from below them, “Come and meet my old friends!”

Loki grinned. Clearly at least one conversation had gone well.

He thanked Fosxyr for the tea, gave him back the empty cup and climbed down to the ground.

“Hello,” he said to the three young men who stood there. They all looked about Haewkyr’s age and were wearing the armour of a troop-leader.

“This is Barzzayr, Garzzaen and Blaokeen,” Haewkyr said, “guys this is Loki.”

They all saluted with a chorus of “Your Grace.”

Haewkyr started laughing.

Loki smiled at them. “Relax men, I am pleased to meet you,” he said.

They did relax, although not fully. Haewkyr took the opportunity to explain how he had met them, and how much trouble they got into afterwards.

Loki listened to the tale of how, as young recruits, they had started arguing one night about what made a person brave, only to wind up deciding that climbing to the roof of the commander’s quarters and leaving all the shields there was definitely the way to tell a brave man from a coward.

“Was alcohol involved in this decision?” Loki asked.

“Why yes, yes it was,” Haewkyr said cheerfully.

They made their way in out of the cold and sat down at one end of the long dinner tables. Fosxyr reappeared as if by magic and served them all some mead.

“Mead!” Loki exclaimed.

If he had to be completely honest, mead had not been his favourite drink back in Asgard, but after so long without it he realised all of a sudden that he was desperate to taste it again.

“Asgard sends us a small group of warriors every so often as a part of a training-trading agreement,” Barzzayr said. “They bring mead with them because we don’t have it. It’s not too bad, and I’ve been told that you can drink it warm.”
Loki nodded. “In the winter, it’s quite good at warming you up after a hunt or a ride through the
snow,” he said.

“It’s alright I suppose,” Haewkyr said with an over-the-top snobbish sound to his voice. “Of course it
is not a patch on our summer wines, not a patch.”

Loki hit him lightly as the others chuckled.

“It’ll get you drunk faster than your wines, of any season,” he said.

“We know,” Gazzaen said, “What do you think we were drinking when we pulled the shield
prank?”

****

Haewkyr was a lot brighter during the next six months. He had spoken to both his old friends and
former commander, and had discovered that they did not blame him. The commander even
apologised, which was something, he had said, that he regretted being unable to do sooner.

There was not much entertainment at the fort, which, given that it was designed as a military base
made a lot of sense, but that sadly meant unfortunate things for Loki.

King Dimcken took full advantage of their shared room, kissing and touching Loki in the mornings
as well as the evenings. They had sex more often here than they had done while travelling over the
hot plains.

Loki hated it, but he managed to hide it. He told himself over and over again that it was only for six
months, then they would be travelling again.

When those six months came to a close, Prince Lyrren and Prince Octir made an announcement.

“We’re staying,” Prince Lyrren said one night after dinner. “We came to this place to serve in the
army as Princes and we’re decided to do just that. We’ve both signed on for a ten year tour.”

King Dimcken looked surprised. Dorgen looked anxious.

“Are you certain that this is what you want?” he asked his sons.

Octir nodded. “We will never be able to truly feel safe until we finish what we have started. I, for
one, will not have my dreams of being a commander one day dashed by a cruel criminal. I will face
my fears and stay.”

“Well said,” King Dimcken said, “you are both a credit to Vanaheim.”

They accepted the praise with thanks. Dorgen still looked worried.

“You’ll be gone for ten years,” he said to them softly as King Dimcken played with Roaseia, who
was toddling around and playing with her dolls.

“Yes, but it is something we have to do Father, and after the ten years are over we will go to the
capital and wait for you to return from Progress,” Lyrren said as Octir smiled.

They would see their mother again twenty five years earlier than expected.

Dorgen’s mouth curled up as he realised their plan.
“Tell her I love her,” he said simply.

“You must tell her yourself every time you write,” Lyrren pointed out.

“Yes, but I would never give up even a single opportunity to say it again,” Dorgen said quietly.

And so when the court left the far-lands and headed back inwards, the two Princes stayed behind to face their fears, and finish what they started.

“I’m proud of them,” Dorgen said as he rode away.

His face was a mixture of that pride blended with sadness. He would miss them.

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It took twenty one years to travel across the northern part of the realm, slowly heading eastward as they went. Eventually they were due north of the capital, although over a month’s ride from it.

They had also reached the volcano.

Loki couldn’t help but be excited. A real-live, active volcano was a rare thing indeed. There were none in Asgard, and, while technically Mulspelheim was mostly built out of them, it was also extremely dangerous to visit for any reason, let alone ‘to go and have a look’.

He was up before dawn on the day they were to visit. King Dimcken had made all the mages check and double check the movements of the magma underground to ensure that the volcano wasn’t about to start erupting, as it was occasionally known to do. They assured him that there was no danger, the last eruption had been three years ago and the pressure had died right down as a result.

They were also going to take the flying machine, which took an hour, rather than trek up there, which took a full day. The flying machine was normally only used for rescues, but King Dimcken wasn’t fit enough to trek and he didn’t want Loki to be in such a risky situation.

It didn’t matter. Loki was going to see a volcano and the thought was making him shake in excitement.

Fosxyr was still asleep as Loki rose and made himself some tea from the set in his current living room. The servant slept on a pallet in the corner, which, when Loki discovered this, he insisted was very comfortable, almost as much as his bed in the palace.

Loki waited until sunrise, then carefully put a cup of tea on the floor by Fosxyr’s head. After a minute the scent woke him and he started when he realised that he’d been caught sleeping on the job.

“How do you do that?” Loki asked him.

“It’s a skill,” Fosxyr replied. “What would you like for breakfast?”

“How do you do that?” Loki asked him.

“It’s a skill,” Fosxyr replied. “What would you like for breakfast?”

“Something light please, I have a nervous stomach today; I’m going to see the volcano!” Loki said excitedly. “Maybe I can collect the lava rocks just as they’re cooling; they have a great deal of magical properties if you catch them at just the right moment.”
“So you have told me Your Grace, more than once. I very much hope you succeed in collecting one, otherwise I fear the disappointment would be crushing.” Fosxyr said dryly.

Loki grinned at him.

“Today is a good day,” he declared.

An hour after sunrise the little party of sightseers assembled at the flying machine’s base. There was King Dimcken, Loki, Musleen, Lord Hortyr, who owned the land, and Wraightyr, the pilot.

King Dimcken pulled Loki into a hug as soon as he saw him.

“You look lovely today my darling, your lips look extra kissable,” he said.

Loki endured the kiss that followed and tried to keep from tensing up. Since that one time at the falls, King Dimcken had not taken his temper out on Loki again, but every time he lost it at someone else, Loki would grow afraid. Yesterday the King had been in a foul mood, snapping and yelling at everyone and everything. Loki had hid in his chambers and refused to go out unless he was specifically summoned.

It seemed that all was well again in the world of King Dimcken, which was a good thing, as it meant that Loki could relax and enjoy the day.

They took their seats and strapped themselves in.


One by one they answered in the affirmative, and the pilot took off.

Flying was not an uncommon pastime in Asgard, where they had ships to travel between the islands and landmasses that clustered around the central city. But it was usually reserved for the military or as part of an organised travel path. Loki had ‘borrowed’ a flyer on a few occasions and gone out to explore the far islands and rocky outcrops, and so had no fear as they lifted from the ground and made their way up the mountain.

Of course it had always been better when he’d flown with Thor, but if he stared at the passing landscape instead of his fellow passengers then he could almost pretend that he was being carried by his love.

After a few minutes he turned his head away, his imaginings had been more painful than he’d thought.

Musleen was looking cheerfully down at the ground as it sped past under them, Lord Hortyr was looking pale and was staring at his own hands. Loki thought it was strange that the man who owned the flying machine would be scared of heights, but he supposed that you couldn’t help what you inherited.

King Dimcken was looking vaguely green. He was also swallowing quite hard.

Loki bit his lip at the sight. If the King had a bad flight then everything could start to go wrong.

“Look at the horizon Husband,” he said, hoping that King Dimcken would listen, he was the very definition of a stubborn old man, and often reacted badly to being told what to do. “I was told to do so on my first flight and it helped me greatly.”
To Loki’s relief King Dimcken did what he was told. The greenness in his face gradually faded as they climbed higher.

“I used to hike up this volcano,” he said with a sad tone to his voice, “when I was a young man.”

Loki and Musleen shared a quick glance over the King’s head. They had to do something about this.

“My grandfather told me that you and he were always hiking and climbing,” Loki said. “You are very fortunate to have had such a strong constitution, as there are thousands that can never climb so high or last so long, even at their peak.”

“That’s true,” Musleen said, “I remember Lord Fanttyen when we were growing up, he was always struggling with minor things like going on a slow walk. Your feats are still being talked about in the court.”

King Dimcken sighed, “I should like to give them something new to talk about, but there is really only one thing left I can still do well.”

As he said that he reached over and patted Loki’s knee. Musleen blushed scarlet at the King’s meaning; Loki’s face was no less red.

It was in that awkward silence that they flew the rest of the way up the volcano.

When they arrived they were greeted by Haewkyr.

“What are you doing here?” Loki exclaimed in surprise.

It was true that he hadn’t seen Haewkyr since the previous evening, but he assumed his cousin had been busy.

“I thought, given that the volcano is not supposed to be active, that I would hike my way up with some supplies so that you might enjoy a nice drink and something to eat at the top,” he said cheerfully.

“What a thoughtful thing to do,” King Dimcken said, delighted. “What do you have?”

“Tea, a bottle of wine, some bread, a cheese, some pastries from the kitchen, baked fresh last night, and some apples, Your Majesty. I would have liked to take more but I needed things that would travel well in a pack,” Haewkyr said.

King Dimcken grinned at him. “That will do nicely, come here Loki and have something to eat.”

Loki was absolutely desperate to get to the rim of the volcano, which was ten feet above them, but he made himself go over and join the impromptu picnic.

King Dimcken, annoyingly, took his time. Haewkyr chatted to him politely about the volcano, and had him recount his closest shave, the same one that had formed ‘Fallconyr’s Peak’.

“It’s over there,” Haewkyr said, pointing. “We should go and stand on it Loki, Grandfather will ask us if we did and I would hate to disappoint him.”

“Let us all go,” King Dimcken said. “That peak saved our lives. I don’t suppose that you can make it rain at all?”

“Sadly no Your Majesty, I was not blessed with that skill,” Haewkyr replied. “Which is a shame, as I have often had need of a shower when no shower was to be found, it would have come in handy.”
King Dimcken chuckled in good humour. “You’ll just have to stay dirty like the rest of us,” he said.

Lord Fallconyr had been correct, it was a very nice aspect. They stood on the peak and admired the view for a while, Musleen and Haewkyr tried to spot various landmarks through the carpet of green that the trees made.

Finally though, it was time to climb up the last few feet and see the volcano’s crater.

“Have you seen it yet Haewkyr? Is there lava in it?” Loki asked.

“Not yet, I was waiting for you to arrive,” Haewkyr said.

They crested the top of the ridge and looked down.

It had been three years since the last eruption and the crater was lined with ash. At the bottom, bubbling gently, there was a lake of lava.

Loki stared at it with hungry eyes. Lava stones were rare, and very powerful. He wanted one so badly.

“We could probably hike down to it in about half an hour,” Haewkyr said softly, “which is about one third of the time it will take for those two to wake up.”

Loki turned and looked down below him. King Dimcken was asleep on the blanket Haewkyr had brought, Lord Hortyr was beside him.

“You-” he began.

“Wine can take people like that, especially with the warmth of the earth to aid in its soothing properties,” Haewkyr said. “The pilot is fine, just in case, and Musleen is distracting him with questions about the flying machine, if you want to go, let’s go.”

“You planned this between you?” Loki asked, already starting his climb down towards the centre of the crater.

“You’ve talked about nothing else for months, so we were fairly certain that you wanted to go down into the crater,” Haewkyr said, following him.

It grew very hot as they approached, but the lava stayed gentle and bubbled away without any signs of danger.

They couldn’t kneel on the earth as it was too hot, but Loki squatted down as near as he could get and reached out with his magic. He’d only read about the stones, he had no idea if he could do this. Slowly, very, very slowly, a bubble the size of his hand rose out of the lava and stayed whole. It was lifted out until it was hovering in the air, where it cooled slowly while still holding its round shape perfectly.

Loki floated it carefully to where they stood.

“That’s a lava stone?” Haewkyr asked.

“It is,” Loki breathed, “It won’t be cool enough to touch for hours yet, but it is a proper lava stone, I *can* do it.”

“Do they ever form naturally?” Haewkyr asked.
“Sometimes, but it’s incredibly rare, there is no difference in their properties though,” Loki said, still staring at his creation in wonder.

“How long before you can rest it on something?” Haewkyr asked. “I can always carry it down the volcano for you if you have to leave it here to cool for a bit.”

Loki looked at him with hope in his eyes. “Really? You’d do that?”

“Of course I would, I’ll gift it to you later and say I bought it somewhere, or maybe found it, seeing as they can form on their own.”

Loki flushed in pleasure. “I need to hold it up for about an hour, then it needs to rest for several more.”

“Can you climb back while holding it up like that?” Haewkyr asked.

Loki nodded, “I’ve got it now, it will float along behind me,” he said.

They climbed back up slowly. In total, the trip had taken an hour and a half.

King Dimcken was still snoozing, although he did stir a little, indicating that the drug had almost worn off. They sat down carefully next to him and waited in silence. Loki floated the now set lava stone to rest on the other side of Fallconyr’s peak, he returned just as Musleen and the pilot did.

“Wraightyr has been telling me all about how the flying machine works,” he said. “I would love to learn how to fly one myself, it is fascinating, and requires a great deal of skill.”

Wraightyr looked embarrassed at the attention.

Musleen’s comments had woken Lord Hortyr, who glanced at them guiltily.

“I apologise Your Grace, Your Grace, I did not mean to be so rude,” he said.

His apology woke King Dimcken, who snorted ungracefully and pushed himself up.

“I did not realise that I was tired,” he mumbled.

“You had a very late night Father, remember, with that extra work that needed to be done?” Musleen said.

“Dorgen should have handled it himself, he’s far too old for me to be helping him like that.” King Dimcken grumbled.

A wink from Haewkyr confirmed it, Dorgen had been in on it too.

“The view is truly lovely, it is a pity that the location is so dangerous,” Loki said.

King Dimcken looked about himself quickly.

“It *is* dangerous,” he said, “We should go soon.”

The party didn’t argue with him, and ten minutes later they were all strapped in and ready to go, except for Haewkyr, who was going to take the long way.

“Take care tonight while camping,” Loki told him.
“I shall,” Haewkyr assured him, “Any sign of trouble and I shall call for help, I have a beacon.”

“He’s a good man,” King Dimcken said as they flew away. “He reminds me of his grandfather. Do you like him Musleen?”

“I do Father, he is a good man and a good friend,” Musleen said.

“That’s good, perhaps he can be to you what his grandfather is to me,” King Dimcken said.

Musleen blinked in confusion. “Not quite Father, as I will never be king, but then I should need good advisors anyway, for who doesn’t?”

“Yes of course, I forgot for a moment. But you will be protecting the realm for your brother, I should like you to have good men you can trust as your friends and companions,” King Dimcken said, waving a hand about dismissively.

Loki and Musleen exchanged another quick glance, the King *forgot* that Musleen wasn’t the crown prince? That was… worrying.

The next evening when Haewkyr arrived back, he handed Loki a lava stone that he had ‘found’ up in the crater.

“So that you might have a souvenir of your visit, cousin,” he said, presenting it in front of the court.

“Thank you Sir Haewkyr,” Loki said formally. “It is charming,”

“And for you Your Majesty, and I do hope that you will forgive my lack of etiquette, I was excited to give my cousin his gift. For you I found a rare gem, a crystal formed by the ash of the lava being crushed, a volcanic diamond.”

There was a gasp around the court, volcanic diamonds were rare indeed. Loki looked surprised, had Haewkyr really found it? It seemed unlikely that he would purchase such an expensive item.

King Dimcken beamed in delight, he took the cloudy lump out of Haewkyr’s hand. “I shall have it cut to the finest stone,” he declared. “Thank you Sir Haewkyr, this is a wonderful gift indeed.”

“How?” Loki asked bluntly later on when he was in the stable with Haewkyr.

“Grandfather sent it ages ago when I told him you probably wouldn’t be allowed down into the crater, he came up with the basic plan too, although Musleen and I tweaked and polished it. He found the stone during his treks up here in his youth, he never really liked the stones anyway and had more than enough money so he did not need to sell it. Instead he put it aside just in case he ever fell on hard times. In his own words ‘that seems unlikely at this point’, and he thought I might be able to use it instead to placate the King after your trip, given that he was going to fall asleep at the top of a volcano.”

“He’s an evil genius,” Loki said, sounding impressed.

“I take after him, obviously,” Haewkyr said, puffing himself up a little.

Loki laughed at him. “Thank you,” he said, trying to sound serious through his chuckles and Haewkyr continued to fake-preen.

“For you? Anything,” Haewkyr said.
Guys, important note. I am having a wisdom tooth pulled tomorrow and, if it's anything like the last time, I will be high as a kite on panadol for a few days afterwards. So there will be a break in updates during this time. I will get back to it as soon as I can, in the meantime I hope you enjoy this chapter.
The Year of Thor's Love

Thank you for all the well wishes, as it turned out the whole thing was very anticlimactic.

You see several years ago I had to have a wisdom tooth out and, not only did it take the dentist forever to pull it, but the bruising and swelling left behind put me on painkillers for two weeks, which for me is unheard of. So I was naturally expecting something similar this time.

Turns out no. He had that sucker out in less than a minute and I didn't need any painkillers at all.

Like I said, anticlimactic.

The moral of the story: It doesn't matter how good your dentist is at everything else, if they are smaller than you and want to take out one of your teeth, *get a bigger dentist to do it*. Believe me, you'll be better off.

There is one line in here about a non-con situation, because it's one line long I'm not sure how to warn for it, so just be careful and I hope it doesn't upset anyone too much.

Loki opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling. He frowned slowly as the sounds of his surroundings reached his ears.

King Dimcken was snoring beside him, the faint sound of horses filtered in through the window, as did the noise of the early morning songbirds.

But the one sound he didn't hear was the sound of rain.

The five-day-a-year difference between Asgard and Vanaheim meant that Thor's rain had arrived slightly earlier each time. Loki knew this, and waited every year for Thor to shower him with a reminder of their love.

According to the Aesir calendar, it had been one hundred years since Loki had married the King. According to the Vanir calendar, that day was still a year and a half away.

Today it should have been raining, but Loki couldn't hear it.

He rose quickly, forgetting the sleeping King beside him, and ran to the balcony with his heart hammering. Surely Thor wouldn't have *forgotten*? Not today, not *this* anniversary, no, please
It was raining. Loki sighed in relief as he looked out over manor yard. The rain was the light, wispy kind that made those who walked through it look as though they had been coated in tiny jewels.

Loki scanned the sky; it was covered over with thick clouds. He felt the tiniest hint of a smile come to his face. Thor had not forgotten him. He was still loved.

It was strangely different to the normal heavy downpour that usually accompanied their anniversary.

A noise behind him alerted Loki to the fact that King Dimcken was awake. Loki scolded himself, he should have been more careful, the King may have been a heavy sleeper of legendary proportions, but not when it was so close to his regular waking time.

King Dimcken growled in annoyance as he wrapped his arms around Loki from behind.

"Rain," he muttered. "Just the thing to spoil our picnic."

Loki forced a suitably disappointed expression onto his face. The picnic had been planned for a week, but it was one among many to him now, he was bored of them, he was bored of almost everything to do with the Progress. He never thought that he would be relieved to find himself back at the capital, but he had been thinking more and more along those lines in recent years. He could take some new lessons at the Tower, his experiments with the lava stone had been successful, but had stalled through lack of knowledge.

"We'll have to do something else," Loki said, "something indoors. Maybe we can have a picnic in the hall?"

King Dimcken chuckled against him. "You young things always have such mad ideas, my granddaughter would probably love it."

Roaseia did indeed love it, she giggled almost nonstop as the entire court ate sandwiches while sitting on blankets on the floor. Camtan and Musleen took it in turns to toss her into the air as outside, the wispy rain continued to fall.

It was still raining the next day, and the next, and the next. Reports began to come in from the messengers carrying news from other parts of the realm, the whole of Vanaheim was covered with heavy rain clouds.

This was no longer unusual, Thor's grief would cover the realm every year for a few days, and while no one knew the true cause, they had gotten used to the strange phenomenon as time went on. No one worried too much as they went about their business, at least this rain remained light.

After ten days the rain had still not stopped. Then they started to worry.

It was not raining in the other realms anymore, just Vanaheim, just the whole of Vanaheim, even the hot, dry plains were being rained on by the wispy droplets.

People were beginning to mutter about a possible curse.

After fifteen days of continuous, wispy rain, the King summoned the leading weather sorcerers to explain, and hopefully stop, the rain from falling.

They arrived from the Tower eight days later, it was still raining. No one would go outside unless they had to; people were starting to claim that the rain had evil properties that made them act in
unnatural ways.

Loki knew that was ridiculous, but he couldn't say anything, just watched with sceptical eyes as the more impressionable of the court started gibbering, or running around like mad things.

Weather magic was a form of natural magic, which was naturally quite rare among the Vanir population. Haewkyr had already been summoned by the King and swore that he could only communicate with animals, weather of any kind was beyond him. The sorcerers were not much better. They could feel the weather enough to predict it in advance but that was about all. They had not been able to predict the rain, which gave even more credence to the idea of a curse.

Loki was forbidden to go outside. He sat in one of the gardens under a shelter and watched the rain from there instead.

"Do you think we could ask your brother to come and stop it?" King Dimcken asked Loki one day as the sorcerers tried fruitlessly to find a way to end it.

Loki's heart began to race. "Thor is still out adventuring, but if Father can get a hold of him I'm sure he would come," he said.

"I will write to King Odin and ask him to send Prince Thor to us," King Dimcken said. "This is getting ridiculous. It is only a matter of time before the curse in this rain is revealed to us. We must stop it before then."

Loki nodded, desperately trying to keep a calm expression on his face. Thor would not be permitted to come to Vanaheim, but Odin might make him stop it from raining, if he could get a hold of him, Frigga's letters made it clear that Thor was always on the move, and almost impossible to contact.

But it was a nice thought. A dangerous thought, but a nice one all the same.

It took eight days for the King's letter to reach the Bifrost site by messenger, and another ten days for him to return. Odin's letter had promised that he would try and contact Thor, but his current whereabouts was not known, he was also constantly on the move, which made finding him difficult. King Dimcken was put into a foul temper by this reply and spent the rest of the day yelling at anyone who was so unfortunate to be nearby.

Loki spent the day in the stables, talking quietly to Haewkyr, until the coming night required him to attend dinner with the King.

"Husband," Loki greeted him politely as he entered the King's chambers.

King Dimcken scowled at him.

"Your Father is being difficult," he snapped. "We are being attacked by an evil curse and he does nothing to help."

Loki tried to look as apologetic as he could. "I'm certain that he will try to find Thor for us Husband, he was just trying to explain why it may take a while."

King Dimcken grunted, he had not risen to greet Loki when he'd arrived, now he thrust out an arm and waited for Loki to come to him.

Loki stepped forwards nervously. The King's sons were not in the room, which was unusual, and he couldn't hide the faint hint of fear in his eyes as he stepped into the King's grasp.
"Why can't that Heimdall find him?" King Dimcken said in a nasty, vicious tone.

Loki swallowed nervously. "I'm certain Father has already asked him where Thor might be found," he stammered. "He'll send a messenger as soon as he can, if Thor hasn't moved on then he'll let him know at once."

"I'm *certain*," King Dimcken said sarcastically.

Loki tried to stay still and did not say anything further. This was a mistake, but then talking probably was as well. When the King was in this kind of mood, everything was a mistake.

"Well? Don't you have anything further to add?" King Dimcken snapped.

Loki shook his head in terror. "I'm sorry Husband, he'll come soon I'm sure."

"You're *sure*, you're *certain*, but are you *right*?" King Dimcken snapped, squeezing Loki tightly against him.

He pulled Loki down until their faces were inches away from each other.

"Your father is leaving us to rot," he hissed, giving Loki a little shake in time with his words. "He wants to bring Vanahem permanently under his rule, I knew it, I've always known it, but that's not going to happen."

Loki had tears of fear in his eyes, the King looked completely mad, little flecks of spittle came flying out of his mouth to hit Loki in the face as he talked.

"No Husband," Loki whispered. "He'd never-"

"No, you're right, it won't happen, because I have a strong son who will stop it, and I have you, you're mine Loki, mine."

"Yes Husband," Loki whispered, terrified.

"I'll make a baby with you, a baby that will be raised in Vanahem and in the Asgard line of succession, I will-" King Dimcken broke off quickly and glared at Loki. "The baby will be your brother's kin, he won't do anything to hurt it, will he? That is if you ever get *pregnant*." Despite King Dimcken trying every time for the last eighty or so years whenever Loki was fertile, Loki had failed to get pregnant every time. It was another source of frustration for King Dimcken, one that was slowly growing over time.

"No Husband he would never hurt his kin," Loki gasped, King Dimcken's grip was tight enough to hurt.

"Good," King Dimcken said, his voice cracking with madness, "good."

He made Loki suck on him as he ate his dinner. As he ate he would reach down and stroke Loki's head with a gentleness that was somehow even more terrifying than his violence earlier. It made Loki jump in place whenever he felt the King's fingers smearing gravy through his hair.

Loki did not get any dinner, and for a long time afterwards he lay beside the King and tried not to move, or even breathe, such was the terror King Dimcken had inspired.

The following morning when he woke, King Dimcken reached out and gave Loki's thigh a pat.
"I was a bit upset last night darling," he said.

Loki sat still, he had no idea what to say to that, 'yes' might get him in a lot of trouble, but then so could 'no'.

"I lost my temper, I am an old man and you must allow me my indulgences, yes?"

"Yes Husband," Loki said.

King Dimcken patted Loki's flack like a favoured pet.

"Good boy," he said, "I shall check with the sorcerers and, if they are certain they cannot find any dark spells in the rain, you may go riding today."

"Thank you Husband," Loki said, trying to act as though everything was back to normal, being afraid of King Dimcken after he'd lost his temper was a sure-fire way to anger him all over again.

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The light, wispy rain continued with no end in sight. It had rained for five straight months before it was time to leave their current manor and head to the next Lord's lands.

"Loki, darling, come here and ride in the coach, you can't ride through the rain," King Dimcken said, "you'll catch a chill."

Loki handed Lightning's reins to Haewkyr and went to the King's side. He had been very careful since Odin's letter had arrived and he'd had to endure the consequences of its contents. The continued absence of Thor had caused several bouts of anger and rage from the King, which Loki had borne the brunt of.

It had been nerve-wracking, and the continuous rain constantly renewed the King's temper.

But Loki wouldn't have it any other way. Despite the terror that the King induced whenever his temper got out of control, Loki would still take an angry King in exchange for the constant, unwavering love of his Thor.

The ground was damp and covered in puddles. The rain was so light that it had taken two of the five months to finally wet the ground enough for puddles to begin to form.

The coach rattled back and forth as they drove down the road and to the next manor. Loki watched the water drip slowly from the leaves of the trees as they travelled through the forests. They were in the north now, and heading further east. The eastern borders of the realm were closer to the capital than the western ones, and the last stop on their journey, before arriving back at the palace, was Lord Fallconyr's estates.

The forest smelt of wet earth and moss. King Dimcken was huddled up in the corner of the coach and grumbled under his breath. He didn't like the rain at all, as his bones would ache sometimes in the damp. The healer had prescribed an ointment to rub into his joints. Normally poor Hieddenyr was given the task, but occasionally King Dimcken had Loki do it.

He always had Loki do it while naked.

Loki didn't care. All he had to do was glance out of the window and he felt loved. All he had to do was walk through the rain and he felt cleansed.
His only fear was that when Thor actually saw him he would somehow see the stains of the inky stuff where it had been. It seemed to creep back over time, not helped of course by the King's constant touches that reapplied it thickly every day.

Six months after the rain began to fall, King Dimcken gave Loki a present.

"I don't like watching you ride in this cursed rain," he said. "I had this coat made for you, it is leather and lined with fur. It will keep you warm and dry."

"Thank you Husband," Loki said, trying it on. "It's lovely and warm."

"I have one too," King Dimcken said, sounding pleased.

He did too, it was identical to Loki's. They looked like a matching pair.

Loki forced a smile at the sight as he silently vowed to burn his coat the moment the King was dead.

There were a lot of things Loki had vowed to do the moment King Dimcken was dead, by now there were so many things that it would be physically impossible to do them all in that single moment.

They'd get done though, Loki thought silently, one by one, they'd *all* get done.

There were side effects to the rain. At first it was not as apparent, but as the months went by, reports began to trickle in of failed harvests and difficult times. The ground had reached saturation point and struggled to release the water into the rivers fast enough. It was becoming boggy in some places. The fens had become a death trap for anyone who strayed from the roads, that is, the ones that weren't sinking. The roads between estates were becoming increasingly hard to travel down and in the lower lying areas of the realm the sewers were starting to overflow into the main water table.

Loki tried to tell himself that he didn't care, but he was lying. He wanted so badly to feel Thor's love, but at the expense of the realm? He couldn't do it. The people didn't deserve it.

Unfortunately he had no way of telling Thor to stop it.

He sat by the fire in his current chambers and held Thor's knife in his hands.

"You need to stop now," he whispered. "It's beautiful, it's wonderful, I feel your love, but you need to stop."

That night, haunted by thoughts of Thor, Loki dreamed.

He dreamed that he stood on a flying machine. It moved through the air above a large ocean.

"Where am I?" Loki asked.

"Alfheim," Thor answered, rising from a seat and coming to stand by him as the warriors two (Hogun was missing) and Sif glanced in Loki's direction, trying to glimpse him. "I am still on my quest Loki, for you, but these people have need of my services, they face a great foe and I must stand with them to help them survive."

He looked guilty.

"I haven't forgotten you, I swear," he blurted out.

Loki smiled at him, at his relentless goodness.
"I understand Thor, I do, you do what you must," he said, reaching a hand up to cup Thor's cheek lovingly.

"I will find the emerald. After this coming battle the head sorcerer has promised to help me by using his many skills to try and track it."

Loki looked out again at the ocean, the sun was shining.

"You sent me rain," he said.

"I cannot think of you without the sky crying my grief, we have been without each other for a hundred years. I... I feel lost without you beside me," Thor said, his face filled with pain.

Loki looked back at him and swallowed hard.

"I need you to stop it," he said softly. "I don't want you to, I want to bath in your love forever, but the people of Vanaheim are suffering. It has been a year Thor, a year of continuous rain, the crops have failed, the roads are treacherous, people are getting sick. Please, for the sake of the people, I need you to stop."

Thor looked at him sadly.

"By your word alone I will stop," he said. "I will send the clouds away again."

Loki felt tears spring into his eyes.

"I love you," he said.

As the world around him faded, the sight of Thor's blue eyes remained in Loki's mind until the very last moment. They looked burdened with sadness, but through that sadness shone the light of love.

Loki woke, and tried not to cry. It had felt so real; all he wanted to do was fall asleep and never wake up so that he could stay there forever.

He turned his head to look at the rain and take comfort from it, but all he saw was a clear night.

The rain had stopped. The people rejoiced when they woke, and alone in his chambers, Loki cried.

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Four days after the rain stopped, the Progress entered the lands of Lord Fallconyr. It was their final stop, they would be spending just under six months at the Fallconyr castle before travelling back to the palace.

Loki was greeted by his grandmother, who drew him into a tight hug.

"Oh my dear boy you look so thin!" Lord Eadgleyr exclaimed. "Come inside so I can feed you."

"Now, now darling, Loki is hardly starving, we must do these things properly," Lord Fallconyr said, glancing at the King with a smile.

King Dimcken returned it. Lord Fallconyr was one of his oldest friends and he was looking forward to staying with him as he had occasionally done in the past.

"Greetings, Your Majesty," Lord Fallconyr said. "Greetings Your Grace Loki, Your Grace Dorgen, Your Grace Musleen, Your Grace Camtan, Your Grace Sofitia and Your Graceling Roaseia."
Welcome to our home."

"It is good to see you Fallconyr, we are all weary from the rain and the travel," King Dimcken said.

"Please come inside and relax," Lord Fallconyr said. "Dinner is being prepared even now for the court."

They followed him inside. Lord Eadgleyr kept his arm wrapped firmly around Loki's waist the whole way in.

"Your tea fields were looking well as we past them," King Dimcken commented. "The ones on the edge of the land looked yellow and rotten, but the ones closer in look healthy, the rain seems to have done them good."

Lord Fallconyr nodded. "We were lucky out here so close to the edge of the realm," he said. "The clouds would form and move inwards before they began to rain, a lot of our crops were saved from disaster."

"Hmm," King Dimcken said.

"Has there been any progress in finding out who cursed us?" Lord Fallconyr asked.

"None," Musleen said, sounding annoyed. "The sorcerers have come up with nothing."

"I'm sure you'll track down the culprit," Lord Eadgleyr said.

"I hope so, I was worn out travelling to the from our neighbour's fields," Lord Fallconyr said.

"What for?" King Dimcken asked, then stopped in realisation. "Of course, Fallconyr, you have weather magic, I can't believe I forgot!"

"I hardly ever used it Your Majesty, in fact, I hardly use it now, but when the rain came I did my best to save the food crops grown by Lord Plaentyen, as I felt that we would need them the most in the coming year."

"Sensible, very sensible, so you couldn't lift it then?" King Dimcken asked.

Lord Fallconyr sighed in disappointment, "No, sadly I was not strong enough, my power has always been mild, I could not stop it at all, only use the winds to blow it away, and even that almost killed me."

Loki felt a twinge of guilt, but it lifted a moment later when Lord Fallconyr snuck a wink in his direction.

Dinner that night was egged and floured pieces of chicken with spicy sauce, roast boar stew with roasted and steamed vegetables, and strawberry and cream pie for dessert. Loki ate well, under the approving gaze of Lord Eadgelyr.

After dinner they were shown to their chambers.

The castle was one of the oldest buildings still standing in Vanaheim, and as such had a chamber each for the Lord and Lady of the land.

Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgelyr were more modern in their thinking however, and slept in one set of chambers, leaving the other one for their eldest grandchild and his wife.
Now that the court had arrived, a certain amount of reshuffling took place. Loki found himself installed in his grandparent's rooms, while King Dimcken was settled in the other set. Both evicted couples had to be moved to somewhere else in the castle.

"I feel really guilty about this," Loki said to Fosxyr, who was putting away the last of his things.

"It's the nature of Progress," Fosxyr said cheerfully. Now that they were close to home he was very cheerful, his wide smile almost never left his face.

"I know, but this is my grandparent's room, I would be fine in another one," Loki said.

"His Majesty would be insulted if you were installed in anything other than the second best room, Your Grace. The Lady of the Castle's old chambers are yours by right."

Loki looked around him, most of the personal items had been removed, but the paintings and tapestries were still hanging on the walls. He saw an old portrait of the Fallconyr family on the wall. All thirteen children were crowded around their parents. Little Frigga was standing by her father's side and leaning against his legs.

"I've been thinking of taking some new lessons at the Tower when we get back," Loki said, studying the picture closely. Little Frigga looked like trouble.

"It will give that mind of yours something to do," Fosxyr said, "and I know you've been frustrated with your efforts with the lava stone."

"I have gone as far as I can with the books that I have, I need access to the Tower's library," Loki said.

He walked into bedroom and started pulling his robes off in preparation for bed, above the bed hung the marriage ropes of his grandparents. Loki stopped and just stared at them in a mixture of amusement and wonder.

They were so long that they had been looped multiple times around the hooks on the wall. Extensions had been added to the bottom several times, not in the traditional colours either, there was blue and yellow and purple with silver flecks.

'Someday I will have a rope with Thor so long it'll have every colour of the Bifrost.' Loki thought.

He dressed in his sleeping robe and climbed into his grandparent's bed. It was comfortable, and the mattress was soft.

"In half a year we will be back in the capital," Loki said with his arms behind his head as Fosxyr tucked the blankets in around him.

"Indeed we will Your Grace," he said.

"Until then, I hope I'll be allowed to help with the tea, I really enjoyed helping, in the fields, in the Properties Room, I'd like to do it again," Loki said.

"We'll see how things go, Your grace," Fosxyr said softly, dimming the lights.

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Lord Fallconyr appeared to have taken it upon himself to keep King Dimcken busy. He arranged, among other things, for their old friends to visit, some of whom had not left the capital in centuries.
The 'oldies', as Haewkyr dubbed them with loving disrespect, kept to one of the living rooms and drank exceptional wine while they played card games for high stakes.

This left the younger members of the royal family to their own devices for most of the days.

Loki spent his time riding with Haewkyr out to the fences. He came back each day with a glow in his cheeks and dust in his hair. He gained a little weight, which looked good on him, all the travel had given him a lean look, and his eyes had become dull in recent years.

Now though he positively glowed with life and health. He would ride away each day with Haewkyr and his other cousins for company. They would ride to a spot just out of sight of the castle, then he would jump down and change into trousers while Haewkyr changed over Lightning's saddle. Loki would then mount back up astride and urge Lightning into a gallop.

His cousins would try to keep up with him, but no horse was as fast as Lightning, he was the Thor of horses.

They were some of Loki's happiest days on the whole Progress.

One day, when Loki went out into the yard, he saw Musleen saddled up and ready to go.

"Are you going riding today?" he asked, reaching a hand up to greet Lightning.

"I was wondering if I might join you," Musleen said. "I haven't seen much of you at all since we arrived here."

"I am catching up with my cousins," Loki said.

"I know, and I wouldn't want you to stop, but I was hoping that for today I might go with you," Musleen repeated.

His horse was already saddled.

"Of course," Loki said, and got Lightning ready.

There were five of them in the group. Haewkyr led them out towards the south fields.

"We've got three known problem areas, and I want to check along the length in case there are any others," Haewkyr said.

They reached an area beyond the view of the castle.

"Loki? Do you want to get changed?" Haewkyr asked.

Loki glanced at Musleen, but only for a second, he trusted him not to tell.

"Yes," he said and climbed down.

Musleen watched without comment as Loki pulled on a pair of trousers and a shirt, before mounting back up astride.

They headed off towards the south fields at an easy canter. Loki could feel Lightning’s desire to gallop already building, but they had to wait until they had reached the fallow fields.

Musleen came up beside him, “You ride well like that,” he said.
“I learnt to ride like this,” Loki answered. “It’s riding side on I’m not as good at.”

“I’m the opposite,” Musleen said. “I’ve never been able to keep my balance longer than a few minutes, it just feels all wrong.”

Loki grinned at him, they were coming up to the fallow fields.

“Race you,” he said and urged Lightning into a gallop.

They tore through the barren earth as fast as they could. Lightning easily outstripped the others, although Musleen came second. They were laughing by the time they reached the fences.

Haewkyr unpacked the materials they would need to fix the broken pieces and they set to work under his direction. Musleen was competent and capable, a fact that did not escape notice.

“You should come and work here, Your Grace,” Haewkyr said.

Musleen shook his head, “I am a city-man at heart,” he said. “I live for the plots and the intrigues, but it would be nice to come here sometime for a holiday.”

“We’ll put you to work,” Haewkyr said.

Musleen smiled, “Good, I hate being idle.”

They spent the day fixing up the fences, before returning to the castle, stopping along the way to swap Loki’s saddle back to side-on.
Loki and the others arrived back from their ride to find King Dimcken waiting for them.

The King was not in a good mood.

"Loki!" he barked as Loki pulled up. "I have had a report that you were galloping!"

Loki felt his heart start to race.

"N-no Husband, Lightning can't gallop," he said.

"You have rather distinctive hair my dear," King Dimcken said. "A dark-haired man was seen galloping astride with a group of others across the fields. You were doing something far too dangerous!"

Loki shook his head. It was important, when lying, to stick to your story.

"N-no Husband, Lightning can't gallop," he said.

"You have rather distinctive hair my dear," King Dimcken said. "A dark-haired man was seen galloping astride with a group of others across the fields. You were doing something far too dangerous!"

Loki shook his head. It was important, when lying, to stick to your story.

"Lightning isn't saddled with an astride saddle Husband," he said.

King Dimcken's eyes flickered down to Loki's saddle and back up. He was still frowning.

"Dark hair is not common among the Vanir population," he argued.

"But dark hats are, if you will forgive my intrusion Your Majesty," Haewkyr said quickly, holding up a black hat. "I ride astride, and while I find it odd to think that I might be mistaken for my cousin, I *was* wearing a dark hat today, if seen from a distance, perhaps the person was mistaken."

King Dimcken narrowed his eyes at the hat in Haewkyr's hands.

Loki waited nervously, although a slight part of his mind was wondering where Haewkyr got the hat. He certainly hadn't been wearing it that day.

"Get off the horse," King Dimcken said to Loki. "We will soon see if there is any truth to what Sir Teillyr saw."

Loki dismounted. King Dimcken pointed to one of his guards, "Mount up," he ordered, "and gallop."

The guard mounted up as Loki tried not to look nervous. Lightning turned to look at the guard sitting
on him and snorted in what seemed very much like derision.

Loki saw Haewkyr dismount and slip behind, rather than in front of, Lightning to make his way to the steps.

The guard urged Lightning into a canter around the yard. When he got clear of the people he tried to urge Lightning into a gallop.

Lightning made as if to start then abruptly stopped, slowing to a walk. The guard tried again twice more with the same result. On the fourth try, Lightning stopped walking altogether and turned to look at him in what Loki would swear was disgust.

King Dimcken sighed in annoyance. "Wasting my time," he muttered.

Then he turned to Loki. "It seems Sir Teillyr was mistaken, I will have him punished for making trouble," he said.

"I'm sure it was an innocent mistake Husband," Loki said quickly, "He was certainly only thinking of my safety."

King Dimcken snorted, reminding Loki faintly of Lightning. "Then he should have been sure, my time is very precious."

"It is Husband," Loki said. "He won't be so silly as to make the same mistake again."

"He won't after I've spoken to him," King Dimcken said darkly, and turned to go away inside without acknowledging Loki further.

After he was gone, Haekwyr quietly handed the black hat back to Musleen, who tucked it back into his pocket.

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There was an unfortunate outcome to Loki’s new, healthier glow. King Dimcken had noticed the colour in his cheeks and the extra weight filling out his leaner areas. Over dinner each night, which were often held in the great hall, he would cast admiring glances at his young wife, licking his lips without realising it as he fell headlong back into lust.

Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr kept the King busy all day with talk and food and, importantly, plenty of wine. For over a month King Dimcken looked but was far too tipsy to touch, at least, as much as he would like to. Loki was forced to endure a few kisses, but in front of Loki’s grandparents the King had an extra reason to be conservative.

Until one day, when King Dimcken deliberately stuck to tea. He was tired of having something so desirable dangled in front of him without being able to grasp it. He drank only a little with his dinner, and when he was done and changed for the evening, he walked down the short passage to where Loki was getting ready for bed.

“Wife? Oh Wife? I wish to see you!” he called out cheerfully.

Inside, Loki and Fosxyr froze in place.

“Of course Husband,” Loki forced himself to say.

Fosxyr gave him a glance of sympathy and went to open the door.
King Dimcken stepped in and looked at Loki hungrily.

“I have missed you Wife,” he said. “I want you beneath me.”

Loki suppressed a shudder and spoke.

“Of course Husband, shall we go to your chambers?”

“How about I take you right here?” King Dimcken suggested.

In his grandparents bedroom? ‘Please no.’ Loki thought. But what options did he have? The King could do what he liked.

“Would you not prefer to lie under our own marriage ropes Husband?” Loki asked as King Dimcken backed him towards the bed.

The King’s gaze travelled briefly upwards, then back to Loki’s face.

“I think,” he said with a sleazy smile, “that it would take too long to get there.”

Then he plastered his mouth against Loki’s and began tugging at Loki’s nightshirt.

Loki let himself be pushed back onto the bed. He wanted to scream at the King for doing this, how could he even look his grandparents in the eye knowing what he was about to do? But there was no choice. They had shown over and over that they understood that, well, this would put their convictions to the test.

King Dimcken barely waited for Loki to slicken before he pressed himself inside. It hurt a little, but Loki managed not to cry out.

Afterwards Loki lay on one side of the bed and stared at the ceiling as King Dimcken snored beside him, yet another little humiliation to add to the growing pile. Would there ever come a time when Loki just ran out of embarrassment and humiliation? There was a part of him that kind of hoped so, although another part of him felt that if it ever happened then he would never be able to come back from it.

Mostly he just hoped that the King died before Loki was broken entirely.

With that wish in his mind, Loki drifted off to sleep.

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It started with a little cough, utterly unremarkable in any way, except that it persisted for a few days before it eventually went away.

Unless you were quite old, or fairly young, then the tiny cough would grow, and deepen. After that it would shake your entire body until you were exhausted, after that, if you were lucky, it would recede. If you were unlucky, you would die.

It began in the north some months prior, and slowly made its way down south until it reached the capital. From there it was only a matter of time before it was carried by the messengers to the lands of Lord Fallconyr.

It started with a little cough...

Lord Eadgleyr was the first to start coughing, but within a day all of the ‘oldies’ were also affected.
They had spent all of their time together, and the messenger had delivered the news of the capital to the King in their presence.

The healer sent them all to bed, with instructions to remain there and rest. Owelyr brought his parents strengthening tea and instructed the kitchens to make nourishing soups.

"You'll be fine," he said, "you're both strong, just rest and you'll get over this in no time."

Lord Fallconyr tried to respond but was overtaken by a fit of coughing.

"Don't try to do anything except rest, I'll handle everything," Owelyr assured him.

Weallia, their third daughter and the healer for the area, moved back into the castle and set up a healer's area for the populous to come and seek aid.

"This thing is quite mild for most, but it has the potential to go bad," she said seriously. "The year of rain hasn't helped, as everyone has spent a lot of time together indoors with has helped it spread more easily."

Loki spent his time sitting by the King's bedside, being a good wife. He read while the King slept and talked quietly to him when he was awake.

"Dorgen and Musleen are handling everything," he assured King Dimcken. "The healer says to rest as much as you can and don't stress yourself with worry."

King Dimcken nodded wearily, he didn't try to talk. His every attempt left him coughing and breathless.

The head healer barely left the King's side for days as the illness took hold.

Day by day, others became ill. For most it was a mild complaint, Haewkyr didn't even spend any time in bed, but for the very old and the very young, it was terrible.

Little Roaseia was isolated from the rest of the castle by her parents. Even after so many years their memory of the poisoning made them paranoid, and they kept her inside with only them for company while the illness took hold. She wasn't the only one, many people with small children had taken them out to the country while the castle dealt with the illness. Children were so few and far between that no one blamed any parents for being overly cautious.

Loki started coughing about a week after the King was struck down. He had a mild sore throat, but was not otherwise bothered by his illness. Less than a week later he was already recovering.

Not so the King, who struggled to breathe at night and coughed almost nonstop throughout the day.

Lord Fallconyr was the first to recover. He had been weakened by the illness and needed help to reach his chair by the fire, but he was past the danger.

Lord Eadgleyr was not far behind him, breathing easily and gently only a day later.

Still the King languished.

Loki sat by his side and acted as nursemaid while he tried to keep the smile off his face. King Dimcken was very sick, he might even die. Loki was certain that, as the illness had no magical origin, he would be able to argue that it was natural causes. In his mind he rehearsed what he was going to say to Odin, the arguments he'd make, the precedents that he'd use.
In the meantime he was the perfect wife. No one would be able to say that he had caused trouble or mischief while the King lay ill.

Three weeks after the illness had begun it had run its course through the castle, there were only two people who remained ill, one was Lord Loawyr, who was even older than King Dimcken, and one was the King, whose skinny frame had turned frail as it tried to fight off the virus that wracked it.

The mood was dim in the castle. Meals were still eaten in the hall, but there was no music or merriment. People spoke in low, serious tones, children were encouraged to play quiet games.

The King, it seemed, was dying.

When the head healer spoke quietly to Dorgen, Musleen and Camtan and urged them to make their final peace with their father, just in case, they nodded seriously and ordered the shipwrights in the capital to stand ready for orders.

Loki sat by the King's side as his son came in to see him.

"Father," Musleen said respectfully. "I will not lie to you, the healer is worried for your health, know that I will take good care of of the courts, I will uphold our laws and the security of our nation."

King Dimcken, pale and weak, looked up at him with a worried expression, he reached out and grasped Musleen's wrist weakly.

"Keep your brother from ruining my realm," he rasped.

Musleen's face went carefully blank as behind him, Dorgen looked furious.

"Father, I will tell Roaseia many stories about you, she'll know of her grandfather," Camtan said.

King Dimcken looked at him.

"You help Musleen," he managed.

"Father," Dorgen began, struggling to keep his voice in check.

"This realm needs a strong king," King Dimcken rasped. "Pity all it has is you."

Musleen and Camtan looked at the floor. Loki looked out of the window.

Dorgen's eyes narrowed.

"If only my Norbleen was here," King Dimcken muttered, wheezing between weak breaths. "He was a son to be proud of, a king to be... proud of."

"I'm so sorry to have disappointed you Father," Dorgen said through gritted teeth.

"Well you... have," King Dimcken said. "You're... weak, your... children... are weak, their mother... filth. You should never have... disobeyed me... about her."

Dorgen's eyes flashed. "She is a thousand times better than you," he growled menacingly. "She will be the greatest queen this realm has ever seen, and they will speak of her greatness long after you have been forgotten you horrible old goat."

Loki winced as Musleen shot Dorgen a warning look, but it was too late, the words had been said.
"Get out," gasped the King, "get out!" He began coughing heavily.

Dorgen turned on his heel and left, Musleen and Camtan hesitated for a second before running after him.

Loki stayed behind and held the King’s hand, wishing very much that he could have added his piece to Dorgen's sentiment.

He sat by the King's side instead, and waited for his freedom.

The following morning when the healer checked on King Dimcken, he was barely breathing, but he wasn't coughing either.

Two days later, after hovering near death, King Dimcken began to breathe more easily, and Loki began to worry.

Four days after that he was able to sit up in bed, and Loki began to cry.

Eight days after that he was back in the great hall, eating at his first public appearance since getting ill.

Loki sat beside him and tried to look happy.

Earlier that day Haewkyr had come up to him in the stables and just hugged him, without saying a word.

King Dimcken and Dorgen were now openly hostile with one another, with the King banning his son from the workroom meetings, and Dorgen refusing to apologise for standing up for his wife.

He packed his bags and left for the capital a few days later. Musleen and Camtan watched him go with worried expressions.

Lord Fallconyr did his best to restore the King's mood. With Dorgen out of his sight, King Dimcken brightened noticeably, and seemed cheerful in public.

In private he raged, often to Loki, about the fate of the realm under 'that cowardly, dishonourable, excuse for a son'.

“I don’t understand why the King hates him so much,” Loki said to Lord Fallconyr in the Properties Room one day. “I know that he doesn’t live up to Prince Norbleen, but he is a good, sensible man in his own right, he won’t lead the realm to ruin.”

Lord Fallconyr looked at him seriously for a moment. “I am not certain that it is my place to say,” he said, “but I trust you Loki, to keep this between us.”

Loki nodded seriously. “Whatever it is, I will,” he said.

Lord Fallconyr took a deep breath and sighed.

“Prince Dorgen was in the marketplace when Thanos attacked. He was one of the first to be corrupted, as was his entire retinue. He was still just a boy really, not yet reached his majority, only started looking at girls seriously. It didn’t matter, Thanos drafted anyone he could into his army, there were *toddlers* with knives running around trying to kill for him.

Norbleen fought for Vanaheim, as did all who weren’t affected. It was during the final battle, when the Aesir were pushing back against Thanos and had almost reached him, when Norbleen came
across Dorgen among the crowd.

Norbleen loved his half-brother, and didn’t want to hurt him. That was his weakness, for those who fought under Thanos’ spell were driven to kill, and kill Dorgen did. He ran Prince Norbleen through with his sword, mere moments before Odin struck to final blow against Thanos, breaking the spell.

Prince Norbleen died in Dorgen’s arms. He’s never gotten over it, not truly, Dorgen idolised his brother. He loved him more than anyone else in Vanheim. His elevation to Crown Prince was not something he could easily reconcile with what he’d done, so he dedicated himself to being the best possible future king, in Norbleen’s memory. The King was so devastated by Norbleen’s death that he has failed to see the man Dorgen became. He will be a very good king one day.”

Loki was silent for a long time, absorbing the tragic knowledge.

“Does the King know what happened?” he asked.

“No, he believes Norbleen was killed in the fighting by a random person.” Lord Fallconyr said.

“How do you know all this?” Loki asked.

Lord Fallconyr looked at him seriously. “I was the one who found them. The last eyes Prince Norbleen looked into before his death were mine. It was I who took Dorgen’s sword, made for him by the palace smiths and wielded by him as Thanos’ victim, and replaced it with one a grabbed from the ground. It almost broke me to run through such a great man, but the last words his lips tried to shape were ‘protect my brother’. He could not make a sound, but I knew the words when I saw them on his bloodied lips. I did what I had to, and Dorgen has been unable to look me in the eye since. I try to spare him as much as I can and stay away from his company.”

“He let his temper rule him, and now the King is angry with him,” Loki said.

“Yes,” Lord Fallconyr replied, “he will have to watch his back very carefully.”

Loki looked shocked. “He wouldn’t,” he whispered, knowing his grandfather would know to whom he was referring.

“He damn well might, he prefers young Musleen, he’s said as much to me just this last week. Whenever he spoke of the future he would speak of Musleen’s responsibilities, Musleen’s difficult road ahead. You tell Dorgen to be careful, I should hate to see my promise to a great man broken because of his own father,” Lord Fallconyr said, “and you be careful too,” he added. “The King seems different somehow, I worry about his mental state, don’t put yourself into harm’s way whatever you do.”

“I promise grandfather,” Loki said, “I will do all that I can to stay safe.”

When their time came to an end at Lord Fallconyr's estates, Loki said a tearful goodbye to all of his cousins. Lord Eadgleyr promised that he and Lord Fallconyr would be coming up to the capital soon, and Lord Fallconyr gave him a box of different teas that he'd been working on. Of all the places that Loki had stayed, this was the place he'd most enjoyed. But it was time to head back to the capital, for the one hundred year anniversary celebrations.

One hundred years.

One hundred.

A century.
One hundred years without Thor.

Back for the first night, and alone in his enormous chambers in the palace, Loki wept.
The first few days back in the palace were actually kind of dull. It was a flurry of activity for the servants, who had to put everything back and find places for new things and resettle back into their working lives, but for Loki, there was little to do.

He went out to one of the gardens instead to check on the progress of the King’s present.

Six months earlier he had asked King Dimcken if he might be allowed to install something ‘extremely large’ in one of the gardens.

King Dimcken had asked him what it was that he wanted to put in there.

Loki had told him that it was a surprise present for their anniversary and that he would tell the King if he insisted, but that he would prefer that it remain a surprise.

King Dimcken granted Loki permission and promised not to ask again, although it didn’t stop him from dropping hints occasionally.

Loki had refused to tell him without a direct order, and now a gigantic statue of the King was just being given its last polish before it was due to be unveiled.

Loki hated it, but King Dimcken would love it, and right now with the King’s shifting temper, that was the only thing that mattered.

It was modelled on a much smaller statue, which incidentally had been carved when the King was quite a bit younger, which should flatter his vanity.

Loki sat and watched the servants polishing it for a while before getting up and heading back to his chambers.

“Fosxyr?” he asked when he arrived.

“Yes Your Grace?” Fosxyr asked with a smile.

The place looked like a catastrophe had struck, but there were small areas of order where the servants had made headway.

“I’m going out to visit Thainia for a while,” Loki said, “Just in case anyone wants me, I’ll be at the
city hospital.”

“If anyone asks I will be sure to tell them Your Grace,” Fosxyr said.

Loki rode Lightning, accompanied by two guardsmen, through the streets to the largest hospital in the capital. Over the years Thainia had written to him regularly, and had updated him on the progress she was making with her studies.

She had qualified as a surgeon-healer fifty years before, specializing in children, she was one of Vanaheim’s most promising young healers, and had been put in charge of her own ward at a very young age.

Now Loki would get to see her in action.

He dismounted and left Lightning with the groomsmen, taking a deep breath as he headed inside. Hospitals were strange places, a whole building full of sick people all at the same time just seemed odd somehow, but then Loki’s life had always been privileged. In Asgard the palace healers had their own wing and only treated the court. Vanaheim’s royal healers were the same. Most nobles had a family healer; hospitals were for the common folk.

He wandered inside and up to what looked like a front desk. The woman behind it looked up and paled in shock.

“Hello,” Loki said.

Her response was a slight squeak.

“I was hoping to find Thainia Cursdottir, do you know where she might be?” he continued.

The woman swallowed hard and tried to smile, she looked nervous.

“Your Grace, I will call her, Your Grace, at once… Your Grace,” she stammered and reached for a communication stone.

It was only a few minutes later that Thainia came flying down the stairs to meet him. The guards made as if to stop her but Loki stepped forwards and pulled her into a tight hug.

“You look so grown up!” he exclaimed.

“It’s the robes, they give me far more authority than I would have had otherwise,” she replied, grinning at him widely. “Daenceia said the court had arrived back, did you enjoy the Progress?”

“I saw the beauty of Vanaheim,” Loki said. “This realm is a jewel, a treasure, and I saw most of it.”

“You must tell me all about it,” she said. “There’s a lunchroom here just down the hall, we can go there and catch up. Your friends can get something to drink.”

“My-“ Loki turned and realised that she meant his guards. “Yes, if they want to.”

They settled at a table in the corner, the guards declined a drink and stood close enough to protect without disturbing as Loki and Thainia caught up. Loki told her all about his travels and she told him all about her work at the hospital.

“You have no idea what you’ve given me Loki,” she said to him. “My life would never have taken this path without you, and there are so many people attending the Tower now that wouldn’t have made it before. You’ve even started a trend; some of the nobles have begun sponsoring promising
young women and men from their lands to attend the Tower. It’s amazing to see them all now. We get together sometimes, us old ones and the new, to support each other with the challenges of studying with our varying backgrounds.”

Loki smiled, “I’m glad to hear I’ve made a difference, seidr is… important. I don’t care what those warriors think, without seidr we would be no better than the mortals on Midgard, they live in huts of clay and dirt, most of them. I’ve heard that even the more powerful among them only live in wooden halls of just one room. Seidr is what pushed us out of the mud, it should be respected.”

“You’ll get no argument from me Loks,” Thainia said.

Loki blinked at the nickname, “No one has called me that in a long time,” he said.

Not since Shiarpia, and he had parted ways with her so many years ago now, which Thainia knew all too well.

“She’s changed a lot since you last spoke to her,” Thainia said, watching him carefully. “I think she grew up.”

Loki sighed, “We did not part on the best of terms, she… you know what? It doesn’t matter, we’re not friends, it’s better that way anyway, safer, I know her uncle prefers that we do not talk.”

Thainia looked at him seriously. “She still lives in the same house, with her parents, the one near the theatre.”

Loki shook his head, “Tell me about your work with the children,” he said, changing the subject.

****

King Dimcken sent for Loki the following morning. He asked him to meet him in a corridor on the ground floor of the palace. Loki arrived to find Musleen and Camtan waiting there as well.

“Any ideas?” Camtan asked them both.

“None whatsoever,” Loki said.

Musleen looked down and didn’t quite manage to hide a chuckle.

“What?” Camtan asked. “You know, don’t you?”

“I suspect,” Musleen corrected. “He sent the orders to have it done years ago, I think it’s ready.”

King Dimcken appeared a moment later and surveyed them all with a grin.

“Loki, my boys, come inside and see,” he said grandly, opening the door.

It was a bathhouse. Twice the size of Lord Eveilyr’s, tiled in varying shades of blue, white and green, with a large statue of Loki as a mermaid in the middle.

“Good look for you,” Musleen muttered to Loki as they took in the room.

Loki shot him a look but couldn’t reply as the King had hooked an arm around his waist and was leading him away.

“You boys go and get your bathers,” he called out, “Loki and I will take a tour of the pools while you are gone.”
Musleen and Camtan gave their father a bow and left the room.

“...I want you right now,” King Dimcken said in Loki’s ear.

Loki felt horrified.

“Husband… won’t they be back very soon?” he asked nervously.

“I think that’s half the fun, don’t you my dear?” King Dimcken replied, already tugging Loki’s robes up.

In the end, what could he do? His husband wanted sex, Loki had to comply. At least King Dimcken led him to a concealed area behind some fake rocks so that they couldn’t be immediately seen when the Princes returned.

Loki looked up at the tiled ceiling as he was thrust into. His imagine appeared above them in the faces of the mermaids, the King’s appeared in the faces of the Vanir swimmers in a massive picture spanning the length and breadth of the room.

It was a disgusting sight to Loki’s eyes, his rape immortalised in a series of loving images for years, possibly the rest of his life.

He hoped Dorgen would order it to be removed once the King was dead.

They were finished by the time Musleen and Camtan returned. King Dimcken had been eager and had not lasted long. He handed Loki a pair of bathers when he was done and told him to go and swim about and enjoy himself.

Loki forced a smile onto his face and went to race against Musleen across the length of the longest pool.

****

Daenceia was working in the Tower when Loki arrived. Her initial fears about running his scholarship program had proved groundless as over the years she had taken to it with great skill and competence.

She had a little office there, for when she wasn’t with her dancing troop.

“Loki!” she exclaimed loudly when he appeared at her door. She jumped up and grabbed him tightly. “It’s so good to see you, letters are just not the same.”

“No,” Loki said, “they’re not. How have you been Daenceia?”

“Wonderful, everything is wonderful, do you know that the defence training that Prince Musleen’s guard gave me has really helped my dancing skills? I did not realise how closely aligned they were, and your program has over fifty students all studying at the moment, it’s incredible. Although once word got out about the heterwart trade there have been some other mages setting up competing businesses, but that’s okay because the graduates are helping out! Loki they give the program money to keep it going! And the professors here try to buy their heterwart from us anyway, because they want their students to be able to study. Your Uncle Smiartyr is very clever also, and—“

“Try breathing Daenceia, I think it will suit you,” Loki said, laughing. “This is all good news to hear. I cannot wait to sit down and catch up properly.”
“You can’t stay for a while?” Daenceia asked, sounding disappointed.

Loki shook his head, “I have to be back at the palace by lunchtime, and a wanted to speak to Horrseen about taking some more classes. I’ll be quite an old student now, you’ve all finished.”

Daenceia laughed, “Don’t you believe it Loki, the Tower teaches many things at many levels, there are students older than the King, you’ll blend right back in, although you will have to find some new friends to sit and have lunch with.”

Loki smiled at her, “Not another gaggle of girls,” he said dramatically.

Daenceia hit him n the arm lightly. “None of that,” she said, “Us *women* are what make the nine realms worth living in, and you’d better believe it.”

“They believe you,” Loki said with a straight face, although it was the straight face of a man who was still teasing her. She knew it too and struggled not to laugh.

“I have to go,” Loki said regretfully, “but I will see you again soon, maybe we can go out one night with Thainia.”

“I heard that the Thunder Boys were back from their four-realm tour,” Daenceia said. “We could go and see them.”

Loki grinned, “Perfect,” he said.

****

King Dimcken had been denied his big, outdoor one-year anniversary. He had clearly decided to make up for this by turning his one-hundredth year anniversary into a gigantic spectacle for the masses.

The preparations had been going on for months as the Progress wound its way slowly home. The streets had been relayed some time earlier, but now they were cleaned and polished with a golden lustre. Decorations were everywhere, and the fountains were made to run with white wine.

Loki thought it looked like the water had been contaminated, but King Dimcken liked it.

Then there were the guests. Royalty and nobility had come from every possible realm, even Alfheim, despite their current troubles with the underground spirits who had been trying to boil the oceans. When the ruler of Alfheim thanked Odin for the help of his son Thor, King Dimcken’s grip on Loki’s hand tightened until it was painful.

Odin deflected the comment as best he could. Loki knew all too well that he had not sent Thor, in a hundred years Thor had not spoken to his father once.

The nobility ate in the main garden, where the guards very carefully kept the commoners out. The servants ran to and fro with trays of wines and different foods.

Loki walked along next to the King and tried to look happy. His time riding in the fields had left him with a glow on his skin and a little bit of weight in his cheeks, both of which looked good on him. The crowds who gathered to see their King and his young consort cheered loudly whenever they came into view.

Later on there was entertainment, dancers and acrobats, jugglers, illusionists and firebreathers. Loki saw Daenceia and would have given her a wave but she was in the middle of her routine and he
didn't want to distract her.

Musleen was standing a little way away, apparently watching the play going on opposite her. It took Loki all of a minute to spot the mirrored wall at the end of the stage which afforded the second prince a good view of the dancing behind him.

King Dimcken, despite the reminder of Odin's 'unwillingness' to help with the year of rain, was in a very good mood. His people were all happy and the other realms had sent hundreds of very rare, very expensive gifts. He had already magnanimously instructed the servants to give all the 'magical stuff' to Loki, as his consort liked that sort of thing.

He was also looking forward to his surprise. Loki had asked for a section of the garden by the palace, and he was excited to see what his consort was going to give him.

Loki looked beautiful tonight. He was so desirable, it pleased the King to be on the arm of someone who everyone wanted but no one could have.

Loki tried to keep an eye out for Frigga, he had not seen her since her arrival at the bifrost site. He knew that tonight he must stay on the arm of the King, in the same way she had to stay near Odin, and that any talking or catching up would have to be done later, but he still wanted to see her.

It would have to wait though, first there was an entire night to get through. Loki put a smile on his face and waved to the crowds, who scream out blessings for him and for the King.

****

The celebrations lasted until the early morning, it only died down when the sun started to rise, which was taken as a cue to head to bed.

Musleen stood under the shower in his bathing room and let the cool water wash away the sweat of the party. Baths were more common in Vanaheim, but Musleen preferred the quickness of a shower, it allowed him to get on with other, more important things.

His hair needed cutting, it was starting to get that ridiculous curl on the ends. The briefest flash of envy for Camtan's straighter, thinner locks flashed across his mind, but he dismissed it just as quickly. There was no sense in dwelling on the unchangeable, especially not when it could be fixed with a simple haircut.

He stepped out from under the water and pulled a towel around his waist. Things at the celebrations had gone well from a security perspective. His guards had maintained order throughout the night.

Musleen's thoughts turned to Loki, who right now would be in the King's chambers, finishing the celebrations with what Musleen considered a gross violation of Loki's rights.

But there was nothing he could do. Just like with his own mother.

Musleen's memories of his mother were a little better than Camtan's. This was partly because he was slightly older, but he had also always been the more observant of the two, and from an early age he had paid close attention to what went on around him.

Camtan's favourite memories were of the parties, of their mother dressed in the finest robes as she laughed and enchanted everyone around her.

Musleen's favourite memories were of quieter times.
On the rare nights when she was not with their father, the queen would put her children to bed herself. She would help them change into their nightshirts, tuck them in, read them stories and sing them soothing songs until they fell asleep.

Musleen loved those songs. They had been the songs of the common people, the little nursery rhymes and folk songs of a people Musleen had, at that early age, never even seen except for in the distance.

Camtan would fall asleep first, and Musleen would have her all to himself for a little while. She would sit on the bed next to him and stroke his hair gently until he fell asleep.

When her affair had been discovered, Musleen had been at his lessons. It was a whole two days before he was told that something had happened, but Musleen had always been observant and had noticed straight away that Fosxyr was worried, his mother was nowhere to be found, and the palace gossip had increased with whispers of something terrible.

Two days later Dorgen had come in and sat both of his little brothers in his lap. They were too big for such things really, and Camtan had wanted to sit in a chair, but Dorgen ignored him and held them both tightly as he told them that their mother had been arrested for treason.

They had clung to him for an hour after that, and he had held on just as tightly.

The King had made them go to the trial. Musleen and Camtan had stood side by side as their mother had been dragged into the courtroom. Fosxyr stood behind them with one hand on each of their shoulders. His grip was so tight that it was painful, but it did the job of keeping them in place.

She had been beaten and the bruises showed on her face and arms. She had been taken while in bed and was still in her nightshirt, it was dirty, and her golden hair hung about her face in filthy strands.

Musleen watched with a strange kind of detachment. It was as though he was watching a play, his mother couldn’t *really* be on trial.

But as the charges were read out, reality sunk in. Camtan began to cry, and Fosxyr had pulled him back and wrapped an arm around him.

Musleen stood stoically. Afterwards one of his teachers had praised him for his ‘noble manner’. Musleen had taken the praise with a serious face, before collecting dog shit from the yard and leaving it in the man’s bed.

When the King pronounced a sentence of death on his wife, and instructed the guards to take her to the execution grounds to be left for the wolves, she had looked, not at the husband that she had betrayed, not at the nobles who were delighted that the ‘commoner’ had been shown her place at last, but at her children, at Musleen.

Their eyes had locked, blue to blue, and he read her apology as easily as if she’d shouted it. Because of her mistake she was about to leave him and his brother without a mother for the rest of their lives, and the pain in her gaze would stay with him forever.

Camtan had screamed, and the King had shouted at Fosxyr to take them away now that ‘justice’ had been done.

Musleen had stayed up all night that night. He’d sat in bed next to Camtan and sang to his little brother for hours until he finally cried himself to sleep.

Without really meaning to, Musleen had learnt two important lessons that day.
One, that 'justice' was not something that should be subject to the whim of one man, even if he was a king, and two, that you couldn't choose who you fell in love with, nor should you be punished for it.

And that was why, when Musleen had spotted Daenceia with a nice-looking young man during the celebrations, he had not shouted or yelled or made a scene, he had not tried to pull her away from him and beg her to take a chance on him, a chance that might take another two hundred years or more before they could even find out if they could have something together, and he had not allowed himself to be angry with her, or to blame the sharp pain he felt inside on her finding happiness without him.

Her heart was her own, it was ridiculous to believe that he had the right to it, the privilege, maybe, one day, if he earned it, but not the right.

He had walked away instead, and involved himself with the security arrangements.

Now though, in the privacy of his chambers, Musleen allowed himself the luxury of hating the man's stupid nose, before he forced himself to put it out of his mind.

Maybe it wasn't serious, maybe he was just a friend, it wasn't as though Musleen could have spoken to her anyway, not when it would have been so easy for someone to see him and report it back to the King. He'd just wanted to glance at her, to see her again after so long.

She'd never said anything about a man in her letters, although granted those had only ever been filled with news of the city, information on crime and security concerns that he might find useful. He had over four hundred agents who had sent him news from across the realm.

He didn't tear their letters open the second he got them though. He didn't look over his shoulder before sniffing their letters to see if there was a trace of perfume on them like he did with hers.

It was too risky to do anything, she was young, it probably wasn't serious, he had to wait, she would be reporting in person again soon.

He really wanted to kiss her.

Alone, and frustrated in more ways than one, Musleen pulled his nightshirt on and tried to go to sleep.
Loki woke the next day in the late morning, he was in the King’s chambers, where, fortunately for him, King Dimcken had been too tried at the end of the celebrations to do any more than kiss him for a little while. He lay in the soft glow of the sun that crept through the drawn curtains and looked over at his sleeping husband.

‘Bastard,’ Loki thought viciously.

He rose and slipped from the bedroom. Frigga would be going home today and Loki wanted to see her. He headed back to his chambers and bathed quickly, it was almost lunchtime already.

He sent Fosxyr to inquire as to Frigga’s whereabouts and discovered that she was in her parent’s chambers. She, and they, sent Fosxyr back with an invitation for Loki to join them for lunch.

Loki was halfway there when he was stopped by Hieddenyr, who looked at him regretfully.

“His Majesty wants to see you Your Grace,” he said.

Loki fought to keep the look of alarm from his face. “Can’t you say you can’t find me?” he blurted out without thinking.

Hieddenyr didn’t say anything as Loki paled in horror at what he’d said.

“I-“ he began.

“I could have a little trouble Your Grace, but I would have to find you eventually,” Hieddenyr said with regret in his voice.

“I assume you already went to my chambers and asked Fosxyr where I was?” Loki asked.

Hieddenyr nodded.

“Can you delay until I’m with my grandparents, I just want to see my mother before she has to go,” Loki was practically pleading.

Hieddenyr nodded. “I will be along shortly Your grace,” he said.

Loki fled down the corridors as fast as he could. He reached the chambers rented by his grandparents
and knocked quickly on the door.

It was opened by their servant, a woman called Darrlia.

“Your Grace,” she said as she stood back to let him inside.

Frigga rose with a smile of delight on her face that immediately became a look of concern.

“Loki what’s wrong?” she asked.

Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr both went to rise at her words.

“The King has requested my presence, his servant will arrive any minute to deliver the message, I just wanted to see you,” Loki said.

Frigga pulled him into her arms. “I can come back and visit, now that you are back here again,” she reminded him gently.

“I wanted to see you today,” Loki whispered in her arms, there were tears forming in his eyes. “I came so close mother, so close, he was, was…”

“Don’t you start crying now,” Frigga said, although she hugged him tighter, as though she was trying to squeeze the pain out of him. “You will survive this.”

There was a knock on the door. Everyone shot a glare at it, which Loki thought was very unfair to poor Hieddenyr.

Darrlia opened the door and the servant stepped inside. He bowed deeply to everyone before delivering his message.

“I beg your pardons Your Graces, Your Lordsirs, but His Majesty requires His Grace Loki for lunch.”

Loki gave his mother another hard hug and turned to go.

“I will stay tonight,” Frigga said suddenly, “I will stay with my parents, and we shall have dinner together.”

“I would love to accept your offer,” Loki said, “but the King often wants me to dine with him in the evenings.”

“Well *I’m* not leaving until I get some time with you. I’m your mother and I will not be moved,” Frigga said firmly. “Please let him know of my intentions.”

Loki smiled then, it was a small smile, like a tiny crack of sunlight peeking through the clouds, but it was there.

“I will tell him,” he said and left them.

King Dimcken was not in a good mood when Loki arrived.

“I woke up and you were gone,” he said, sounding annoyed.

“I’m sorry Husband, I wanted a chance to see my mother before she left,” Loki explained, relieved that Musleen, Camtan and Sofftia were also present. The King’s rages were far less likely to build to a terrifying height when there were other people in the room.
“You should have seen her last night,” King Dimcken said grumpily.

“I wished to stay by your side for the celebrations,” Loki said.

It was a lie, but it was something the King loved to hear, and, predictably, it soothed his temper somewhat.

“Of course you did, but I want you today, I want to see my surprise, we never managed to get to the garden, we were out all night and then went to bed,” King Dimcken said.

“It’s all alright anyway Husband, Mother told me she was planning to stay a few days so that we could catch up properly,” Loki said, trying not to look gleeful at the faint look of panic that flashed in the King’s eyes.

“She’s staying?” he asked.

“Just until we’ve had a chance to catch up, her family are here too, at least, some of them, it should only be a few days,” Loki said.

“Tomorrow,” King Dimcken said just a little too quickly, “you can have the whole of tomorrow, and she can come for dinner tonight, in fact so can Lord Fallconyr and his wife, we should make quite the party.”

“That’s wonderful Husband, thank you so much,” Loki said.

“I want you to be happy you know,” King Dimcken said suddenly.

“I am very happy Husband,” Loki lied.

Mollified, King Dimcken began to serve himself lunch.

“Where’s Dorgen today?” he asked.

“He’s in his chambers,” Musleen replied, “He went to the celebrations last night, he was over on the western side with Mulmyr and her family.”

“Huh,” King Dimcken said, “he shouldn’t have come at all.”

“The absence of the crown prince would have been noted by the foreign dignitaries Father, he had to come,” Musleen said carefully.

King Dimcken sneered. “He’s a disgrace for a crown prince,” he muttered.

“I heard he was planning to go and visit with Mulmyr’s family for a while,” Camtan said.

“Good, he can stay there,” said the King.

“Lyrren and Octir are going with them,” Musleen said.

“Fine.”

“They did not say when they would be back.”

“I don’t care, talk about something else,” King Dimcken said, as though he was not the one who had brought up his son in the first place.
“Roaseia is learning to swim,” Camtan said. “I’ve assigned a teacher and given her permission to take Roaseia to the bathhouse to practise.”

“That’s good, very good, children should start young with those kinds of things, they will learn faster, when did you two start your lessons?” King Dimcken asked.

“We were slightly older,” Musleen said. “I was afraid of the water and wouldn’t go in until Camtan was old enough to join me.”

King Dimcken looked surprised. “You were afraid of the water?” he said.

“I was very small, and it was very big, but yes, I was. Then after Camtan jumped in and splashed water everywhere I realised that there was nothing to be afraid of, but it was too late, and the teachers treated me like a precious little jewel ever since,” Musleen said. He sounded grumpy about it.

King Dimcken chuckled. “Well you don’t seem to have suffered for it. I’m glad to hear that my granddaughter is being well taken care of, she’s the only one I have after all.”

“For now,” Soffitia said. “We’re not quite ready yet but we’d like her to have a brother or sister.”

King Dimcken looked delighted.

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After lunch, Loki went with the King to the garden to show him his present.

King Dimcken just stared at it for the longest time, so long in fact that Musleen and Camtan, who had accompanied them, exchanged a look of concern.

“Oh Loki, it’s… it’s… it’s beautiful,” King Dimcken said.

To Loki’s astonishment there were tears in the King’s eyes.

“I’m glad you like it Husband,” Loki said.

King Dimcken turned to him then and kissed him hard.

“It’s wonderful, truly magnificent. We shall have dinner right here tonight, so that I might admire it properly.”

He gave Loki a tight squeeze. “I have a present for you too you know,” he said.

“Oh Husband, you did?” Loki said, trying to sound interested.

The King’s presents were, without exception, horribly thoughtless.

“I sent some warriors to the upper branches of Yggdrasil to bring back a feather from Veðrfölnir, the hawk who sits atop the eagle. Its feathers are known to have magical powers, I thought you would like that sort of thing. I will give it to you at dinner tonight.”

Loki had to hold back a look of astonishment, he managed instead to turn it into a look of surprised delight.

“Oh Husband, you spoil me,” he said.

Over the King’s shoulder Camtan and Musleen bumped the sides of their fists together.
King Dimcken kissed him again before thankfully detaching and making his way slowly around the gigantic statue.

“Whom do I thank?” Loki asked the two princes as soon as King Dimcken was out of range.

“I delivered the message, but it was Dorgen’s idea,” Musleen said.

“We were discussing it some time ago, no one likes seeing you get given jewellery, and the faces you make trying to look grateful are frankly painful to witness,” Camtan said, giving him a pat on the shoulder.

“A feather from Veðrfölnir is an amazing gift, add to that all of the magical artifacts we were given by the other realms that the King let me have and I am amassing quite a powerful little collection,” Loki said.

“Just don’t turn it all on us,” Camtan said. “Remember, we like you.”

Loki smiled. “And I like you too,” he said in a slightly mocking tone.

It was good to have friends.

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Dorgen was gone by the end of the day, he and his entire family rode out to Mulmyr’s family home. King Dimcken did not say anything, although Loki strongly suspected that if Frigga had not been at dinner, he would have let his temper explode. For all that he wanted his eldest son gone, he wanted to be shown respect even more, and Dorgen had not even told his father he was going, let alone asked for permission as he should have done.

Loki was glad he was gone, Dorgen was probably safer somewhere far from the capital. Hopefully in time the King would calm down, and if not, then hopefully Dorgen could stay out of his father’s way until King Dimcken died. At this point that seemed like the best option.

No one mentioned it at dinner. Odin had returned to Asgard that afternoon, but Frigga had determinedly stayed behind. There had been a minor argument about it, but as she was already on Vanaheim, staying behind was easier to achieve than arranging a separate visit at a later time.

King Dimcken was polite, courteous and every inch a gentleman to the Queen of Asgard. She was very gracious in turn, and the dinner in the garden went off without a hitch. King Dimcken even refrained from asking Loki to join him that night, although the peck on the cheek he gave Loki as he wished him goodnight provided a good cover as he gave Loki’s bottom a quick squeeze.

Loki had no doubt that once Frigga was gone the King would insist on a private celebration, something special.

It had been a while since King Dimcken had demanded something special in bed. During the Progress he had been frequently worn out by travel, or maybe it was the ever changing scenery that put him off, but one-hundred years of marriage was too good of an opportunity to miss.

Loki was dreading it, but there was nothing he could do.

The following day he spent entirely with his mother. They talked long and hard about the things that he’d seen, about facing attempted assassination, about the King. Frigga was as supportive as she could be, given the circumstances.
“Just stay strong my boy,” she said, before leaning forwards and lowering her voice. “I have given a second amulet to my father for safe-keeping, it seemed easier to bring it now than to try and get it to you in twenty more years. He’ll deliver it before the first one runs out.”

“Thank you,” Loki said, equally soft despite shielding them with his magic from prying ears, it never hurt to be extra careful. “I do drink the tea, but I was always worried that I wouldn’t be able to drink it at the right moments, the amulet is such a relief.”

Frigga looked at him seriously.

“I’m not certain when Odin will allow me to return,” she said. “I know we will be invited to your two hundredth anniversary-“

Loki bit his lip at the mere mention of another hundred years.

“-but in between then I do not know,” Frigga finished. “I will write of course, and I will try to come and see you, but Odin is being so stubborn, he insists that you are benefiting from your ‘education’ here.”

“I certainly know how to suck dick,” Loki said without thinking.

Frigga face was a mixture of horror and resignation.

“My ladies have told me of the things the King liked to do, I had hoped that he was far too old to do any of them,” she said.

“No, no he isn’t,” Loki said bitterly. Then he forced himself to look more positive. “There is nothing anyone can do, I cannot make trouble, I risk losing something far greater than anything else I cherish in the nine reals if I do. I have enrolled at the Tower to take more lessons, I hope to fill my days with activity.”

“Oh Loki, my poor Loki,” Frigga whispered. “I would kill him myself if I could get away with it.”

It was a good thing that they were shielded by Loki’s magic, such a declaration was technically an act of war.

“You will have to wait behind a rather large number of other people,” Loki said, trying to sound amused.

Frigga raised an eyebrow. “If they know what’s good for them, they’d let me go first,” she said, deadly serious.

Sadly she could not get away with it, and left that night after holding onto her boy for long minutes by the bifrost site.

“I love you,” she said. “I love you Loki, I will write to you.”

“I love you to mother,” Loki said, fighting tears.

It didn’t seem fair that after eighty years apart they only had a single day to see one another, but at least it was a whole day without the King.

Loki clung to that thought as the bifrost activated and Frigga was carried away.

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It was the following night that King Dimcken insisted on Loki’s presence after dinner. Loki was almost sick with nerves, and he had to force his dinner down with a great effort.

King Dimcken was far too cheerful. It was going to be bad.

When Loki walked into the bedroom and saw what was lying on the bed, he almost turned around and begged the King not to use them.

It was ropes. Thin enough to tie easily but thick enough to hold him in whatever position King Dimcken wanted.

“Oh my darling, you are so beautiful. I’ve been thinking about this for a while now, I want, I want you, on the bed, now, undress and get on there now,” King Dimcken said.

Loki pulled his robes off and tried to stop his hands from trembling. Whatever was about to happen, he would survive it. He had survived so much from this man, surely the ropes couldn’t be the worst thing he’d ever had to endure.

Loki climbed up onto the bed and lay there in trepidation.

King Dimcken climbed up after him and reached for the first rope. Loki realised that it had a cuff at the end of it, these ropes were designed to be restraints.

The King put the cuff around Loki’s wrist and secured it to the bedpost. The angle forced Loki’s arm downwards, towards his feet.

The second cuff held the other arm in the same position.

The third and fourth cuffs went around his ankles, and King Dimcken fastened the ropes to the top corners of the bed. They were quite long, and Loki could still lie normally.

It was only then that King Dimcken pulled another rope from the side of the bed. This cuff was bigger, and went around Loki’s waist. The King smiled at him as he fastened the two roped that led off it to the bottom two corners of the bed, next to the wrist restraints.

Only then did he tighten the ankle ropes, pulling Loki’s legs up above his head until he was unable to move more than an inch in any direction. The restraint at his waist kept him from curling up too far to ease the strain on his legs, and his arms were forced downward.

The position made it hard to breathe deeply, and Loki hoped desperately that the King would release him when he was done.

He should, tied up in this position Loki took up all of the bedspace, King Dimcken would untie him so as to get a good night’s rest.

All Loki had to do was last.

King Dimcken was grinning at the sight of Loki tied up and helpless. He pressed his bony fingers to Loki’s vagina and began to press inside.

“Oh you look so sweet my love,” he purred as he worked his fingers back and forth. “I could do so much to you right now.”

‘Please don’t,’ Loki thought, knowing that it was useless, ‘please don’t.’

King Dimcken rubbed until Loki’s body responded, then he lined up his penis and thrust forwards.
Loki had to stifle a cry. In this awkward position the King’s penis pushed hard against his insides. Loki pulled unconsciously at the ropes as the King moaned in delight.

“You’re so tight like this,” he groaned.

Loki bit back a whimper, he didn’t want anything to encourage the King, the last thing he wanted was for King Dimcken to decide that he wanted to do this again, after all it only took a few moments to set up.

King Dimcken pulled out and then thrust back in, moaning loudly as he did so.

“Oh yes, oh yes, my darling, oh yes, oh yes, yes, yes, Loki yes,” he gasped and cried as he rocked back and forth into Loki’s helpless body.

Loki tried hard, but eventually the feelings got too much for him and cries began to spill out of his mouth. He managed to refrain from begging the King to stop, but several times his ‘ohs’ were closer to ‘nos’.

The King didn’t appear to notice.

After an eternity, King Dimcken spilled into Loki’s body and collapsed on top of him. The weight of the King pressing down on his already strained legs made Loki whimper, and to his surprise King Dimcken actually noticed it.

“I’m sorry Loki darling, here let me untie you,” he said, reaching for the first strap.

Loki’s legs had fallen asleep, and he got them down with difficulty.

King Dimcken reached for them and began to rub one.

“You’re a good boy,” he said.

Loki tried to look accepting as the blood rushed back into his legs.

“Tomorrow I will make you climax, I don’t want you to think that I am neglecting you my darling,” King Dimcken said as he kissed Loki on the cheek. “Goodnight now.”

“Goodnight Husband,” Loki parroted.

He lay down in the darkness and bit his lip as the pain in his legs from the returning blood grew then faded.
The Tower itself had not changed. There was still the busy bustle of the students as they went from lesson to lesson, there were still the same teachers moving amongst them looking older and wiser, but at the same time it was different, because all of Loki’s old classmates were no longer there. They had all long since graduated and had headed out into the world to ply their trades.

Loki had enrolled in advanced mind magic, ice magic (as he seemed to have a natural talent anyway), and potion brewing, a lessor art as it could be done by anyone with access to magical ingredients, but it never hurt to know what others chose to overlook.

It also took up four days a week out of his schedule. Another day he dedicated to training in the yard with Musleen and his guards, as they had gotten into the habit while on Progress and he didn’t want to give it up.

One afternoon a week he went swimming in the bathhouse. He avoided the spot behind the rock as though it was diseased. In his mind he could *see* the filth lying there like a dirty puddle, but the rest of the place was untainted.

He avoided looking up at the ceiling, and never, ever, looked at the mermaid statue in the centre.

Slowly, life in the palace became routine, it became normal.

Time drifted past.

Loki was walking down the corridors when he heard her name. He frowned, he was certain that someone had said Shiarpia, one of the students. He shook his head and put it out of his mind. It was probably a common name in Vanaheim anyway, he dismissed it and kept walking.

Loki had asked for, and been given, an office in the Tower for his personal use. Daenceia had originally been granted one back when she had taken over the scholarship program, and she had immediately offered him hers, but he declined. They now worked only three doors down from one another as she brought him up to speed on what she had been doing while he was away.

It was also where he conducted his private study. His lava stone was kept in a safe there, as was his hawk feather. It was untainted, unlike everything else the King had ever given him, but then in his mind the feather had been a gift from Dorgen, Musleen and Camtan, three brothers who had taken it upon themselves to try and make his life here better.

He spent his free hours studying their many properties, and trying out their uses. The library at the Tower was enormous, and he found a wealth of information on both artefacts.

Today though, Loki was on a mission, a mission that he had set himself yesterday, when he’d been training with Musleen.

“What do you mean she’s found someone else?” Loki asked him, knocking his sword back with a
hard swing.

“At the celebrations, she was dancing and talking with a young man, he didn’t leave her side all night,” Musleen said, countering Loki’s swing with a darting thrust.

“That doesn’t mean anything, he could be a relative,” Loki said.

“He could be, he could also be a lover,” Musleen said, sounding nervous.

Loki took advantage of his distraction to disarm him.

“You need to know for sure, your skills are suffering,” he said.

Musleen scowled, “You have no idea what she does to me,” he muttered.

Loki thought of all the times Thor had beaten him just because the sight of his muscles had distracted Loki at a key moment.

“I can imagine,” he said instead. “Let me talk to her, we’re friends, friends are supposed to tell one another about these things anyway.”

Musleen looked worried. “I don’t want her to know,” he said. “She’s coming in to make her report on the city in a few days anyway, I’ll see her then.”

“She’s really taken to this spy thing hasn’t she?” Loki asked.

The tips of Musleen’s ears went red. “She’s quite gifted in that area,” he said. “Which makes me worry, she’s young, and has her dancing career, she doesn’t need to be a spy.”

“But you think she’ll volunteer?” Loki asked.

“I think so, yes. She’s common enough to be a servant, graceful enough to pass as a noble and, while she is extraordinarily pretty, she can blend into the background when she wants to. She snuck up on me one day, she was by my side and tapped me in the ribs before I realised, and *I* think about her all the time.”

Loki nodded. “Would you stop her?” he asked.

“No,” Musleen said at once, “not if that’s what she wanted to do. I don’t have the right to stop people from doing what they wish with their lives.”

“Even when your heart is at stake?” Loki asked.

“Especially then,” Musleen said seriously, “especially then.”

All of which brought Loki to the here and now. He knocked on Daenceia’s door and waited.

“Who is it?” she called out.

“Loki,” Loki called through the door, “and I’ve brought lunch.”

“Come in,” she called from inside.

Loki pushed the door open and walked in. Daenceia’s office was covered in papers, the accumulation of eighty years of running his scholarship program.
Daenceia herself was balancing on a very small block while holding a sword.

‘Um?” Loki said, letting his tone ask the question for him.

“I am practising my balance and poise,” she said. “Storongyr said I should do this if I want to become a good swordswoman, and I do, I really do.”

“Who is Storongyr?” Loki asked, setting down the lunch he had brought.

“One of the shadow guards,” she said, giving him a big grin. “That’s the name the common people give to Prince Musleen’s guards, they work in the shadows and find the guilty party.”

“Nice name,” Loki said as she jumped down and put her sword away. “You look as though you are planning to join them.”

“Woman are allowed to join,” she said, “secretly, they are even more like shadows right now.”

“Why secretly?” Loki asked.

“His Majesty would not approve, so Prince Musleen didn’t ask him, but we have to keep it quiet in case he finds out and bans us. Prince Musleen says that woman can be as good as men in most cases, and better than men in the rest because we are not expected. He’s been quietly recruiting among his informants for over a century, but it’s a slow uptake, you need focus and commitment, no time for other pursuits.”

“What about your dancing?” Loki asked.

She bit her lip. “It’s a family tradition, and they say I am very good, but maybe I don’t want to be a dancer? Just because you are born to something doesn’t mean you have to do it.”

Loki smiled. “If you want to follow your own path Daenceia then I would encourage you. It is your life after all.”

“I’m glad you understand Loki, my parents don’t, they think I’m letting the family down,” she said sadly. “They said that my friendship with you had given me illusions of grandeur, especially after you put me in charge of your program.”

Loki shook his head. “You be who you want to be, and do what makes you happy,” he insisted.

She sat down beside him and pulled out the food from the bags. “Ooh, you brought salad,” she said.

“I know you like it, although I think you are mad to eat it when pork rolls are available,” Loki said.

She flicked a bit of lettuce at him.

“You and your pork rolls,” she muttered, managing to make a perfectly normal foodstuff sound like a terrible vice that should be banned by all the nine realms.

Loki laughed at her and took a big bite. They sat there chatting about all manner of things until lunch was almost over.

She didn’t mention having a lover once, so as he chewed up the last of his roll, Loki decided that he would have to be a little less subtle.

“So is there anything new in your life that I should know about? Anything exciting, anything… man-related?”
“Loki!” she exclaimed and started laughing. “No, no, I am as sad and loney as the last time you saw me.”

“Oh? A pretty thing like you?” Loki pressed.

She blushed lightly. “There is one man—”

“I knew it.”

“-but I’m not interested. He’s very nice, but he’s the son of one of my father’s friends, all our lives we’ve been raised knowing each other, and the little jokes about us getting married one day are starting to become more than jokes, and they weren’t that funny to begin with.”

She looked annoyed. “I don’t want to marry yet, I don’t think I want to marry at all.”

Loki blinked. “What, ever?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I’m not immune to the sight of a gorgeous chest or a handsome face, but I want to be a shadow guard, I want to have a career, I don’t want to be somebody’s wife.”

Loki decided to go for broke, there was no other way to find out really.

“What if you met someone who was happy for you to follow your dreams?” he asked. “Someone who wanted you to be happy, no matter how you achieved it, someone who worshiped the ground you walked on and talked like a very bad poet whenever he spoke of you because his normally brilliant mind just kind of stopped working where you are concerned, what then?”

She giggled. “Men like that do not exist Loki, no one is perfect.”

“I didn’t say he was perfect, he can’t ride astride or dance to save himself, he can be far too formal and hardly smiles except when you catch him off guard, and he’s never off guard—”

“You sound as though you are speaking about a real person now,” she said.

Loki winked at her. “Just keep your mind open,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Why would you do this to me Loki? I thought we were friends,” she said.

Loki looked startled. “We are friends! What do you mean?”

“There are four letters in my top drawer that all have one thing in common. They were all written by Prince Musleen. He almost never writes his orders down, his messengers can be trusted to pass on his instruction faithfully, so in eighty years I have had four letters, and I read them like a girl obsessed. I have tried so hard to put him out of my mind but the *sight* of him, from a distance across a crowded square, at the celebrations was enough to give me a fluttering in my stomach. I reported to him in person just the other day and I struggled to concentrate. It is extremely cruel of you to practically describe him to me as a fictional possibility when everyone knows that he will marry a foreign princess or a fine noblewoman one day. That hurts Loki, more than you think. I thought I’d be cured by an eighty year absence but I am worse than ever.”

Loki whispered a spell to seal the room. Daenceia frowned in surprise.

“You know that he almost died in the high mountains?” Loki asked, leaning forwards and taking her hands.
She nodded, looking worried at the very thought.

“The last thing he said before he lost consciousness was that he regretted how he would never see you again,” Loki told her.

Daenceia raised a hand to slap him, but Loki caught it and held it gently. “I’m not lying,” he told her. “He knows his father wouldn’t approve and so won’t even think about making a move until, until afterwards, when his brother is king. But Daenceia, he has all of your letters too.”

She swallowed hard. “Truly?” she whispered.

“Truly.” Loki said nodding. “He didn’t want you to know because it isn’t safe for you two right now, he would do anything to keep you safe.”

“He’s letting me be a guard,” she pointed out.

Loki shrugged. “He’s not the kind to stop a person, like I said. But he worries, oh boy does he ever worry.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I, I don’t know what to think.”

“Try not to think of anything, he didn’t want you to know, and it’s been killing him, seeing you with that man.”

“Oh no.”

“He sees everything Daenceia, you know that.”

“Tell him that man is nothing to me.”

“Don’t worry, I plan to. You have a long wait ahead of you, you know that.”

“I can wait. We spent six years working together against the resistance, Loki, I fell in love with him, I never thought he might do it too.”

“He is still a Vanir you know, he has emotions.”

“A long suspected fact but never publically proven.”

Loki grinned. “He’s going to kill me for telling you.”

“Don’t tell him, he’s right, it’s too risky. I will carry on as before, tell him I am not with anyone, but don’t let him see me as anything different to how he does now. That is the best way.”

“As long as you’re sure,” Loki said with a frown.

Daenceia nodded. “I am,” she said.

The next day at the training grounds Loki quietly told Musleen that Daenceia was not, repeat, not involved with anyone.

Musleen responded to this information by kicking Loki’s arse four times at swords, fighting a
Time passed, years slipped away as Loki studied. He grew proficient in all manner of seidr as the decades went by.

Occasionally he would still hear the name Shiarpia floating around the Tower, but he determinedly ignored it despite becoming more and more certain that it was her, whatever she had done, he didn’t want to know.

There were things to learn, hunts to go on, King’s lusts to satisfy and tempers to placate.

Twenty years after they arrived home, Lord Fallconyr delivered the tiny pregnancy-preventing amulet. The last one had dissolved slowly under Loki’s lip, and Fosxyr carefully inserted the new one with as much care as he could.

One hundred and fifty aesir years after Loki had left to get married, the skies shook with a powerful, passionate storm that caused a section of the palace to be struck by lightning so strong it blew a hole clean through the roof and destroyed the mermaid statue in the middle of the bathhouse.

Loki sat in his chambers and the storm shook the windows. He was staying well away from them in case they shattered. The servants were in their little waiting room, even Fosxyr, as Loki had asked for some privacy tonight.

The celebrations for the Vanir one hundred and fifty year anniversary were still almost two years away. Five days did not seem like much but over the centuries he and Thor had drifted apart in their reminders of the distance that grew between them.

Alone in his living area, Loki carefully took down the box that held his knives and took out Thor’s. They were identical in every way to look at, but Loki never had trouble telling them apart. There was something about Thor’s that just called to him somehow.

The knife was broken.

Loki stared in horror at the handle, his outrage built as he imagined someone coming in here and *touching* it, touching Thor’s knife, how dare they –

Wait. No. It wasn’t broken. It was *open*.

Loki sat down in his chair and carefully opened the top of the hilt. Inside, a small piece of parchment was just poking out.

With trembling fingers Loki withdrew the parchment and unrolled it. The writing was quite cramped to be able to fit onto the parchment, but that didn’t matter, not at all.

*My Dearest Love, I sit here, already without you as you learn how to be someone else’s queen, and I cannot imagine how the next three hundred years are going to be. I begged and pleaded with Father to change his mind but I have been unsuccessful. So instead I give you this, I had the blacksmith make this knife with a concealed chamber. I studied the runes to lock and unlock it myself, I could not ask anyone to help me as it might have gotten back to Father. I hope that I have been successful, and that you hold this in your hands halfway into our separation, as a reminder that I wait for you. Know this my love, I Love You. I will always love you, I will never love another. This I swear once, this I swear twice, this I swear thrice. Thor*
Loki’s eyes began to fill with tears. All around the edges of the parchment was written the magic runes for concealment. There were also several runes that, Loki thought, were supposed to ensure that only his touch could unlock the knife when the time came, and only if he was thinking of Thor.

They weren’t quite correct, although they still did the job, in fact, the way they were written would turn this knife into an imperfect… communication… device.

The dreams had been real. These runes would have created a connection between them that was reinforced every time Loki touched the knife while thinking of Thor. Then, if the conditions were right, he would see Thor in his dreams and talk to him and see him and touch him and it was him! The real Thor! Not a dream, not once!

And Thor had not seen the filth.

Maybe it didn’t travel in dreams.

Loki read the note over and over, memorising every word, every letter. He even memorised at what point Thor had started cramming his letters together more closely when he had clearly realised that he hadn’t left himself enough space.

That was so typical of him, and Loki found himself smiling sappily at the thought.

He read the note until his eyes hurt, then he reluctantly threw it in the fire. Such a letter was far too dangerous to keep. Loki stood by the fire the entire time as the note burned in order to ensure that every last trace was gone.

Then he recited the words in his mind again, taking comfort from Thor’s love.

It had to be love, to drive Thor into the library to look up runes. It had to be love, for him to go to so much effort. It had to be love, for him to do something so thoughtful, so wonderful.

Loki had made it halfway, and with Thor’s love he would make it to the end, no matter what.
Loki had to admit that he was nervous. Daenceia had arranged a get together of all the scholarship students, past and present. Apparently this was a yearly event, and it gave everyone a chance to talk about the challenges they faced.

There were smaller, informal meetings that went on all the time. People would meet up to ask questions about classes, get help from other students and trade resources.

There were a number of students who had lived on the streets, to them, even getting enough parchment to write their essays on was an issue. Daenceia had used some of the money from the heterwart trade to buy resources and equipment.

The students who did use ot were careful and economical, they would return parchment that had not been used, even if it was only half a page, because someone else might need it.

Ex-students who had gone on to find work would often buy gifts of notebooks and magical ingredients for those coming up behind them.

One enterprising young woman had opened a boarding house for students without a place to sleep. As they learnt new skills at the Tower they would work for her in exchange for their bed and three meals a day. She also put aside a small amount of the money they earned into a trust so that when they graduated they had a little bit to get them started.

Daenceia had investigated this arrangement, just in case it was a scam designed to prey on the vulnerable, but found it to be legitimate. After all, nobody wanted a large group of angry mages at their door demanding their rights.

It was a revolution, and everywhere he went in the Tower Loki was followed by whispers. Most loved him, some, the children of nobles mostly, were unhappy about sharing their precious magic with the more common of the commoners. But Loki ignored them, let them hate him, it was that kind of thinking that caused the resistance to become so powerful in the first place.

Now he stood at Daenceia's side as around him the true results of his idea sank in.

"There are over a hundred of them," he said.

"I know, it's amazing, they are some of the most talented people in the Tower too, they have so much more to lose if they fail," Daenceia said.

Loki walked carefully through the crowd. He nodded and smiled at the students, who bowed to him as he passed. He wanted to tell them to stop but there were too many.
"I've had Lord Horseen himself come to see me about them," Daenceia said happily. "He wanted to see if some of the teachers could sponsor students for the program, if they knew of someone with a specific talent that could not attend. I told him that we'd consider anyone brought before us, but could not play favourites."

"Good," Loki said. "I'd hate to see the program become something controlled by the nobility."

"Not a chance," Daenceia said. "The ex-students have been sponsoring others for years, the teachers would have to get in line. Oh and Loki, some of the ex-students have paid for people to go to the Tower, family members mostly, but sometimes friends, children of friends or even just someone they feel deserves a chance. They pay their fees, buy their equipment and books, it's wonderful."

Loki realised that he was grinning. "I think," he said, "that I can say that I achieved something while here in Vanahem."

"Something wonderful," Daenceia said with a determined nod, "something truly wonderful."

****

When someone is having fun, keeping busy and enjoying life, they will often find that time slips by quite quickly, and that before they know it they have aged rather more than they ever thought they would, with no clear idea of how they got there.

Loki's life was a mixture of fun, when he was with his friends, keeping busy, at the Tower, enjoying life, when alone, and sheer horror, when he was with the King.

It was the horror that always seemed to last forever. He would come back to his chambers shaking and filthy, hating everything the king stood for and silently wishing for the sweet relief that would be King Dimcken's death.

The horror made every day seem to last an eternity. But time still marched on, and one day Loki was informed by a sympathetic Fosxyr that his two hundredth year anniversary was due in six months’ time.

He had already spent Thor's two hundredth anniversary alone with his thoughts, but that was two and a half years ago now. Fosxyr's words were a sharp reminder of how long he'd been living in this prison.

"What should I get him?" Loki asked immediately. "He already has a statue, which he spends an awful lot of time around. I can't give him another one."

"I don't see why not, he does love them so," Fosxyr said. "Tell him that you wish to move that one to one side of the main gates and have another one made to stand beside it, he'll love the idea."

"He will, won't he?" Loki mused. "I will ask him at dinner if he approves, it means he won't get a surprise, but I don't think he'd mind too much."

"How is your back?" Fosxyr inquired gently.

The night before King Dimcken had tied Loki face down onto the bed and beaten him with a switch. Then he'd used the rounded handle-end of the switch to do something to Loki that made sitting today extremely uncomfortable.

"It's fine," Loki said softly.
He didn't even want to think about it. It was a thing that happened, and then got pushed out of his mind. It was easier that way.

"His Majesty if having a health check with the healer today, he has one every five hundred years, if it is good news then he will be very happy tonight," Fosxyr said.

"And if it is bad news then I'd best be prepared," Loki finished.

King Dimcken's temper had grown over the years. More than once Loki had found himself on the receiving end of the King's sharp remarks and mocking tone. Even more often, he had been the method by which the King released his rage against others, exhausting himself in Loki's body at the end of the day.

Loki bathed before dinner, letting Fosxyr carefully wash his bruised back before rubbing some bruising cream into the skin. Then he dressed in light robes and made his way to the King's chambers.

King Dimckn was grinning. He gave Loki a tight hug that pressed down on his bruises.

"Loki my darling wife! The light of my life! I have come from the healer and she has given me good news!"

"Oh Husband, what did she tell you?" Loki asked.

Over the King's shoulder, Musleen, Camtan and Sofftia were looking at him sympathetically.

"I am in perfect health, in fact, she's sees no reason why I cannot live for another five hundred years!" King Dimcken exclaimed.

Loki's breath caught in his chest.

No.

Surely not?

But King Dimcken was horribly healthy, and such a long life wasn't totally unheard of.

Five hundred years?

"Husband that's wonderful," he lied.

"I know! I knew I felt well but this is the best of news! I feel like celebrating! Organise a party my darling, for two weeks hence, I will give you a guest list."

"Yes Husband," Loki said.

"I'll help," Camtan offered, looking at Loki sadly.

His expression suddenly became more cheerful as the King turned around.

"Good, good, this is a wonderful day," King Dimcken said beaming at them all.

Loki felt vaguely faint. He wanted to go back to his chambers and cry at this news, but he had to get through dinner.
Maybe the healer had made a mistake? She was supposed to be the best in the realm, but that didn't mean she couldn't have missed something.

He forced the thoughts away as the servants brought the first course. Now was not the time for thinking about this. Now was the time for paying attention to the King.

"Husband, I was wondering about our two hundredth anniversary, which is in a few months," Loki said.

"Excited are we my darling?" King Dimcken said cheerfully.

Loki forced a smile. "I have been thinking about your present, I have had an idea but it is a little bit complicated. I'm afraid I cannot make it a surprise, as I need your permission for something."

King Dimcken pursed his lips. "Oooh, I don't know, I do like surprises," he said in a teasing tone. He was in a very good mood, and his eyes twinkled. He wanted to flirt. Loki wanted to be sick.

"But I think you'll like it Husband, I mean, it could be a surprise, if you stayed away from the front gates and ignored any banging noises you might hear for a few months."

King Dimcken looked pleasantly intrigued. "Banging noises? Oh my dear what could you possibly be planning? Is it a new gate for my palace?"

"No Husband," Loki said as Camtan and Sofftia both tried to find something else to look at that wasn't a ridiculous farce. Musleen was watching closely however, a raised eyebrow the only sign that he too was curious as to what Loki was planning.

"Is it a fountain? Right in front where the people can see it?"

"No Husband," Loki said.

King Dimcken leaned in close to him and brushed his lips against Loki's. "Then whatever could it be my love?" he asked.

"If you might grant me permission to move your statue to one side of the gate, I was thinking of ordering another, the first one represents your warrior side, and the other would be your scholarly side, your wisdom as King of Vanaheim," Loki said.

King Dimcken grinned at him.

"That is an *excellent* idea my darling, an excellent idea. I grant you permission, of course I do, that will look magnificent!"

"I will start the arrangements first thing tomorrow Husband. I'm glad you like the idea," Loki said.

"And I must get started on the arrangements for our celebrations," King Dimcken said. "I want a beautiful banquet, with dancing, I love to watch you dancing, and a giant crystal ball floating above your heads that will reflect light all over the hall. It will be beautiful."

"It sounds it Father," Camtan said.

"It will be spectacular," King Dimcken said, sliding a hand onto Loki's leg. "After all, we have so much to celebrate. Oh, and someone write to Dorgen and tell him he needs to be here, he is the crown prince and his presence will be expected. Besides, he's been gone for a century, people are starting to talk."
Loki saw Musleen frown at the King’s words, but wasn't able to say anything. He also thought that it was odd that the King hadn't mentioned his son for close to a century except to curse him, only to suddenly demand his presence without so much as a bitter remark.

****

Six months later, and Loki was looking at the two giant statues of King Dimcken flanking the palace gate.

So were a lot of other people. It had created quite the spectical for the people over the past few months.

Loki hated them. He hated the way they looked, and especially what they stood for.

Five hundred years. It was possible, in fact the way the healer had spoken it was extremely likely. Loki had wept in his chambers for hours at the thought. It seemed as though his spirit was struggling to keep from being crushed by the news. He thought of Thor's letter, it seemed to mock him now, ‘halfway point, halfway.’ He wasn't even close to halfway.

The workers on the statue continued to polish them both to a bright sheen. Loki forced himself to look happy and went inside.

He had been banned from the great hall, as the King wanted to surprise him with the decorations. The celebrations would begin that night, and until then Loki was at a loose end.

He went back to his chambers, reciting Thor's message in his mind, as he had grown accustomed to doing over the years.

He'd give anything to be able to talk to Thor right now.

Why not?

The thought had been flitting in and out of his mind ever since he had worked out what the knife could do. He'd resisted the urge as best he could. Contacting Thor was definitely 'causing trouble,’ of course, it only counted if he got caught.

It was four hours until the celebrations began. Loki made up his mind, he needed Thor.

"Fosxyr, I want to take a nap before tonight's celebrations, could you please brew me some sleep-tea?” he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Yes Your Grace," Fosxyr said, giving him a concerned look.

Loki ignored it. It was just one time, just one, he needed this.

He took the knife into his room and slipped it under his pillow. He drank the tea when it was ready and lay down in bed. Fosxyr drew the curtains and glanced over at him.

"I'll come to wake you in two hours Your Grace," he said.

"Thank you Fosxyr," Loki said and lay back.

He slipped his hand under the pillow to touch the knife and thought hard about Thor.

Thor.
Thor.

Thor.

He blinked, and there was Thor.

"Loki!" Thor exclaimed and pulled up his horse. "Loki I'm so close now, I swear to you, I'll find it-"

"Thor, my Thor, I needed to see you so badly," Loki said. "I just... the King saw the healer for a health check and he... he is expected to live for five *hundred* more years."

Thor's expression darkened. Overhead the sky flashed with lightning and the clouds began to gather.

"Do not despair my love," he said. "I will find us a way out of this."

Loki frowned, "Father's oath-"

"Will not matter, I will find a way," Thor insisted. "I am so close now Loki, I will find the emerald, I swear."

"What is your obsession with that thing?" Loki asked.

Thor opened his mouth to reply but Loki was already being pulled back.

"No," he gasped, but it was too late, he was awake.

"Your Grace, you must rise and get ready," Fosxyr told him gently.

There was only one moment in their entire time together that Loki had wanted to hit Fosxyr, and this was it.

He refrained. It wasn't Fosxyr's fault that Loki's time with Thor was so fleeting.

He rose and made his way to the bathing room with resigned footsteps.

What did Thor mean when he said he'd find a way? Find a way to do what? Free Loki? What did the emerald actually *do?*

But there was no time for dwelling, Loki had the celebrations to get ready for.

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The theme was gold.

The floor and the walls had been covered in gold leaf, the ceiling had been painted with new images, of Loki and the King’s life together. There were ice sculptures of some of the more exotic creatures of Vanaheim, and the tables were all covered in golden cloths and plates.

King Dimcken led Loki in to the main table. Once again, his parents had come, and Odin sat in the chair next to Loki.

Loki sat, and smiled at his mother who sat one seat over. She returned it. Over the years they had not managed to see one another anywhere near as much as Loki would have liked.

The plates were placed in front of them, and Loki picked up his fork to eat. He saw Odin’s favourite dish again, but was in no mood to play games with him. The thought of five hundred more years of
this was too demoralising. Loki ate everything neatly and quickly, then asked the serving man for his
favourites.

That was another thing, as he’d grown accustomed to life in Vanaheim, Fosxyr had taken a less
active role in his life. The servant no longer attended feasts to guide Loki in proper behaviour, he no
longer followed Loki everywhere. He didn’t even stay in the bathing chamber the way he used to
unless Loki needed him.

Loki knew that he should feel happy about no longer having a shadow, but instead he found himself
missing the servant’s calm manner and kind eyes.

Fosxyr would be back in his chambers, Loki’d see him tomorrow, maybe they could sit and
talk for a while, it had been ages since they’d done that.

Lost in his musings, it took Loki a minute to realise that his father had spoken to him.

“I’m sorry Father, I was distracted, what did you ask me?” he asked.

Odin looked at him steadily with his one eye. “I did not ask you anything, I commented that you
seem well settled here.”

With the King on the other side of him, there was nothing Loki could say that would even *begin* to
hint at how he really felt.

“I’ve been here for two hundred years,” he said, his tone light and his smile just fake enough that
Odin could see it while the masses who were further away remained fooled, “it would be strange for
me not to be settled by now.”

Odin narrowed his eye just slightly and turned back to his dinner.

Once the food had been eaten the dancing began. King Dimcken waved Loki up cheerfully. Loki
turned and offered his hand to Frigga.

“Mother?” he asked with a smile.

“It’s been a long, long time since I danced any Vanir dances Loki,” Frigga said even as she rose.

“You can dance the step-in-time, everyone can dance to that,” Loki said to her.

He led her out onto the floor and lined up ready for the music.

“Your father is worried,” Frigga said in a low voice as they started to dance. “The tension between
King Dimcken and his son is known throughout the nine realms, the other rulers are all concerned.”

Loki shrugged, stepping easily down the line.

“They have never seen eye to eye on some things, why is it a problem now?”

“There are rumours that Prince Dorgen is amassing a power base, and plans to create a rival court,”
she said.

Loki thought about it.

“He’s waited an awfully long time Mother, I doubt he’ll start trouble now,” he said.

“Mulmyr insists he has done nothing of the sort, but the rumours persist,” Frigga said.
Loki frowned, suspicion growing.

“Have those rumours reached the ears of the King?” he asked in a whisper.

Without meaning to, Loki looked over at where Dorgen sat, where the servant stood behind him, moved behind him, flicked his hand casually out…

He was drawing breath to call out when Musleen grabbed the servant from behind and pulled him down. In less than ten seconds his guards had the man restrained and had pulled him from the room. Dorgen had noticed the attempt and had paled in his seat. He and Musleen left a moment later, slipping out a side door as a Mulmyr stayed at the table and attempted to look calm.

“That was-“ Frigga started to say.

“That was Musleen, he is the best I know,“ Loki said.

Frigga was looking at him seriously. The dance was coming to an end but it was clear that she had worked out something very important.

“You suspected the King,” she murmured in horror as the dance came to an end.

Loki realised that he had. King Dimcken was a ruthless man who did not like his son at all, but he *had* always stood by the idea of succession. But if rumours that Dorgen had been planning to betray him by setting up a rival court had reached the King’s ears, then there would be no protection, not even for family.

It could still have been a normal assassination attempt, something to disrupt the celebrations, but why go for Dorgen? Why not go for the King? Or even Loki? Was it just a target of choice?

Loki didn’t believe that for a minute.

Dorgen and Musleen both returned a few minutes later. Dorgen was pale, and went to his wife’s side. Musleen remained standing, like one of his guards, his blue eyes on the lookout for further trouble.

There was none. The rest of the celebrations continued without incident, and at sunrise everyone retired to their beds.

King Dimcken was too tired to take Loki, which was fine by him, and they lay down together to sleep.

“I saw you almost shout a warning about the assassin,” King Dimcken said suddenly, putting Loki on instant alert. “That would have been very disruptive Loki, we can’t let our guests know when something like that happens, it will make them uneasy. Musleen took care of it, he’s a very…” the King sighed “alert young man.”

“I’m sorry Husband,” Loki said, his suspicions only growing. “Will Musleen interrogate him now?”

“No, I have ordered him to wait until the guests have gone, the man is in custody and he will hang soon enough,” King Dimcken said, settling down to sleep. “You looked beautiful tonight my darling,” he murmured.

“Thank you Husband, you looked very fine,” Loki answered.

The King just snored. Loki sighed softly in relief and closed his eyes.
Five hundred more years? He almost wished that Dorgen would set up a rival court, except that the King had to die of natural causes for Odin to keep his oath.

Maybe Loki could convince Dorgen to keep his father alive in prison, as long as Loki didn’t actually *cause* the trouble, he couldn’t be held responsible if someone else decided that the old man had to go.

It would still mean that Loki would spend another five hundred years in Vanaheim, waiting for the King to die. But it wouldn’t be as bad here with the King in prison.

With those thoughts in his mind to give him a little bit of imagined comfort, Loki drifted off to sleep.

****

Down in the dungeons, two days after the celebrations, Musleen stood with his hands behind his back, Dorgen at his shoulder and King Dimcken outside the cell as he stared the assassin down.

The man was a professional, somehow he had wormed his way past the security, dressed as a servant, and almost gotten away with murder. The knife he had been planning to use was tiny, but then with a poisoned blade it didn’t need to be very big.

He was silent, on his knees with his hands tied behind his back. Musleen had been standing there for over an hour and showed no sign of getting tired.

King Dimcken broke first.

“Just beat him,” he snapped.

Musleen raised an eyebrow as he looked down at the man.

“Very well Father,” he said and backhanded the man across the face.

The man fell to the ground with a grunt. After a moment he looked back up to see Musleen still standing there, with his arms behind his back and his expression unchanged.

“I believe I asked you your name,” he said calmly.

He had, over an hour earlier.

The man spat at him. Musleen calmly walked behind where the man lay and stood on his fingers.

King Dimcken looked annoyed, Dorgen looked stoic, although faintly pale, he knew that sometimes drastic measures were necessary, but he believed in making them as rare as possible.

So did Musleen, which is why, after the man screamed, he removed his foot and went back staring.

King Dimcken scowled.

“We should just kill him already, we know he’s guilty.”

“He’s a hired man,” Musleen said calmly. “I would like to know who wishes my brother dead.”

King Dimcken scowled at Musleen’s back. “It was probably the last of the rebels,” he said.

“After so long? Unlikely, but if so then I need to know who, how many and what their plans are next,” Musleen said calmly.
King Dimcken sighed, he was bored. Normally he did not trouble himself with interrogations, but he had been very interested in this one.

The man looked back and forth between the two men.

“I never saw who hired me,” he said.

“I did not ask you that, I asked you for your name,” Musleen said calmly.

The man hunched over himself. “Stoabyr,” he said.

Musleen stepped back outside the cell and waited as one of his guards disappeared for a few minutes. When he returned he had a small pile of papers.

“Stoabyr, known assassin, age, approximately 3000, used to work for the palace as a servant before resigning and changing careers, that explains a lot about how you got in. Did you use the servant’s corridors?”

Stoabyr scowled. “Bloody nobles,” he spat.

Musleen flicked through several more pages. “You were quite trusted once upon a time Stoabyr, what made you leave your position here to go and be a killer?”

Stoabyr looked back and forth between Musleen and the King, then he smiled.

“I’ll trade you Your Majesty, my life and freedom for something you want, some*one* you want.”

King Dimcken frowned. “Who could I possibly want to kill more than you?” he asked with a sneer in his voice.

Stoabyr’s grin turned gleeful. “Her lover,” he said.

Those two words froze the room. There was no question of whom he spoke, King Dimcken turned a ghostly pale colour as Dorgen and Musleen exchanged stunned looks.

“Tell me,” whispered the King, his eyes deadly.

“Guarantee my freedom, swear it thrice,” Stoabyr demanded.

“Father wait, whoever sent him-“ Musleen started to say but King Dimcken cut him off.

“I swear it once, twice, thrice, now tell me.”

His eyes were practically glowing with madness.

Stoabyr grinned in relief as his life was spared.

“Fosxyr,” he said. “His name was Fosxyr.”

Chapter End Notes

The title is a quote:
“A secret's worth depends on the people from whom it must be kept.”
— Carlos Ruiz Zafón, The Shadow of the Wind

I liked it, and it was better than whatever I was trying to come up with.
Chapter Summary

A Night of Secrets

Chapter Notes

Okay, well, normally I get somewhere between five and ten messages to a chapter. That's cool, I can live with that.

Today when I got home there were 40, and all I had to do was threaten to kill someone, remarkable.

A few short notes before I go on.

1) There is a non con scene in this chapter, you've been warned.
2) Roaseia might suddenly seem as though she's grown quite fast, but she didn't show up in the last few chapters and we jumped a lot of years. She's 200 Vanir years, or about the equivalent of 3.5 human years old at this point.
3) There seems to be some confusion about the last chapter, for which I am sorry, I obviously didn't write it clearly enough. Just to clarify:

King Dimcken hired the assassin to kill Dorgen, as he hates his son very much.

The assassin does not know that he was hired by the King, the man who hired him did not give his name or show his face.

Because the assassin failed the King has no problem with killing him.

The assassin bought his life by telling the King that Fosxyr was the queen's lover, which some servants suspected at the time but did not have proof for.

and 4) Oh I do love a twist...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

King Dimcken lurched forwards and wrenched the door to the cell open.

"You can go," he barked and turned on his heel.

Dorgen ran out after him, Musleen followed, but turned back just as Stoabyr reached the doorway and slammed the cell closed again.

"He promised me freedom!" Stoabyr yelled.

“I didn't,” Musleen said and turned and ran after his brother.
King Dimcken headed up the stairs towards the queen's chambers with a troop of guards following him. They were his own private guardsmen, whom Musleen personally hated for being thuggish and brutal.

Behind them, Dorgen veered off and slipped through a hidden door into the servant's corridors.

Musleen chased after his brother, catching him up as they raced up the narrow stairs inside the walls. They ran down one corridor, through another, past the servants who flattened themselves against the wall as the two princes thundered by.

Dorgen burst out of the corridors into Loki's private living area.

"Where's Fosxyr?" he gasped, as Musleen went further down the corridor to see if he was in the servant's waiting room at the end.

"He's with Camtan, he's spending time with Roaseia," Loki said, getting up from his chair. "What's happened?"

"The King is going to kill him," Dorgen gasped.

Musleen appeared at the door.

"Camtan," Dorgen gasped, "get to Camtan."

The door burst open, all three of them froze as the King strode into the room. He looked startled to see Dorgen and Musleen standing there, and then his eyes narrowed.

"So you would betray me? My own sons? For a SERVANT?!!" he screamed. "Where is Fosxyr?!!"

No one spoke, they were all too afraid.

King Dimcken's eyes narrowed. "Have you warned him already? Seal the palace! And find him!"

The guards scattered.

"Keep them here!" King Dimcken barked to the remaining guards, who moved to seal off the servants' corridor, trapping them in the room.

Loki looked back and forth between them. "What's happening?" he asked.

"That traitor Fosxyr is going to die, that's what's happening!" King Dimcken barked.

"Father, please, you have the word of one man, and a killer at that," Musleen pleaded. "Fosxyr has been a loyal servant for centuries, over the word of a murderer trying to save his own neck!"

"No!" King Dimcken shouted, "It was him, I know it! I know it! He was always close to her! I didn't want to believe it by why not?! Why would he care for her if he wasn't fucking her?!!"

Musleen and Dorgen both winced slightly at the King's words. They were forced to stand by helplessly as King Dimcken worked himself further into a furious rage.

"I gave him a job, shelter, I let him care for my sons! I trusted HIM!" he screamed. "I trusted that piece of filth, that *creature* that, that, that COMMONER! I should have known better, I should have KNOWN!!!"

The guards reappeared with Fosxyr held between them. Camtan was following them, demanding to
"What is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed. "I demand that you tell me!"

"The meaning of this," King Dimcken hissed as Camtan froze, "is that this man has betrayed me, betrayed all of us. You will sit down Camtan, you will all sit down. NOW!"

They sat, side by side on one of Loki's enormous couches.

King Dimcken turned to where Fosxyr stood and grabbed the back of his red hair painfully. He leaned in until their faces were close together.

"I had an interesting conversation with someone Fosxyr," he said in a quiet, deadly voice. "A man named Stoabyr, do you remember him?"

Fosxyr paled at the sound of the man's name.

"He raped a serving boy and killed him to try and cover it, I had him thrown out," he said.

His voice was shaking just slightly.

King Dimcken frowned nastily. "Why didn't you report him to the courts?" he said. "Did he perhaps know something you didn't want to get out?"

Fosxyr's face remained blank. "The courts did not concern themselves back then with the crimes of commoners against commoners, that was His Grace, Prince Musleen's doing, and he was still a child," he said.

King Dimcken blinked. "Oh, yes," he said, momentarily thrown. But it did not take him long to resume his anger.

"He named you Fosxyr, as the lover of my last wife, the traitorous bitch who whored herself to another."

To the horror of the men on the couch, Fosxyr flinched at King Dimcken's words, it was almost as good as a confession to the enraged King.

Almost but not quite.

"Did you love her?" he spat into Fosxyr's face.

Fosxyr looked at the King with pure disgust on his face.

"More than you ever did," he said boldly.

King Dimcken backhanded him across the face.

"Take him to the execution grounds. Do it now, tie him there naked and bloody for the wolves! She was torn apart, you can die the same way, that's what lovers like to do isn't it? That's what's romantic? I trusted you Fosxyr, I trusted you to raise my children, to aid my new wife. You have betrayed me, and now you will die."

"Father," Musleen pleaded. "A trial, he deserves-"

"He deserves nothing! Take him away now! And you lot will stay here tonight, in fact, fetch the others, they will join you. Sofftia, and that ugly bitch Dorgen married, are your sons still here?" he
barked at Dorgen.

"No, they left yesterday for home." Dorgen said bitterly.

King Dimcken's eyes narrowed dangerously. "If they think of that dingy little manor in the country as home they can bloody well stay there!" he barked. "No one leaves this room tonight! No one leaves the palace until it's over!"

Fosxyr was dragged out, Loki watched him go with horrified eyes.

He'd suspected Fosxyr, the little clues here and there had seemed at the very least to indicate that he knew more about the queen's affair than he had let on. But his confession had still been shocking.

A few minutes later, Sofftia, with Roaseia in her arms and Mulmyr were ushered in.

"You can all stay here, all of you. Watch the room!" barked the King to his guards. "No one leaves for the rest of the night."

He reached down and grabbed Loki by the arm. Loki allowed himself to be pulled up and into his bedroom.

King Dimcken slammed the door behind him and half dragged Loki to the bed. He yanked violently at Loki’s robes to try and get them off. Loki undid the buttons as quickly as he could, the King was in no mood for gentleness.

Once Loki was naked, King Dimcken shoved him onto the bed face down and pressed a hand onto his back between his shoulder blades. He leaned all of his weight down, pinning Loki to the bed as he pressed his fingers between Loki's legs.

Loki struggled not to let out a whimper at the feeling of the King's fingers pressing hard inside of him. He wasn't even remotely ready, but after a minute or so of painful rubbing he realised something, neither was the king.

He was too angry, Loki realised. He could hear the sounds of the King pulling and tugging at himself, trying to get aroused, but he couldn't do it.

This wasn't sex, this was a claiming. Old wounds had been opened and the King was trying to prove a point. Unfortunately, his body was not young enough to do so easily.

He punched the bed beside Loki's head in frustration and growled as he renewed his struggles.

Loki's heart was hammering in fear. If the King stayed angry he would stay awake, but if he exhausted himself with sex then he'd fall asleep, deeply asleep.

And Loki needed him to fall asleep.

It wasn't even a plan, not yet, but he knew that Fosxyr could not die. Not for falling in love, no one should be punished for falling in love.

He had to do something to soothe the king's temper enough so that he could become aroused.

He took a deep breath, put on his best 'vulnerable' tone and said:

"I can't believe he betrayed you."

King Dimcken froze above him.
"I thought... I mean... he always... I thought he was different," Loki said.

There was a subtle relaxing of muscles from behind him.

King Dimcken sighed heavily. "Oh my darling young wife," he said.

One hand tugged on Loki's shoulder to turn him around. Loki did so, and found himself lying caged by the King's arms.

He pouted a little and tried to look shocked and betrayed.

"I thought I could trust him," he whispered, "I thought that after so many years of your example that he had learnt loyalty, and honour. But he turned out to be just like all the other commoners."

Loki sniffed a little, and looked hurt.

King Dimcken kissed him gently.

"I thought so too my love, but you can't trust them, they are not like us, they do not value their word, they do not have true honour. It is a hard lesson for you to learn, but you'll be better for it, I promise."

"Yes Husband," Loki said sadly.

King Dimcken lay down, putting his weight on Loki's body.

"You're a good boy," he said. "You are loyal to me, aren't you?"

Loki allowed himself a look of childish outrage, different from a look of adult outrage because it wasn't the slightest bit scary to look at. The word 'cute' had been used to describe it more than once.

"I would *never*," he said, "I am a Prince by blood, I have *honour*. You are my husband and I am *yours*."

King Dimcken smiled and kissed him again, with his temper soothed, his arousal was growing, Loki could feel the results against his leg.

"Yes," King Dimcken purred, "you are mine."

It seemed to last forever. In reality it couldn't have been any longer than normal, but with time of the essence, it seemed an eternity before the King gasped in release, rolled over and finally, finally fell asleep.

Loki waited anxiously until he heard the first of the snores. Then he waited even more anxiously for ten more minutes, in case the King was faking it.

Finally he rose from the bed and crept towards his dressing room. The guards would have taken Fosxyr right away, but unless they had him on the back of a horse they would have to take a wagon, which would slow them down.

Loki had to catch them.

He slipped into the dressing room and ran on bare and silent feet to the back.

His aesir clothes sat there in the rays of the dying sun, if clothes could have emotions, then these looked almost alive with anticipation.
Loki pulled them on. The leather was as supple as the day he'd last worn them, which was good, because he was going for a long ride.

He crept back through the bedroom where the King lay snoring heavily and paused by the door. He concentrated and whispered an illusion spell over himself and the door. He opened the door and slipped through. No one reacted. Camtan and Soffitia were lying on one of the couches with Roaseia curled up between them. She was still awake and as Loki silently made his way across the room to where his knives were kept, her voice piped up in question.

"Why are we sleeping here?"

"We're having a sleepover darling," Soffitia said gently. "All of us together."

"But why are we *here*?" she asked.

She was at that age where her questions seemed endless. Loki admired both Camtan and Soffitia for their restraint during such a stressful time.

"Because there are lots and lots of couches and chairs to sleep on here," Camtan said.

"I need to go to the toilet," Roaseia said.

Camtan shot a helpless look at the guard as Loki slipped the knives into his belt.

One of the guards looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry Your Grace, I have orders," he said.

"Maybe there's a vase or something," Camtan muttered.

Loki bounced on his feet impatiently. He needed to talk to them all, but he couldn't do it while the guard was paying close attention.

"There should be a toilet just off the servant's room in the corridors," Dorgen said softly. "If you went with them, the others will all stay here and watch us."

The guards looked at one another in indecision.

"She's only a child," Camtan said pleadingly.

One of the guards sighed in frustration and pulled the servant's door open. Loki echoed the sigh, only silently, he needed to get moving and the delay was terrible.

Soffitia picked up Roaseia and carried her through. The other guards watched the rest of them closely, but they were all sitting in sullen silence.

That was good enough. Loki quickly cast a spell over the whole room, he could work with this.

The Princes all turned to look at him in astonishment as, to them, he appeared from thin air. The guards didn't react, to their eyes everyone was still sitting quietly, staring at nothing as they were lost in their own thoughts.

"I need your help," Loki said. "I'm going to rescue Fosxyr."

Dorgen stood up immediately. "I'll come, I know the way to the stables through the servant's corridors, and there is a back way past the execution grounds that is faster, we can make up some time."
He turned to Mulmyr and exchanged an intense look.

"Do what you have to," she said seriously, "but stay safe."

"Always," Dorgen said, and turned back to Loki. "Can you conceal us?"

Loki nodded. "Nobody talk to Dorgen while we're gone, as far as the guards are concerned he's going to fall asleep."

He cast his spell into one of the many crystals he kept in his chambers and left it on the chair where Dorgen had been sitting.

Dorgen led the way through the servant's corridors with Loki following. They went down through the twisting passageways to the stables. The servant's corridors had no windows, and no obvious signs of where they were at any one time. They had been designed like that on purpose; you had to work there to prevent yourself from getting lost, that or grow up in the palace with a love of exploring.

They reached the stables quickly, Loki ran through to the back and grabbed one of the astride saddles from the army storage area.

He saddled Lightning as fast as he could. Dorgen saddled his own horse as well.

"Can you gallop side on?" Loki asked.

"I can," Dorgen said seriously.

They ride out of the yard and through the gates. Loki made them invisible and removed the sound of the hoof beats as they rode. He was starting to get a slight headache from casting such complicated spells so rapidly, but he had to, Fosxyr's life depended on it.

They rode through the cobbled streets, which were thankfully fairly deserted, and headed for the northern gate.

They rode in silence to twenty minutes before the houses gave way to the beginnings of the forest. Another ten minutes of riding and Dorgen slowed up.

"Here," he said. "It's here, this is the messenger's rode, they use it so that they don't get slowed by the carts on the main road."

They turned and started riding again. The messenger's road was well maintained and designed for single riders. They made good time as they rode through the forest.

Lightning was faster than Dorgen's horse, and Loki slowly pulled ahead. He started to pull up at one point but Dorgen yelled at him to keep going.

"I'll catch you as fast as I can, just get there!" he yelled.

It took an hour, even Lightning couldn't gallop forever, but he sure as hell tried, and at last Loki reached the execution grounds.

He dismounted and quickly wrapped Lightning's reins around a branch, then he crept forward to peer between the trees.

Fosxyr had been tied by his arms to two different points, they were pulled so tightly that his joints were straining. His legs were dripping slowly but steadily with blood from shallow cuts the guards
had made to the skin on his thighs.

His face was a mask of fear, Loki saw why immediately. A wolf was standing in front of him, readying itself to spring. There were others in the shadows as well, waiting for their moment. After so many years of this place being used as an execution ground, the pack had grown used to having food left for them.

Loki withdrew Thor's knife from his belt. The guards, he knew, would be in the cart back on the road, safely sealed from attack until morning when they would check on the condemned.

The wolf sprang, Loki threw.

The knife hit the wolf in the neck, it landed against Fosxyr's body but it was already dead.

The other wolves drew back, wary of Loki's presence as he ran to Fosxyr's side and started pulling at the ropes.

"Loki?" Fosxyr hissed in astonishment. "What in Hel's name are you doing here? Are you insane?!!"

"A little," Loki said, freeing one of Fosxyr's hands and starting on the other.

The wolf pack was circling, but they knew better than to attack the food that wasn't tied up.

Loki got Fosxyr's second arm free as the sound of hoofs reached his ears.

"That's Dorgen," he said softly. "How close are the guards? Would they have heard?"

"I don't know," Fosxyr said, rubbing his wrist. "I've never been here before."

Dorgen appeared, watching the shadows carefully. He took in the sight of the dead wolf.

"We'll have to bring that with us," he said. "Or else someone will suspect."

"Wait," Loki said.

He had been listening for the guards but luck, it seemed, was on their side.

"Help me tie the wolf up," he said.

Dorgen frowned in confusion, but he and Fosxyr helped lift the wolf up to the ropes. Loki tied each of the wolf's front paws so that it hung the way Fosxyr had.

"Go to the horses," he said. "I'll join you in a minute."

Dorgen helped Fosxyr back to the horses. Loki waited until they were gone before he turned back to the wolf.

He'd mastered the art of transmutation centuries ago. Really it was just one type of meat to another.

It was still an effort, and it left Loki feeling lightheaded and dizzy, but slowly he transformed the wolf body into a human one; a human one with a familiar face.

The sight of it made Loki feel sick. He knew it was just a wolf, but it looked like Fosxyr, right down to the red hair.

He stumbled away, not looking back as the wolf pack slipped from the shadows and began to tear
Dorgen had given Fosxyr his middle garment, and they had torn up his undergarment into bandages to stop the bleeding on Fosxyr's legs. They looked up as Loki approached. Neither of them asked him what he'd done, they no doubt suspected, but didn't want to know.

That was fair enough, Loki wished that *he* didn't know.

"We need to get back to the palace," Dorgen said. "If we get some spare robes and some food from the kitchens, then there is a pathway to Asgard just outside the eastern wall. The King had it sealed by a mage during the trouble with the resistance, but if Fosxyr can hide for a few days I might be able to break it."

"You have magic?" Loki asked as they mounted up.

Loki pulled Fosxyr up behind him. The servant gripped him tightly around the waist but didn't say anything as he sat awkwardly astride.

"A little, from my mother," Dorgen said. "Father thinks it's a useless pursuit for a man. If I can get the pathway open, it leads to a rocky island, but Mulmyr will write to her contact in Asgard and they will send someone to collect you, you'll be there for four days at the most."

"And if we can't open it, Fosxyr will be trapped trying to hide in the palace where everyone knows him. Someone will let something slip," Loki said. "We need a backup plan."

"I never thought it was you Fosxyr," Dorgen said. "You were always around, but the way you acted with her, it wasn't like a lover, more like-"

"A brother," Fosxyr said.

His voice was subdued, but with an edge to it that Loki had never heard before.

"You were her brother?" Loki exclaimed.

"We were twins, she was my other half, in a field of thousands, she found me. My father and brother had been searching for months but she found me in days. She always knew when I was in trouble."

"You were the young man in the story," Loki said. "Who was rescued... by... I wasn't asleep," he finished lamely.

"Clearly," Fosxyr said with a touch of his old snark.

"Why didn't you say so?!" Dorgen blurted out. "Fosxyr, he sent you to your death and you said nothing! Why?!!"

"Why would I betray the only man who loved her more than I did?" Fosxyr said simply. "She never betrayed him, she never betrayed me for helping them, and I did help them. I covered for them. I watched the children while they spent time together. We were young and foolish and we thought we were smarter than the King, but we weren't, and she paid the price."

Loki saw Dorgen looking uncomfortable, and a tendril of suspicion uncurled in his mind. "How do you know about the pathway?" he asked him. "And for that matter, how do you know that there'll be someone waiting?" His eyes widened. "You've done this before."

Behind Loki, Fosxyr stiffened.
Dorgen looked across at them both uneasily. "I wasn't going to tell anyone until after the King died and I could pardon her," he said.

"The queen," Loki said.

"Visxena," Fosxyr said, his grip around Loki's waist tightened.


Dorgen nodded slowly. "I couldn't let it happen," he said. "It wasn't right, so I... sent her away, until things changed." He turned to Fosxyr. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I didn't think it was safe to tell anyone, even Musleen and Camtan have no idea, they were children back then and after enough time past it seemed safer to stay silent."

Loki was stunned. The last queen of Vanaheim had been living under Odin's nose for over a thousand years. He couldn't *wait* until the day Odin found out.

"We'll find a way to send you to her, there has to be a place you can hide in the palace," Dorgen said.

Fosxyr was silent for a while, he seemed to be in a mild shock.

"How could you stay," Loki asked him, breaking the silence. "Knowing what the King had done, how could you stand it?"

"No one went anywhere as long as they were looking for the lover," Fosxyr said. "No servant leaves such a high position without very good reason, it would have been too suspicious to go, besides, her children were there, I couldn't leave behind the only piece of her I had left."

Loki frowned. "So does that mean that her lover is still in the palace? Even today?"

There was silence from behind him, which was as good as a confession.

"How could any of you stand it?" Loki asked.

"We had no other choice, I wanted to kill the King afterwards, I had a plan and everything, I didn't care about getting caught, only succeeding."

"What stopped you?" Loki asked, his mind flashing back to Shiarpia and what she'd told him centuries ago.

"My brother talked me out of it," Fosxyr said, confirming Loki's suspicions. "And I've never been truly able to forgive him."

"Who was her lover?" Dorgen asked.

More silence, this time with a stubborn overtone.

"Fosxyr, when news of your capture and execution reaches his ears, he may do something drastic, I don't want to hurt him, I swear to you, on my honour." Dorgen said.

Fosxyr stayed silent for a moment, then he spoke.

"Hieddenyr," he said.
Loki’s jaw fell open in shock.

"But he’s the King’s personal servant!" he exclaimed. "He fills the King’s bath, he dresses him, how could he continue to do that after what happened?"

"He had no reason to leave, he’s never had a good enough reason to leave. You think the King had forgotten that he never caught her lover? Tonight has proven that he did not. Hieddenyr’s been trapped there, serving the man who ordered the execution of Visxena, for thousands of years." Fosxyr said.

He took a breath and continued.

"There is nowhere I can think of where I can hide completely undetected," he said. "The palace is a secure building for obvious reasons, places and rooms inside do not get abandoned. If you cannot lift the seal tonight, I cannot stay in the palace."

Dorgen frowned. "We'll just have to try," he said as they rode onwards.

It was just past midnight when they returned. Loki and Fosxyr saw to the horses as Dorgen investigated the pathway.

They met up with him as soon as they could, and could tell by his face that he had bad news.

"I can't break it, the seal is incredibly strong, my seidr isn't strong enough," he said. "If my mother was here she'd have it down in minutes."

"Let me try," Loki said. But he was swaying on his feet. The sheer number of spells he had cast that night had taken their toll, and he couldn't get the pathway to open.

Fosxyr just nodded in resignation. "I will have to wait to see her again," he said.

"We need to hide you," Dorgen said, "and quickly."

Fosxyr looked between them, before settling his gaze on Loki.

"I know a Lord who owes me a favour," he said. "I had hoped never to have to take Lord Eadgleyr up on his offer, but do you think you could wake them at this time of night?"

Loki kept them invisible as they made their way through the servant's corridors to Lord Fallconyr and Lord Eadgleyr's rooms. He was definitely feeling weak, but he forced himself to continue.

The two lords were spooning together on their bed, Loki woke them carefully by patting their arms.

"Loki! What on earth is happening?" Lord Eadgleyr blearily asked as Lord Fallconyr sat up with an expression of alarm.

Loki and Dorgen told them what had happened as quickly as possible. When they were done, Lord Eadgleyr looked at where Fosxyr stood.

"You need a robe, I’ll get you one of mine. Give that one back to Dorgen so that the King doesn’t notice its absence. And you two need to get back to the queen’s chambers. We’ll take care of Fosxyr."

Dorgen took his middle-garment back before reaching out and clasping Fosxyr's wrist.

"Do you forgive me my silence?" he asked.
"With every breath in my sister's body," Fosxyr said.

"Take care Fosxyr, and I will see you in the future," Dorgan said and went to the door as Lord Eadgleyr draped a robe over the servant’s shoulders.

Loki clasped Fosxyr's wrist next. "Thank you for everything," he said.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Fosxyr told him sincerely.

As Loki turned to go he heard Lord Fallconyr say "We need to wake Haewkyr, he can go home tomorrow with the empty trade carts."

"The *almost* empty trade carts," Lord Eadgleyr corrected. "Don't worry, Haewkyr will see you safely to the country. Oh and Loki?"

Loki turned.

"Yes Grandmother?" he asked.

"Those clothes suit you," Lord Eadgleyr said with a smile.

Loki returned it, and slipped into the corridor where Dorgen stood waiting.

They ran back through the corridors to the queen's chambers. Loki was starting to sway as he reached the top floor. Dorgen grabbed him and led him through the passageways, past where Wraenyr lay sleeping, until they came out in the bathroom.

"You need to get the smell of horse off you," he said.

Loki stripped off and showered quickly as Dorgen put his aesir clothes back in the dressing room for him. Washed and dried, Loki almost stumbled on his way back to bed.

King Dimcken was still snoring. Dorgen scowled at the sight of his father as he helped Loki crawl under the covers.

"Go through the door when I nod at you," Loki whispered.

Dorgen went to the door and waited.

Loki concentrated one last time, creating an illusion of the door so that it would appear to remain closed, and on Dorgen to keep him invisible. He nodded, and Dorgen slipped through.

A moment later Loki felt a disturbance in his other spell as Dorgen settled in the chair. He lifted the spell and finally allowed himself to rest.

The night had been one of revelations. Who would have thought that Dorgen would have saved the last queen? And Fosxyr being willing to die to protect Hieddenyr? And Hieddenyr?! How could he even stand to be in the same room as the King?

Rescuing Fosxyr definitely counted as causing trouble, even though they hadn't been caught.

The thought hit Loki so suddenly he gasped out loud. He hadn't even thought about it, he'd just known that he had to save Fosxyr, he'd never stopped to think. There was no way that Odin wouldn't use this as an excuse to banish Loki from Asgard forever.

Unless...
"Heimdall?" Loki whispered, looking up at the ceiling out of habit. "I had to, please, it was the right thing to do."

Loki lay in the silence of bedroom and hoped that Thor would understand, before exhaustion finally overcame him and he fell into a deep sleep.

The following morning the guards returned with the news that Fosxyr was dead. Later that same morning, Haewkyr set off for home, accompanied by the two cart drivers and a stack of *almost* empty tea sacks.

Chapter End Notes

Coneycat? Well done.
Ninety Four Steps

Chapter Summary

Once Upon a Time

Chapter Notes

References to rape, a bit of gore and underage sex.

A long time ago...
Fosxyr finished hanging Prince Dorgen's robes in his dressing room and took a moment to stretch. The Prince himself was at his lessons, learning all the things he would one day need to be a King.
The amount of things he had to learn seemed to be endless, and Fosxyr was grateful a million times over that he was born common. Since the death of Prince Norbleen, Prince Dorgen's life had changed dramatically.
It put the second, now only, prince of Vanaheim in a dark mood, but then he'd been in a dark mood since the end of the war, so had the King really.
Fosxyr sighed and spotted a robe that was hanging crooked, he straightened it carefully.
He knew that Dorgen and the King had loved Prince Norbleen, *everyone* had loved Prince Norbleen, but it had been 187 years, 'surely,' he thought with the selfishness that came from youth and inexperience, 'surely they should have stopped grieving by now.'
The clock bell rang, interrupting his musings. It was finally midday, and he had a much longed for break.
He also had a visitor.
He made his way downstairs to the servant's gate at the rear of the palace. Visxena was waiting for him with her arms full of carefully wrapped clothes.
"Robes for the Queen," she announced unnecessarily.
Fosxyr had known she was coming, well, he'd known *someone* was coming. He'd been expecting their older brother, Vullpesyr.
"He's out chatting to his girlfriend," Visxena filled in for him without him having to ask. She often did that, but then so did he, they could read each other like open books.
Fosxyr took the clothes from her arms and led her inside. Visxena glanced around openly as he escorted her down to the palace laundry and placed the new robes on the pile for the Queen’s laundry servant to collect.
"Come on," he said, "let's grab lunch and go to the garden."

He led her through to the servant's dining area where they grabbed some rolls and fruit. The dining area was busy and loud, full of servants from all over the palace, as well as dozens who worked for specific Lords and Ladies. They wore the colours of their masters, but, as most of them had been there a long time, they were not by any means considered outsiders.

The two serving women who each worked for a Lord on either side of a vicious feud were sharing a drink and swapping stories of their grandchildren, as at the end of another table the bedroom servants of Prince Breaveen and Lord Loawyr were trading casual gossip about the state of their master's sheets.

"Who’s that?" Visxena asked, nodding at a tall, slightly gangly young man in the palace colours.

"Hieddenyr, he’s a friend of mine, he’s the King’s bedroom servant," Fosxyr said.

Visxena gave him a wave and he dropped his fork on the floor.

He blushed furiously as he snatched it up, and she gave him a smile.

Fosxyr saw the head of the bedroom servants, Wattchen, giving him a calculating look as Visxena walked past. He knew that the man was wondering whether she was his girlfriend, or something else, with their different looks it was an easy mistake to make.

They went to the public garden and sat under one of the trees. Fosxyr pulled some grass from the ground and started flicking it, it was an old habit that he'd had since he was a child.

Well, a younger child, but he was almost a man now, he was going to be one thousand next year, only another 125 years to go after that, *then* he'd be a man.

"How's Father and Mother?" he asked.

Visxena rolled her eyes. "Impossible, they keep me inside at all hours to help with the sewing, but Vullpesyr gets to run all over the place all the time."

"That's because he can't sew. He's a terrible excuse for a tailor's son," Fosxyr said.

"He's talking about moving into imports, trading in the base materials and keeping the clothes as a smaller sideline, that is, once he inherits Father's business," Visxena said. "Father thinks that's a terrible idea, but if he can't sew then he needs to make a living."

"Hmm," Fosxyr said, not really interested.

"How's work, do you see the Prince Dorgen very often?" Visxena asked.

"Every day," Fosxyr said. "He's gloomy and dull."

"He's suffered a great loss, they all have." Visxena said.

"Yes, 180 years ago," Fosxyr said.

Visxena sighed. "It's tragic, and Prince Dorgen is so..."

"Seriously?" Fosxyr interrupted with an incredulous look. "Don’t tell me you’re like all the other girls?"
She blushed lightly. "I don't see why I can't be like the other girls, I *am* one. He's only a little older than us and the other girls all think he's very handsome, and one day he will marry a beautiful princess and the wedding will be amazing, maybe Father will be asked to sew the wedding gown!"

Fosxyr rolled his eyes. "Girls," he muttered, "you're all mad."

She giggled. "You seriously don't find him dreamy?"

"I most certainly do not!" Fosxyr said as she erupted into giggles.

They were infectious, and soon they were laughing at nothing at all in the way youths are prone to do.

"Well what have we here?" said a voice from over their shoulders.

They turned and jumped quickly to their feet to bow as they realised that their King stood behind them.

He was tall and well built, with grey in his dark-blonde hair. He smiled indulgently at the two of them as they almost fell over each other in their rush to bow. His chief of security, Lord Leymonyr, and his good friend Lord Falconyr stood behind him.

"I heard laughter and couldn't help but try to find the source," he said good-naturedly.

They stared at their feet, struck mute by his presence.

"Rise up," he said, still smiling.

They rose, and King Dimcken laid eyes on Visxena properly for the first time.

He blinked at the vision of loveliness that stood before him. Her hair was silky and long, and fell in thick curls around her face. Her eyes were the brightest blue he'd ever seen and her lips were so inviting that he just wanted to lean in and kiss them right there and then.

"Well," he managed, "and what, um, what is your name?"

"Visxena Your Majesty," she said, her voice was trembling slightly from shock and awe.

"Was it you I heard laughing just now?" he asked.

"We weren't doing any harm Your Majesty," she said in a small voice.

King Dimcken chuckled. "I didn't say you were, you have a lovely laugh my dear, enchanting."

"Thank you Your Majesty," she murmured.

He nodded at her and moved on. She and Fosxyr stayed frozen to the spot until the King was out of sight, before they grabbed the remains of their food and ran back to the servant's dining room. Once safely away they burst into a fit of laughter at what had happened.

"I met the King!" Visxena exclaimed. "My friends will never believe me, never!"

"I've been working here for 120 years and I've never even *seen* him!" Fosxyr exclaimed.

Back in the garden, the King turned to his chief of security.
"Find out who she is," he said. "She wasn't in servant's livery, I want to know who she is."

"Yes Your Majesty," Lord Leymonyr said as Lord Fallconyr rolled his eyes. Another commoner who would entertain the King for a few hours, although this one looked a little young to be swept off her feet, maybe she was older than she looked. Lord Fallconyr frowned in thought, he *hoped* that she was older than she looked.

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"She's a tailor's daughter, 999 years old, no history of crime or trouble. Two brothers, the younger one works in the palace as a servant. Other than that she's a clean slate." Lord Leymonyr told the King.

"She's too young," Lord Fallconyr pointed out. "I thought as much, she still looked like a child."

"She's well developed for a child," King Dimcken argued.

"Some children are, but they are still children, the law states that the age of majority is 1125, she's too young, wait a while, she's only going to get older," Lord Fallconyr replied.

King Dimcken scowled. "Someone else will have her before then, some inexperienced boy."

"An inexperienced boy for an inexperienced girl, at least they'll learn together," Lord Fallconyr said calmly.

"I want her," King Dimcken said.

"She's too young by the law your father wrote with his own hand," Lord Fallconyr protested.

King Dimcken glared at him, then brightened. "Too young for wooing," he said, "but not too young for marrying. The marrying age is lower with the parent’s permission. If I marry her then I can bed her, and I don't have to wait."

Lord Fallconyr looked shocked. "Dimcken!" he said. "You are already married!"

"To a woman who won't touch me," King Dimcken snapped. "I want Viaxenia."

"Visxena," Lord Leymonyr mumbled.

"Yes her," King Dimcken said. "I will go to the Master of Ceremonies and have myself divorced, then I will marry Visxena."

"You can't be serious," Lord Fallconyr snapped.

"I am perfectly serious, why shouldn't I be? Am I to live my life without love?"

"What love? You saw her for thirty seconds and want to bed her, do you even know her last *name*?" Lord Fallconyr protested.

King Dimcken's eyes narrowed. "I am your King," he said quietly.

"You're a bloody fool," Lord Fallconyr snapped.

"Leymonyr? Take *that* bloody fool to the dungeons. I will not be spoken to in such a way." King Dimcken ordered.
Lord Leymenyr rose and took Lord Fallconyr by the arm. "Come on Fal," he mumbled in the Lord's ear, "you know what he's like."

Lord Fallconyr gave them both a haughty look. "I will take myself," he snapped, "I know the way."

Once he was gone King Dimcken turned to Lord Leymonyr. "As soon as the divorce is over I want her installed in the palace," he ordered.

"Yes Your Majesty," Lord Leymenyr said.

****

Two days later Prince Dorgen came thundering into his room and kicked over one of his chairs.

In the servant's room behind the walls, Fosxyr and the other servants froze and waited. Dorgen was often gloomy, but he rarely broke his own things, even when he did lose his temper.

"That *bastard*, that horrible... arrgh!!" He smashed another chair.

"Dorgen Claeveren Norbleyr Dimckenson! You will calm down *right now*." It was the voice of his mother, the Queen. One of the servants crept a little closer to the door to listen. Something major was going on and it was important to know what it was in case it affected the servants.

Fosxyr sat with the other servants and waited.

"How can he do this to you?" Dorgen asked her. "Just like that? With no warning? You're his queen! He can't just divorce you!"

The servant’s exchanged shocked glances. A Divorce? This was big news.

"He just has, or at least, he has announced it. Dorgen, you know that your father and my marriage was arranged?"

"Of course, but even so-

"He claims to have fallen in love, perhaps that is true, but regardless he and I have been living separately for quite some time. I am not concerned by this, I will still be here for you, it may just be for the best."

"Who do you think it is?" Dorgen asked, his voice a little calmer. "Some social climber?"

"Perhaps, perhaps one of the Ladies from the more influential families, I am not sure," she said. "Regardless, I expect you to treat her with respect, a future King must be both diplomatic and tactful."

The bell rang in the servant’s room, making them all jump. The listening servant waited for five seconds before opening the door and stepping out to serve.

The others exchanged looks of surprise and excitement. A divorce! Followed by a royal wedding. So much *work*. The noble court never thought twice about what things like this meant to the servants.

"Go downstairs and tell Wattchen about this, quietly," one of the older servants said to Fosxyr.

Fosxyr nodded and went.
Four weeks later and the divorce was finalised. The Queen, now a Lady again, moved to rooms nearer her son. King Dimcken wanted her gone entirely, but until Dorgen had reached his majority he had no good reason to kick her out.

It was Wattchen who came to find Fosxyr.

"I've just seen the new Queen-to-be," he said to the bewildered boy. "That girl you were with that day in the kitchens, is she your sweetheart?"

"My sister," Fosxyr said, confused as to why the head of the bedroom servants would be singling him out.

"Name of Visxena?" Wattchen continued.

Fosxyr paled. "Yes?" he whispered.

"Thought so, she's in the queen's chambers right now having a panic attack, the King's set the wedding date for two weeks from now."

"What?!" Fosxyr blurted. "He can't do that!"

"He's the King, he can do anything," Wattchen said calmly. "I'm relieving you of your morning duties, go and talk to her, poor little thing."

Fosxyr went to the queen's chambers in a kind of shock. Wattchen had to be wrong, Visxena was too young, and a commoner! Fosxyr wasn't stupid enough to believe that nobles didn't prey on commoners, especially the pretty ones, but marriage? No, that just didn't happen.

But why then was Visxena in the queen's chambers? Her blue eyes were full of terrified tears as she looked up at him as he came through the servant’s door.

"He s-said h-he's g-going to m-marry m-me," she sobbed. "I-I d-didn't k-know how to say n-no. A-and F-father had to s-sign a p-paper and he d-didn't want to b-but the King m-made him."

Fosxyr just sat down beside her. They were both sitting on the fireplace step, commoners didn't sit on the chairs of the nobles.

He put his arm around her.

"Maybe it's a mistake?" he said hopefully. "Maybe it's a prank? A joke on us common folk?"

"M-maybe," Visxena sobbed, burying her face in his shirt. "I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to Mother, she was out," she said.

They sat there, numb and shocked, as the hours slipped by and the afternoon turned to night.

****

Her family were not invited to the wedding. Fosxyr, as one of Dorgen's bedroom servants, spent the night sitting in the servant's room in case his master returned and needed something.

The King's new marriage had been a scandal; a common-born queen in a court of nobles. The old queen had been enraged, usurped by a rival lady she could understand, with her son the crown prince she could even welcome her freedom, but usurped by a commoner? The humiliation was
Dorgen was furious on behalf of his mother, and spent the night dancing with every woman present except the new queen. He glared daggers at her the entire time until one young lady with a rather unfortunate face and build told him to damn well look at the poor thing properly. He was so shocked by her bluntness that he did what she said, and his rage softened slightly.

Visxena didn’t dance with anyone, she only knew the village-dances anyway, and had never even heard the refined music that was being played before now. King Dimcken danced instead, stopping to look back at his new Queen during the breaks in the music.

He turned to her at one point during the night and promised to give her a proper education, to make up for her 'lack of breeding'. She just nodded and whispered a thank you. She was in a type of shock, and her eyes kept slipping towards the doors. But only the servant's doors, Lord Fallconyr noticed as he watched the poor girl. She was so young it was obscene.

Lord Eadgleyr had pulled him away from the crowds at dawn as they made their way to the bedchamber for the first night.

"Don't," he said softly as he put his arms around his husband’s swollen belly. It would be their thirteenth, and probably last child. "You can't stop him, and you'll never survive his reaction if you try."

The following morning, as the nobles slept off their busy night, Wattchen came and found Fosxyr.

"I'm transferring you," he said without preamble, as was his way. "I'm moving you to the queen's chambers, you can be near your sister."

"Is she alright?" Fosxyr asked him, his face worried.

"The healer said she'd be fine," he answered gruffly.

"The healer?!" Fosxyr exclaimed.

"Don't go running off, it's a standard thing following a noble's first night, they're all a bit weak to be honest, and they think everyone else must be too" Wattchen said. He paused in thought. "Does anyone else know that she’s your sister?" he asked.

Fosxyr shrugged. “A few people,” he said. “Hieddenyr, Henlpen, Staobyr, um, maybe one or two others.”

“If you want my advice, I’d keep my mouth shut about it. His Majesty doesn’t want her family around, he’s made that much perfectly clear. He doesn’t like us” -Wattchen sneered- “commoners. Keep it quiet and you’ll be able to stay by her side, now you go and take care of her."

Fosxyr nodded and went to go. Wattchen caught his arm and added one last thing.

"If it was my girl, I'd have killed him," he muttered, and let go.

Fosxyr ran through the corridors to be by her side.

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She named him Musleen, people assumed that it was after the King's father, but it was really after her mother, Musleia. She wanted them to know that she hadn't forgotten them.
"They know," Fosxyr said as he watched her cradle the tiny child in her arms. "I tell them that you think of them every time I see them."

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Camtan was her father's name, months before the birth she and Fosxyr had researched in the library, trying to find a great warrior who had the same name, so that the King would agree to it.

Camtan the mighty was a powerful Lord from before the freezing of the high mountains, he ruled the land by the sea and his tomb was said to still be there, cut deeply into the cliff-side.

She told the King the story over time, slowly building his esteem for the long-dead warrior lord until he was convinced that it was the only possible name for his third son.

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Hieddenyr had come to the palace about fifty years before Fosxyr. He was tall and gangly in his youth, but very good at cleaning. He started in the kitchen, getting such shine on the fine silver that it looked better than new.

Later it was the King's brother's chambers, then the King himself. King Dimcken had to have the best, and Wattchen knew talent when he saw it.

He did not foresee what would happen.

She was always better at speaking to the servants than she was at speaking to the nobles, she was one of them, and after the initial confusion most of her servants became her friends, forgetting propriety and chatting to her like they would any one of their own.

She helped them clean up her chambers, although she was so good at picking up after herself that there was little to do in any case. She was not one of the baffling *nobles*, she was normal, trapped, but normal.

She even won Dorgen over. He could see her fear and her reluctance, he could see that she was trapped. He let his rage towards her go and directed it solely at his father instead. But what really cemented his decision was her decision to witness the birth of his two sons. He, Vixena and Prince Breaveen, the King's brother, were the three witnesses to their births, and as such, their legitimacy. Without her, by Vanir law his children would have not been in the line of succession.

In the dark and quiet of the meditation room, after the King had fallen asleep, Vixena and Hieddenyr would talk. Many times she would cry, and he would comfort her.

He alone saw what the King would do to her, she tried to keep it from everyone else, even Fosxyr, as she didn't want to upset him.

They didn't mean to fall in love. They certainly didn't mean to act on it. But one night, after so many nights of longing, they gave in to one another.

Those years were the happiest of her marriage. She would sing to her children, smile at everyone, her body was imprisoned but her heart was free and loved him fiercely.

She told Fosxyr, because she told him everything. He worried of course, but he didn't stop them. He and Hieddenyr had been friends for years as they went about their work in the palace. Now they were co-conspirators in the most dangerous secret they had ever kept.
Slowly, as time passed and they all grew up into adults with more responsibilities, they began to talk more and more of the day the King would die.

"He's healthy, he might last a long time," Hieddenyr said to Fosxyr as they ate their lunch in one of the private gardens.

"His mother died young, he might take after her," Fosxyr pointed out optimistically.

"I'll take good care of her you know," Hieddenyr said. "I know she suffers, I know she has nightmares, I'm prepared for it, I won't leave her if she struggles."

"I know," Fosxyr said. "You're a good man."

For the longest time the nobles remained oblivious to what was going on beneath their noses, not so the servants, who were far better at reading the subtle signs. The name of Fosxyr was bandied about as a possibility, they were close after all, but Fosxyr’s friends would laugh it off, and Fosxyr himself would just roll his eyes and tell them not to be so stupid. So, as the rumours could never be confirmed, the three of them continued with their secrets blissfully oblivious to the true danger they were in.

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It was too good to last, the rumours eventually reached the ears of Lord Shaockyr, Lord Leymonyr's replacement as head of security. He had taken over the role a few centuries earlier when Lord Leymonyr had been assassinated, a hazard of the job that had taken three lives during King Dimcken's reign.

He told the King, as was his duty, and almost paid for it with his life. King Dimcken refused to believe that her 'common-touch' Queen could be unfaithful, she was a commoner for goodness sake! She lived in awe of him!

But the seed had been planted, and it grew in his mind. Finally he agreed to a trap for her, to catch this lover and her in the act. King Dimcken planned to fake his sleep after their night together to see what she would do, and Lord Shaockyr and his men would wait hidden in the shadows for the lover to make his move.

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The night that it ended did not seem any different to Fosxyr. He was dozing in the servant's room outside the nursery, just in case one of the children woke in the night. But it wasn't the children who woke him.

It was Wattchen. He was older now, more grey, and looking forward to retirement, now he shuffled up quickly and shook Fosxyr awake.

"Wattchen, what is it?" Fosxyr asked.

"They've set a trap for the Queen!" he hissed. "They say that she has a lover and they've set a trap to catch them!"

Fosxyr paled and jumped to his feet.

"So there really was a lover? The rumours were true?" Wattchen said at his reaction. "I wasn't sure, but I thought I'd better warn you in any case, you children are playing a dangerous game."
Fosxyr looked at him in a panic. "Mind the children!" he said and ran.

He flew through the corridors, desperately trying to reach the king's chambers in time.

Hieddenyr was pushing open the door, he had a flower in his hand from the garden, her favourite blue one. Fosxyr crashed into him, grabbed him around the waist and pulled him back before the door could open fully.

"Get in the servant's room!" he gasped and then took off.

Lord Shaockyr and his men heard the noise and came running through. They saw Fosxyr's back and ran after him as Hieddenyr stood unseen nearby in silent terror.

The Lord and his men had not expected the lover to use the servant's corridors, they had assumed that it was a young noble who had caught her eye, and nobles, they thought with a superior air, did not use such common places.

To this end they themselves were not used to the servant's corridors, and Fosxyr lost them in minutes.

He returned to the children, shaking in fear. Wattchen was waiting for him.

"Did you stop it?" he asked.

"I stopped him, but they know someone was there. But there was no proof that it was a lover," Fosxyr said, wide eyed. "Without proof they can't do anything."

"When you're the King suspicion is proof," Wattchen said quietly, "that girl is in a lot of trouble."

"He can't do anything," Fosxyr insisted, "not without proof."

There was a noise from the bedroom and both men froze.

"See to the children," Wattchen said. "And I do hope you got away with it."

The following morning, they knew that they hadn't.

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Lord Shaockyr had used the disturbance and chase through the corridors as proof of a lover. Visxena insisted that it must have been an intruder, but to no avail. The King's mind had been poisoned against her.

He felt betrayed, and all the pleading in the world could not convince him that it was an intruder that had been scared off and not a lover.

"There just happened to be an intruder on the one night that my security was lying in wait hmm? Who is he?!!" King Dimcken screamed.

She looked at him with pleading eyes.

"There's no one Husband," she insisted. "Lord Shaockyr has framed me. He hates me."

Lord Shaockyr shook his head from behind the King. "I have only done my duty," he said. "That is
"Find the lover," King Dimcken spat. "Find him so I can kill him."

It took all of Visxena's control not to react.

****

Fosxyr lived in a state of terror. He knew they would come for him. He was known to be close to the Queen, if Lord Shaockyr checked the old records then he'd know that they were related, and then Fosxyr would be arrested and tortured.

He didn't want to tell, but he was afraid he wouldn't have the strength.

What if he let them down?

No, he wouldn't. He would be strong, he would be brave. If they couldn't find the lover then they couldn't execute her, not without proof. This could be the answer to all their hopes. She would be divorced and freed.

It was Henlpen who came and found him. When Fosxyr saw the personal servant of the head of security he paled in fear.

"He's going to speak to you," Henlpen said in a hushed voice. "Don't tell him that you're family. I found the old records and burned them. He doesn't know, and no one who does is telling. Just act dumb, you minded the children, you never saw anything suspicious."

Fosxyr clasped his hand. "Thank you," he whispered.

"You're my friend Fox," he said simply, and slipped away.

It was a common problem among the nobles, they never saw the servants as people, with likes and dislikes and families and friendships, and perhaps most importantly of all, loyalty. The servants looked after one another, look out for one another, helped each other with impossible demands and generally led their lives in a world completely different to that of their masters. Fosxyr was well liked in the palace. Very few people knew that he was the Queen's brother, but those that did were his friends.

He played dumb, and got away with it. He was known as the servant she left the children with, and Allibien the laundry servant, told Lord Shaockyr that he'd dropped off some towels that night and walked right past the dozing Fosxyr.

He got away with it, they all got away with it, except for Visxena.

****

Visxena's arms were stretched painfully far by the ropes as the guards finished their task. They took a bucket of blood, taken from the palace butcher, and threw it all over her.

There were a few comments about her body, a few groping hands. They didn't rape her, which she had feared, although *how* she could still fear it after suffering that same fate night after night at the hands of the King she did not know.

Then they left her there to die. The wolves would come soon. She hoped that they would puncture an artery in her leg and that she'd bleed to death before they had time to feast. She had visions of
being slowly torn apart from the legs upwards, her intestines spilling onto the ground while she screamed in pain.

It would be over soon.

Her boys would grow up without her.

It was that thought that made her cry.

A figure emerged from the trees, for a moment she thought the King had come to gloat, but then it drew closer and she made out the more angular and refined features of Prince Dorgen. He held a finger to his lips and reached for her ropes.

He also carried a container of blood, as well as some small chunks of torn meat. He poured it out all around where she had been standing and then took her arm.

“Come on,” he whispered, “we’ve got a plan.”

‘We’ turned out to be him and his wife. Princess Mulmyr had carefully put together provisions from the kitchen and was waiting in the corner of the palace garden.

“I’m going to open a pathway to Asgard,” Dorgen said. “It leads to an island, very rocky, but you won’t be there long. You’ll be collected and taken care of.”

She frowned. “My sons-” she began.

“You can’t stay here and they can’t go,” Dorgen said sadly. “I will take care of them, I promise. And when that bastard is dead I will pardon you and you can come home.”

“Take care my dear, don’t speak of your past. It is better and far safer to stay hidden. If you are discovered then Asgard will have to send you back as hiding a declared traitor is an act of war. But my friend knows who you are and agrees that you do not deserve to die for what you did,” Mulmyr said.

Visxena turn to Dorgen again but he was already concentrating.

“Please, she said, tell F-“

The pathway took her.

“She’s got a long, hard wait ahead of her,” Mulmyr said.

“She’ll be alright,” Dorgen said.

****

The day they took her away and executed her, Fosxyr decided to kill the King.

He would slip a sleeping drug into Hieddenyr’s drink and get past him in the night. He would stab the King in the neck, then he would wait for the guards and the death to follow.

He went to see his family that day, to say goodbye.

“Don’t you even think about it!” shouted Vullpesyr.

“He murdered our sister!” Fosxyr screamed.
“Yes,” Vullpesyr hissed as tears began to flow down his face. “But will you let him murder you too? Am I to lose all my family? At least Mother and Father did not live to see her executed so cruelly.”

“I don’t care!” Fosxyr yelled.

“But I do!” screamed Vullpesyr. “I love you, you idiot! I can’t lose you!”

“You have a family! A wife and child! You will manage!” Fosxyr yelled through the tears that streamed down his face.

“*They* don’t,” Vullpesyr yelled.

Fosxyr was silent, apart from his sobs.

“Her children are without family, without *our* family. Do you want them to grow up like *him*?” Vullpesyr asked. “Please little brother, don’t do this, don’t leave me too, don’t leave *them*, *please*.”

Fosxyr pulled the knife from his belt and slammed it into the floor. The sleeping powder he’d bought was next, and then he stormed out without looking back.

The door to Shiarpia’s bedroom slid open slightly and she peered through the crack at her father, broken and crying on the floor.

****

Fosxyr returned to the palace and went straight to the nursery, where the two younger princes just sat and stared at nothing.

“Sunbeam, Moonlight,” Fosxyr said softly, reaching out to stroke Musleen’s hair.

“I want my own room,” Musleen said. “We’re old enough, I want it.”

“Why do you want your own room? You didn’t want one yesterday,” Fosxyr asked.

Musleen scowled as Camtan began to cry.

“We don’t want to stay in this room anymore. This is the room we slept in when she died.”

The words shocked Fosxyr, and cut him more deeply than he would have thought.

“No my boy,” he said softly. “In this room she sang to you, she played with you, she read you stories and made up games. In this room she danced with you and taught you your letters and listened to you talk about your day. This isn’t the room you slept in while she died, this is the room you slept in while she lived.”

Musleen looked up at him with tears in his eyes.

“It was wrong,” he said softly. “And when I’m grown I won’t ever let it happen again, to anyone.”

“And the realm will be a better place for it,” Fosxyr said softly, stroking the boy’s hair as his other arm reached out to pull Camtan into a hug.

He was all they had left of her. His brother was right, he couldn’t go anywhere.

And he didn’t want to.
Two hundred years after Visxena's execution, Fosxyr understood how someone could grieve for so long.
Loki didn't know whether Dorgen had managed to talk to Hieddenyr, King Dimcken was keeping a close eye on all of them following Fosxyr's execution, but the servant seemed as calm as ever when Loki saw him next.

Dorgen himself had left the palace after a few days. He and Mulmyr headed back to her family home. Musleen sent a group of his most trusted guards with them, for added security.

"To be honest, I wish you would stay in the palace where I can keep a better watch over you," he said. "You know my suspicions about the assassin."

"I cannot stay under the same roof as that man," Dorgen said. "I'm sorry Brother, but I can't. What did you do with the assassin anyway?"

"Officially? He was pardoned by the King for trying to kill you, but equally officially I arrested him for raping and murdering a servant boy centuries ago. I have found enough witnesses to speak against him, he's going to hang."

"Good. Assassins are not necessary in a civilised court, if someone, *anyone*, has done something bad enough to require death then they should be able to be brought to trial, and one day," Dorgen added darkly, "they will be."

"Even the King?" Musleen asked quietly.

Dorgen turned to look at him seriously. "If I ever turn into that," he breathed, "drag me into the courtroom and stop me. Do it properly, but stop me."

Musleen nodded. "I give you my word," he said seriously.

"And take care of Loki!" Dorgen added as he rode away.

To Loki's sadness, Daenceia was included in the group of trusted guards. She was well trained, clever, and had illusion seidr that could be used to fool an assassin.

At least that was what Musleen told him during their usual sparring match in the yard.

"She was excited to go," Loki said, "nervous of course, but excited."

"She is very good, and getting better, she was a logical choice," Musleen said glumly.

Loki had to admire the second Prince, he really did believe in letting people make their own choices and live their own lives.

Loki desperately wanted to blurt out that she loved him too, but he held his tongue. They would work it out in their own time he was sure.
He wished he could comfort Musleen by saying it wouldn’t be much longer, but he couldn’t. Five hundred years. Five hundred years with the King, and without Fosxyr.

Loki pushed it from his mind and concentrated on sparring. He just had to take things one day at the time, just like the last two hundred years.

Suddenly struck ill he lurched away from Musleen and retched, doubling over as he held his stomach.

“Loki?” Musleen exclaimed and dropped his sword. “What is it? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Loki gasped. “It’s just a stomach ache.”

“You should see a healer,” Musleen said.

Loki shook his head, they couldn’t help him, no one could help him.

“I’ll be fine,” he said instead. “I’ll go inside and rest.”

The following day, while in the Tower, Loki heard Shiarpia’s name again. It would occasionally crop up among some of the scholarship students, and he had always ignored it, but it was more difficult now knowing what she must be thinking about the fate of her uncle.

"I heard she was crying."

"Yeah she's looks almost sick."

"Her parents too, they're so sad."

Loki knew what it was about, and he felt for them. There had been no time for Fosxyr to contact them and let them know that he was alright, it would have been far too dangerous.

But still, to grieve for no reason...

Sighing in frustration at his newfound inability to stay the hell out of trouble, Loki made himself a glamour of a blond man with curly hair and blue eyes, and slipped from the Tower during his lunch break.

He made his way to the house by the theatre. He approached it from the front first. It was a materials shop, clearly one of quality. There was a man behind the counter checking the books. He was blond, but his eyes were the same as Fosxyr's, and his mouth too had that overly-large quality.

He looked up and greeted Loki with a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"Shopping for yourself or for your wife Sir?" he inquired.

"Just browsing at the moment," Loki told him. "I am thinking of a new set of robes, and I wanted to know what was available."

"As you like Sir, call on me if you have any questions," the man said and turned back to what he was doing.

Loki wandered through the different materials, stroking at the silks lightly with his fingers. There were some exquisitely embroidered ones, and in one corner, some that had been cast with protection and other spells. To Loki’s eyes, Shiarpia’s mark was all over them. He slipped out a moment later and headed to the rear of the house.
He arrived just as a stream of people, ranging from quite young to almost adulthood, came flying out of the back door.

They were chattering at the top of their lungs, and Loki had to stand to one side to let them all run by.

"Be back in an hour!" called a long unheard, but still familiar voice. "I won't let you back in if you're late."

She was older and her face was thinner, but she was still beautiful. Her golden hair was tied back and her eyes echoed the sadness Loki had seen in her father's.

She saw him standing there and came closer.

"Can I help you?" she asked him. "Do you want to join the class?"

"The class?" Loki asked.

She gave him a very shrewd stare. "The seidr classes? To help you gain basic skills and control so that you can find better work? Or is it reading and writing you want to know? That's Thursdays. Is that not why you're here?"

"You run seidr classes for beginners?" Loki asked.

She frowned then. "I've been doing it for years, if you're not here for that then what do you want? The shop is in the next street and I don't have time for strangers."

Loki leaned on the fence and regarded her.

"I was just curious as to why you would do this? Most of those children were in rags, they can't be paying you."

"Someone has to change the world for the common people," she said. "We can't all be lucky or talented enough to win a scholarship."

"But some of them do," Loki prompted.

"And good luck to them, I would never hold them back if they have what it takes to go on," she said.

"But still, for free?" Loki asked.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I make my money working in the shop, what I do with it is my own business," she said and turned to go.

"You've changed," Loki said softly, which stopped her halfway back to the house.

She turned and stared at him harder, he could *feel* her seidr examining him, trying to break the spell.

He let it fall for less than a second and her face changed with recognition.

"I'm not meant to be here," he said.

"I thought you'd never speak to me again," she said softly. "Have you come to offer your condolences? I mean, it's finally over isn't it? The last of the family drama," she sighed, and Loki could see the defeat on her. There would be no vengeance from Shiarpia, which he had been worried
about. She had given up her fire.

Loki debated rapidly about what he should do, in the end it was Fosxyr who swayed him, or rather, Fosxyr's reaction to learning his sister lived. The way his arms had tightened around Loki’s middle in shock, and the slight edge to his voice when he’d next spoke.

Loki rapidly cast a spell to shield them from anyone who might be listening, just in case.

"I'd offer you my condolences if I could, but they would be premature," he said softly. "You've changed Shiarphia, for the better, and I think that now I might just be able to trust you."

His only clue was the flash of understanding in her eyes, her face remained carefully blank.

"Take care of yourself Loks," she said softly. "I have to set up for the afternoon."

She left him in the yard. Loki smiled and turned away. Maybe they would never be friends as they once were, but he no longer hated her, the sense of betrayal he'd felt had faded. Maybe she’d changed, or maybe they both had.

****

That night Loki sat in his favourite chair by the fire as Femtchyr brought him tea. He missed Fosxyr’s easy manner and gentle smile. He missed the way the servant would tease him gently or sympathise with him when things went wrong.

Loki sighed and took a sip of tea. He wondered when he’d be able to visit his grandparents’ lands again and if Fosxyr would be there. Maybe not, they might have sent him to one of the villages, or maybe one of the more distant farms.

Loki’s lips twitched as a thought entered his head.

Maybe Haewkyr had hidden him in one of the field shelters, as he’d once promised Loki he’d do for him if he ever needed it. Loki could just imagine Fosxyr sitting there on the dirt floor, scowling at the lack of cleaning materials.

It was getting late, and Loki finished his tea and headed to bed.

Wraenyr helped him change. Loki thanked him softly as he gathered up the discarded robes.

“Get some sleep You Grace, you look tired,” Wraenyr said gently.

That had to be Fosxyr’s influence, Loki couldn’t imagine Wraenyr ever growing so bold without the example Fosxyr had set. It was as though he was simply out of the room, and not gone forever as everyone believed.

‘Maybe it’s easier that way,’ Loki thought as he brushed his teeth. The servants must mourn, but they could not be seen to do so, not ever. It wouldn’t be proper. Instead they would carry on as though the person they grieved for was just… somewhere else.

‘How appropriate,’ Loki thought.

Below stairs he was sure that it would be different, they would talk, maybe cry. Would they hold any kind of ceremony for him? Something the nobles would never, ever hear about?

They wouldn’t tell him, even if he asked. A certain amount of familiarity was all very well, but in most ways Loki was still very much an outsider to the world below the stairs and behind the walls.
He wanted to tell them, he wanted to tell everyone who loved Fosxyr, which seemed to be everyone in the palace who wasn’t a king, but he couldn’t. He had to keep the secret, all would be forgiven one day.

In five hundred years.

No matter how many times he tried to get used to the revised number it still made him sick to his soul.

‘Get used to it,’ he thought to himself harshly. ‘You can’t give up now. You *will* survive.’

He lay back in the darkness and recited Thor’s letter in his head like a prayer. But that was the other worry wasn’t it? After what he’d done to save Fosxyr’s life would he even be welcome in Asgard when it was all over? Odin was damn well not going to tell him that he’d failed, Loki knew that much. His father was blind to King Dimcken’s vile acts, convincing himself that Loki’s compliance was maturity.

Loki hated him.

What would he do if Odin banished him? He’d go to the tea fields, Loki decided. He could go there and… and… and what? He’d be without Thor, although with the King gone Thor might come looking for him, what would Odin do then? How badly did he want his sons to stay apart?

Maybe they could have a life on Vanaheim, at least for a while. Dorgen surely wouldn’t stop them?

Actually, while he might not stop Loki, letting the Crown Prince of another realm set up house in his kingdom wasn’t exactly clever politics. Those who worried about Vanaheim becoming a vassal state would object, Odin would certainly object, putting Vanaheim in the line of fire. Dorgen would have to do what was best for his realm, Thor might be permitted to visit, but he couldn’t ever live there.

Loki had a horrible feeling that, after having waited out one King’s life, he was going to have to wait out another before he ever got to see his Thor again.

The fear that had stayed with him since Fosxyr’s rescue crowded his head for hours before he managed to finally fall asleep.

****

The next morning the mail arrived from Asgard. Loki reached for his mother’s letter with a smile.

His smile froze. Someone had tampered with the letter. It had been opened and stuck back together again almost perfectly, but Frigga’s spell of concealment, that let her write honestly to her son without the words being seen by any but him was shining red in his vision.

He cautiously opened the envelope and pulled out the letter. There was an extra sheet of paper tucked into the back.

Loki had never seen Heimdall’s handwriting before, but even so he knew it could be no one else. The writing was neat and regular. The paper was blank except for two words.

“I Blinked.”
For the next few months after Fosxyr's execution Loki was on his best behaviour. So was everyone else. News of his death shot through the servant community like lightning. Within an hour of the guards reporting his death to the King, every servant in the palace knew what had happened.

Most of them were furious. Fosxyr had been well liked, hardworking, kind to the new ones and a fixture at the palace. He'd been working there since he was still a child, hired as a helper for Prince Dorgen as he was about the same age and the other servants were all older. The knowledge that he was the lover divided the lower orders into three distinct ranks.

The majority were unsurprised, there had been rumours at the time, and most of them had expected his arrest within days of the death of the queen.

A small number had been shocked, they had known that as her brother he was close to the queen but their behaviour together had never shown any sign of turning romantic.

The third group consisted of Hieddenyr, who was neither shocked nor unsurprised, for the King was clearly unstable and had always been vengeful, and Fosxyr's familial connection had put him close to the line of fire on more than one occasion.

He was however, very angry. Only Dorgen's hasty conversation in the servant's room behind the king's chambers kept him from doing something drastic. Only the knowledge that the woman he had fallen in love with was still living kept his face calm and his hands steady.

He made up for it by having tea and little cakes to nibble waiting for Loki when the King was done for the night.

Loki sat in one of the large chairs in the King's living room and tried to read his book. It was difficult. Hieddenyr was *right there* and Loki really wanted to say something.

'Did Dorgen speak to you?'

'Did you really love her?'

'How was she able to touch anyone after what the King did to her?'
He really wanted to ask the last one. With every day that passed, Loki became more and more convinced that he never wanted to be touched ever again in his life.

This would be a problem when he eventually returned home to Thor. Maybe he could ask her how she did it, maybe there was a special soap or something that could clean off invisible filth.

He couldn't ask him. Loki wasn't even sure how you approached asking someone questions like that. So he thanked Hieddenyr quietly for the cakes and tried to concentrate on his reading.

****

Loki was practicing a new spell with his lava-stone when the messenger arrived. The boy had been sent from the palace and knocked respectfully on the door.

"Yes? What is it?" Loki asked him, looking up with a frown at the interruption.

"Your Grace, I have message for you from His Grace Prince Musleen," the boy said, holding it out. Loki took it with a mutter of thanks and tore open the envelope.

*Lord Eadgleyr has suffered a fall, in healer's chambers, suspected fracture - M*

Loki felt his heart leap into his chest.

"I have to get back to the palace," he said.

He let the messenger boy ride with one of the guards to save him the jog back. They arrived at a canter and Loki jumped down before Lightning had pulled up properly.

He ran through the corridors to the healer's chambers.

It was quiet in there, peaceful, the sound of Loki's outdoor shoes clattering on the floor sounded like the Thunder Boys drummer going all out.

"Grandmother?" Loki called out, trying to spot where Lord Eadgleyr had been sequestered.

"I'm over here you boisterous child," came Lord Eadgleyr's voice, filled, as always, with a combination of frustration and affection for one of his noisy brood.

Loki ran over and finally relaxed at the sight of Lord Eadgleyr lying comfortably in bed. Lord Fallconyr was sitting beside him in a large armchair.

"Musleen sent me a message," Loki said by way of explanation. "I was in the Tower and had to ride back."

"You aren't missing lessons are you?" Lord Eadgleyr immediately asked.

Loki shook his head with a smile. "No Grandmother, private study I promise."

"Hmm, even so, you didn't have to rush back, I am perfectly well."

"He's broken his hip," Lord Fallconyr interjected.

"But I'll *be* perfectly well in a little while," Lord Eadgleyr argued. "Anyone could have slipped on the floor there, there was spilt wine. The servants have already cleaned it and my *dear* husband has yelled at the young nobles responsible for leaving it there instead of telling someone about it so that
they might clean it up before someone got hurt. It's all sorted."

Loki sat down on the edge of the bed. "How long will you be in here?" he asked.

Lord Eadgleyr huffed. "The healer says four days," he admitted.

"And you will listen to her, I'm the reckless one in the family, we don't need you to be as well," Lord Fallconyr said.

Loki grinned as Lord Eadgleyr rolled his eyes. "You worry about me far too much," he said.

"I wouldn't have to if you'd stop getting yourself into trouble," Lord Fallconyr teased.

Lord Eadgleyr's expression of outrage was priceless, and Loki started laughing.

"Don't you laugh at me my boy, you stop that right now!" Lord Eadgleyr exclaimed.

"I'm sorry Grandmother," Loki said. "I'm glad you'll be alright, truly."

"I'd be better if I could have my books," Lord Eadgleyr said.

"Loki and I will fetch them for you, the one on the side table I know about, any others?" Lord Fallconyr asked.

"There are two on the living room table that I was thinking about starting, it seems that I will have time now," Lord Eadgleyr said.

Lord Fallconyr rose and shooed Loki out of the door ahead of him.

"He's fractured his hip quite badly," he told Loki as they made their way back to Lord Fallconyr's chambers. "It was an accident, but even so the outcome was quite bad. I want to take him to see our daughter at home. She can do a series of healings on him to build up bone strength, it's so easy to lose it without realising when you are our age."

"You should go," Loki said. "It's been an age since you were back in your lands, you should both go back."

"He doesn't want to leave you here by yourself," Lord Fallconyr said.

Loki sighed. "I love having you here, and I won't lie to you, I am happier when you are, but I survived eighty years of Progress without you, go home, I'll be fine."

Lord Fallconyr nodded. "I don't suppose that you'll help me convince him?" he asked.

Loki shrugged. "I'll do my best, but you know what he's like."

"Stubborn," Lord Fallconyr said fondly. "But maybe between us we can convince him."

****

They didn't mention it right away. First Lord Eadgleyr had to recover. The healer worked on him daily for four days before announcing that she'd healed the bone and he could go back to his rooms.

"Be careful, don't push yourself too hard until the bruising goes down, and come back if you experience any pain," she instructed.
Lord Eadgleyr gave her a smile that lasted exactly as long as he remained in her eye-line. The moment he was out of sight he rolled his eyes.

"I've broken bones before you know," he said as Lord Fallconyr and Loki escorted him back to his chambers.

In the end it was his other grandchildren that convinced him. His granddaughter Luicyia was due to give birth to her first child and Loki encouraged him to go and be there when the baby came.

"You can have the bone strengthening-heals at the same time and be back before you know it," he said.

"Well," Lord Eadgleyr said, "If we send Haewkyr back here to stay with you then you won't be as alone."

"That's a great idea, I'm sure he misses Loki, you two are quite close now, aren't you?" Lord Fallconyr asked.

"We've become good friends," Loki confirmed.

"Then it's settled, we'll go home for a while, Haewkyr will come here and Loki will be just fine," Lord Fallconyr said. "I'll go and arrange it."

He practically ran out of the door.

"He wants it sorted before I can change my mind," Lord Eadgleyr said. "You think I don't know what you two were doing but I do. I know I have to go home, I can't ask Weallia to come here, she has a family, but I do hope you'll be alright Loki dear."

"I'll be fine," Loki insisted. "And maybe after a little while you can invite me to go and stay for a few weeks."

He gave Lord Eadgleyr a comically-pleading look which made his grandmother laugh.

"We will certainly invite you Loki, certainly," he said.

****

Two weeks later, when Lord Eadgleyr had healed enough to travel, Loki waved his grandparents goodbye as they set off for home.

In his pocket was the replacement amulet from Frigga to prevent pregnancy. Lord Fallconyr had been keeping it safe since the anniversary celebrations a few months earlier. Now it was up to Loki to find somewhere to keep it safe until it was time to implant it.

He felt sad to see them go, and doubly sad because of why. They were old men, who were growing weaker with age. It was a difficult fact to face but for every day that brought the King's death closer, it brought their deaths closer as well.

Why couldn't the King hurry up and die, while Loki's grandparents stayed healthy and linger? Was that so much to ask?

It was with a heavy heart that Loki turned away to go back into the palace.

He recited Thor's letter in his mind for comfort, although the idea that 150 years was thought to be the halfway mark was now a painful one. Still, it made him a little happier to remember that Thor
was out there somewhere, and Haewkyr would be back soon, that was good.

Loki made his way to one of the gardens and sat down dejectedly. Lord Eadgleyr's accident had brought home to him the fragility of age. Loki had never imagined still being here when his grandparents died, it didn't seem possible.

Now it did, and the thought made him gloomy.

"Loki," said a voice to his left.

He turned and saw Musleen standing there. Loki cursed himself internally for allowing himself to become so lost in his thoughts that he could be snuck up on.

"My grandparents left for home, I'm just feeling a bit completely miserable about it," he said honestly.

Musleen sat down beside him.

"I'm sorry to see them go," he said. "I like them, Lord Fallconyr is a wise man, and Lord Eadgleyr is very clever and quite shrewd. I'd hate to have come up against him in a game of spies."

Loki smiled. "They are who I want to be one day," he confessed.

"Perhaps you can visit them?" Musleen suggested.

"They promised to invite me," Loki said, "I hope I can go."

They shared a moment of silence as they considered the obstacle to Loki's visit.

"Enough of this sadness," Musleen said in a different tone. "Camtan wants to go out to the theatre tomorrow night and he insists that we both come. There's a new play about a warrior prince-"

"-who is taken hostage by an evil mage and his betrothed has to go and rescue him. It's an opera."

Loki interrupted. "-who is taken hostage by an evil mage and his betrothed has to go and rescue him. It's an opera."

"-who is taken hostage by an evil mage and his betrothed has to go and rescue him. It's an opera."

Musleen finished as though Loki hadn't spoken.

"Do I have to?" Loki whined jokingly, although there was a slight element of truth to his words as he wasn't really a fan of opera.

"Apparently, the songs are in the style of the Thunder Boys," Musleen said. "It's all fast drums and loud notes, with choruses that repeat."

"So not at all like opera then?" Loki asked with hope in his voice.

"Not really no, they're thinking of calling it by a different name, something that means singing, but not *that* kind of singing. But only if it is a success of course, it may be a dismal failure."

"Not if the two Princes, one Princess and the King's Consort of Vanaheim show up to watch it," Loki pointed out.

Musleen gave a small smile. "I do hope we don't start a terrible new trend," he said.

He glanced over at Loki shrewdly, taking in the slight hunch of his shoulders and downcast eyes.

"Do you want to spar?" he asked. "I'd like to take you on with knives again, I've been practising and
my right hand is getting quite strong. I think you'll struggle to get the knife to go flying."

Loki looked up with the beginnings of a smile.

"That sounds like a challenge," he said, a hint of a sparkle coming into his eyes.

Musleen smiled at him. "Let's go," he said.

****

Haewkyr returned a few weeks later. He climbed out of the Fallconyr family coach, looked up at the palace and sighed heavily. It still looked ugly and somehow sinister.

But then he knew what monster lived inside of it.

He grabbed his bags and made his way inside. His grandparent's chambers were still being rented for his use. They were far bigger than what he was used to but he'd just have to make do and spend a lot of time in the stables.

He dumped his bag in the bedroom and went to find Loki.

'Thor,' he thought as he checked the queen's chambers, 'was one lucky bastard.'

It was his own little secret, the way just the sight of Loki made his heart flutter. He'd always had a weakness for the dark, strong, types, and Loki was certainly that. Watching him be caged like some kind of rare and delicate specimen made Haewkyr's blood boil.

Loki's servant told Haewkyr that he was in the library. He offered to make Haewkyr some tea if he wanted to wait, as the palace library required royal permission to go inside. Haewkyr declined to stay; instead he left a message to say that he had arrived at the palace, and went to find the stablemen.

He'd made a lot of good friends on the Progress, and most of them were still there. Servants didn't often leave their posts without very good reason after all. It was seen as suspicious, even a little obscene. Haewkyr didn’t understand it, but then he wasn’t a nutjob.

There was a game of cards going on at the back of the stable. Haewkyr handed over a bottle of wine that he'd pilfered from his new chambers and was dealt in.

It was probably his country manners, or the love of horses that overrode everything else about him, but the stablemen seemed to accept him as one of their own. He sat and played for a while, drinking with the men and chatting about inconsequential things.

After a time, as often happened, the conversation turned to politics, specifically, what the various nobles were said to be planning. Haewkyr stayed quiet during these times, making a show of drinking heavily, just in case someone remembered that he was technically of a higher class. He also paid close attention.

General muttering made it clear that Lord Kinndyr was quietly backing the absent Prince Dorgen. It made sense as, after the scandal of his wife, the King had completely disregarded his entire family. Lord Eveilyr, never one to let an opportunity pass him by, had also begun quietly backing the Crown Prince.

Dorgen himself did not seem to be making any moves. He was living quietly with his wife's parents, while making the occasional visit to his mother who lived in the north of the realm. If he was soliciting support for a takeover, he was doing it very quietly.
If he *wasn’t* planning a takeover, then the unofficial support of two of the realms most powerful Lords could land him in a lot of trouble with the King.

Haewkyr resolved to tell Prince Musleen as soon as he could, Dorgen was in a precarious position which could prove disastrous if the wrong information reached the King. Dorgen had already survived one assassination attempt and people weren’t stupid, a lot of nobles strongly suspected that either the King himself had a direct hand in it, or whoever had planned it had expected to be favoured as a result of their initiative.

Sir Craulen was under suspicion of not paying his bills with the farmers. Three of them had come to the capital to lodge a complaint with the courts. Sir Craulen's argument was that he was storing the grain for them in exchange for a percentage, however any attempt to reclaim it had been met by 'delays' that went on forever.

King Dimcken had put in an order for some Muspelheim silk. Made from the silk of the Muspelheim fire-spider it was dark red, so fine that the fabric was sheer, and gave off heat for a thousand years after being harvested. The extreme cold climber suits were lined with it. The rumours said that either he was planning to send an expedition over the high mountains, he was unable to stay warm any other way in his advanced age, or he was planning some kind of elaborate gift for his consort.

An image flashed across Haewkyr's mind of Loki in a clinging robe of fire-spider silk. He grabbed his drink and took a large swallow.

It angered him a great deal to think of Loki with that evil, disgusting, horrible, filthy, bastard of a man, that through pure luck of breeding had control of the realm.

If the great war had gone slightly differently, it would be Lord Fallconyr who'd be king right now, and Haewkyr would be a Prince. He'd have gone to Asgard as a part of political negotiations and met Loki years ago, maybe they'd have gotten to know one another, maybe before Loki had ever fallen in love with Thor, maybe, maybe, maybe.

There was no point in dwelling on it, however much he'd like to. But he could at least be Loki's friend, which was one of the reasons why he kept an eye on the goings on below stairs.

Slightly drunk and filled with new information, Haewkyr bid the stablemen goodbye and headed back to his chambers.

A few minutes after he'd gone, a new servant from the storage areas joined the game.

"So where have you been?" the head stableman asked.

"His Majesty had us get the uh, the iron chair out if storage," the servant said with a look of discomfort.

His expression was mirrored by the others around the table.

"That poor child," the head stableman muttered as he dealt the next hand.

****

King Dimcken was excited. It was his birthday and he wanted to celebrate. Loki had been on edge all day, there was something about the way the King kept looking at him that night at dinner.

Whatever it was, it was going to be bad.
King Dimcken kept his arm around Loki's waist as he bid his sons and daughter-in-law goodnight.

"My wife," King Dimcken said lustily in Loki's ear. "My dear sweet wife, I've been thinking about you all day."

Loki swallowed nervously, whatever the King had in mind he would be forced to endure it.

King Dimcken pulled him into the bedroom and started tugging at his robes.

"Get undressed my love, we haven't had dessert yet," he said.

Loki nervously pulled his robes off and left them on the bed. King Dimcken was actually trembling in excitement. He was holding what looked like smallclothes made out of metal, almost like a chastity belt.

'If only,' Loki thought without much hope.

He stood passively and let the King lock it around him. It had several cut-outs that were perfectly placed for one highly specific purpose. King Dimcken carefully tucked Loki's penis inside before clicking it shut.

"Come over to the table my love," King Dimcken said, his voice shaking, "and we shall have dessert."

There was a new chair by the table. It was made of iron and had a high back.

There was no question of who would be sitting in it. Loki lowered himself tentatively into the chair. He was struggling not to show his fear.

The moment his bottom touched the seat, a mechanism locked him into place.

King Dimcken tugged his own robes off and sat down next to him with an eager smile.

"Time for dessert my love," he said and reached for the spoon.

It was his favourite cream dessert. He scooped up a mouthful and held the spoon to Loki's lips. Loki obediently opened his mouth-

-and jerked in place as he felt something press against his vagina.

King Dimcken was still watching him with a creepy smile.

"Relax my love," he purred, "have some dessert, there you go."

He pushed the spoon into Loki's mouth. Loki swallowed the mouthful quickly. He was still straining against the object that was pressing against him, but he couldn't lift himself out of the seat.

The feeling suddenly retracted and Loki relaxed, but only for a moment before it was back.

"Husband?" he asked fearfully.

King Dimcken was grinning, and Loki saw him move his leg just as the pressure increased again.

"I oiled them myself," he said. His eyes were sparkling with glee as Loki struggled to maintain his composure.
King Dimcken shifted again and the pressure receded. As he reached for another mouthful, Loki took a moment to try and look over the side of the chair.

There was a footplate on the side, when the King pressed down, the object pressed up.

Loki glanced up to find King Dimcken looking at him.

"Good boy," King Dimcken said softly.

As Loki swallowed the next mouthful, the object finally breached him, pushing in deeply as his legs tensed in a desperate attempt to get away.

But it was futile, and Loki struggled not to whimper at the pain it caused him.

King Dimcken scooped up another mouthful and the object receded again. Loki bit his lip, there were tears in his eyes.

Another mouthful, another breaching. Loki was openly struggling not to cry.

"Please Husband," he gasped at last, "please, please stop, I can't."

"Shhh, you're a very good boy, my wife," King Dimcken said, "just relax."

The bowl was almost empty, another mouthful, and King Dimcken bounced his leg up and down, causing the object to jerk in and out of Loki's vagina as he moaned in pain.

King Dimcken licked the spoon clean before getting up and carefully moving the table to make room for his chair. He sat opposite Loki and settled in comfortably. His erect penis was pointing straight at Loki's chest.

A tear fell from Loki's eye and trickled down his cheek as King Dimcken licked his lips in excitement, and raised both his feet to rest them on either side of the chair.

Loki cried out as the object pushed back into his vagina, it was followed quickly by a scream as another one pushed up against his anus.

"Husband stop! Please! Please stop, you're hurting me! Please!" he shrieked desperately, slapping his hands against the arms of the chair as his legs strained helplessly in a futile attempt to lift him clear.

King Dimcken let the vagina object slide from him, but replaced it with the anal one, pushing it up slowly but steadily until it was fully seated.

Loki gasped for air as his body was assaulted.

"Please," he whispered.

King Dimcken let the anal object down as he pushed the vaginal one back up.

Loki sobbed as the King alternated with his feet, playing with him, jerking both of them with little thrusts before forcing one or the other back in all the way.

King Dimcken was moaning in pleasure as he watched the tortured Loki. He groaned and licked his lips in delight.

Loki took a deep shuddering breath. "Please Husband," he begged, "please stop."
King Dimcken took both feet off the footplates and stood up.

"But I love watching you like this," he said in a playful voice, cupping Loki’s chin with his hand. "What could I possibly love more than this?"

Then he stepped forward and stood on both footplates. Loki screamed as both objects breached him in rapid succession. They pushed in all the way, stretching and fighting for space inside of him.

"Stop!!" he screamed.

"What will you do to stop me?" King Dimcken asked, stroking his penis gently.

Loki didn't bother with gentle, he grabbed the King's arse and pulled him closer, swallowing down the penis in front of him with enthusiasm caused by pure desperation.

He didn't care about what he was doing.

He didn't care about who he was doing it with.

He just wanted the pain to stop.

King Dimcken made a noise of surprise at the sensation. He gripped the back of the chair and held on as Loki swallowed around him desperately.

Loki was gripping the King’s buttocks so tightly that it hurt. He was sucking desperately, trying to finish the King off as fast as possible as his fingers dug into the wrinkly, loose flesh.

With a cry of pleasure King Dimcken came down Loki's throat. He fell backwards and collapsed into his chair. Loki gasped and sobbed opposite him, there was seed dripping down his chin and tears pouring down his face. With the pressure released from the footplates the objects receded, leaving him shaking in relief.

King Dimcken took a moment to get his breath back before he rose and fetched two keys. One released Loki from the chair.

With shaking limbs Loki managed to painfully push himself out of the chair. The second key opened the metal smallclothes.

As the King pulled the metal smallclothes away, Loki felt something wet run down the back of his leg. He glanced down and saw a dark red trickle of blood.

King Dimcken saw it too and paled slightly.

"Come to the bed darling," he said, sounding nervous.

Loki tried to take a step, but his legs felt heavy and weak, he stumbled, and his stomach muscles were too sore to stabilise him. With a cry of pain he fell to the floor and into blessed blackness.
When Loki opened his eyes he was lying in the King's bed. He blinked slowly, trying to clear the fuzzy clouds that appeared to be filling his head.

There was movement to his right. Loki looked over in terror.

"His Majesty is not here," Hieddenyr said in a gentle tone, coming over to him. "You have slept all night."

Loki allowed himself to relax slightly. He watched as Hieddenyr poured a small measure of liquid into a cup.

"This is for the pain," he said. "I was instructed to see that you drank it upon waking."

Loki allowed Hieddenyr to lift his head gently and hold the cup to his lips. The strong peppermint taste didn't quite mask the bitter taste of the medicine. It had to be strong.

"The healer fixed some tearing," Hieddenyr said, "she said that there's extreme bruising, she instructed that you be left to heal for a day before you be moved back to your chambers."

Loki was already starting to feel like he was floating. The painkillers were *extremely* strong.

He turned his head and looked over at the table in the corner.

"His Majesty had it moved back into storage," Hieddenyr said, following his look.

His face was angry, and his hands were trembling slightly.

Loki reached out and laid his hand on top of Hieddenyr's, startling him.

"Did Dorgen talk to you?" he asked in a slurred voice.

Hieddenyr looked shocked, apparently, if Dorgen had spoken to him, he had not mentioned Loki.

"Don't do anything," Loki slurred, "You told me it's not worth it, and it's not, stay... stay good... stay quiet... until..."

His eyes fluttered closed as the painkiller took full effect.
The next time Loki's eyes opened, he was in his own bed. He looked around in confusion for a moment before he managed to focus on Wraenyr. Wraenyr came closer, he had a bowl of cool water and a cloth, and he gently wiped Loki's brow and face.

"You need to take another dose of medicine," he said.

Loki frowned and tried to shake his head.

"The last dose hasn't worn off completely yet," Wraenyr said, "Please Your Grace, drink it now."

Loki closed his eyes and turned his head away. "I want to stay awake," he muttered.

Wraenyr poured the medicine and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Please Your Grace, I will give you a little less, but you should take it," he urged.

Loki pressed his lips together stubbornly.

Wraenyr put the cup down on the table and gave Loki a fatherly look.

"Would you like some tea Your Grace?" he asked instead.

Loki shook his head, his stomach was starting to hurt.

Five minutes later it was hurting a lot and Loki was sweating with pain.

This time when Wraenyr held the cup to his lips, Loki drank.

The pain receded and Loki blinked slowly as the floating feeling came back. He surrendered to it and let himself drift away into sleep.

****

Loki stood in the King's bedroom. King Dimcken's was standing on the opposite side, he was naked, and his penis was standing erect in Loki's direction.

He started walking forwards and Loki stepped back, but there was a wall behind him and he couldn't get away.

"P-p-please," he whispered, "Husband please, no."

King Dimcken's penis grew to an enormous size, Loki whimpered and tried to push back but he was being held against the wall.

The wall was his father. Odin's hands were holding his arms tightly as King Dimcken approached.

"Please, Father, let me go, Father, please, he's going to hurt me, he's going to hurt me, Daddy please!"

King Dimcken was licking his lips, he was inches away and grinning as he lined himself up.

Odin leaned down and huffed into Loki's ear.

"Be a good boy," Odin whispered as the King rammed himself into Loki's anus.
Loki screamed and tried to get free, the pain was overwhelming, he couldn't stop it, it was everything, he couldn't get free.

Loki came back into semi-consciousness. He was lying in bed, someone was stroking his forehead and singing to him softly as someone else was washing gently between his legs.

Loki realised through his drug induced haze that he'd soiled himself, and that they were cleaning him up.

The song finally registered as a new nightshirt was carefully slipped over his head. It was a Thunder Boys tune, slowed down until it sounded like a lullaby.

'Wraenyr has a good singing voice,' Loki thought dimly.

He let the singing sooth him back to sleep, all thoughts of fighting the pain had gone from his head. If he could sleep through his recovery, that would be wonderful.

****

The next time Loki woke he wasn't alone. There was a presence on the bed next to him. He fearfully turned his head.

It was Haewkyr, he was flicking through one of Loki's books with a frown on his face.

"You look bored," Loki mumbled.

Haewkyr's head shot up and he looked at Loki with worry written all over his face.

"Loki! How are you feeling?"

Loki blinked very slowly. "Floaty," he mumbled.

Haewkyr rolled off the bed and came around to Loki's side where the medicine was. Loki watched as he poured a measure.

"Still bad?" he asked.

"It's better to be safe," Haewkyr said. "You have terrible bruising, the healer was in here earlier to try and heal some of it, and they never do healings on bruises, it's a waste of magic and only has a slight effect."

He was rambling, and his unease was clear. He sat beside Loki and helped him to lift his head enough to drink.

"How long have I been sleeping?" Loki asked after he swallowed.

"Two days now," Haewkyr said. "The King told everyone that you had a stomach flu. You'll heal Loki, you will."

He looked devastated. Loki wanted to say something, to reassure him that there was nothing he could have done to stop it, but he was too exhausted.

"Don't do anything stupid," he mumbled instead as the room began to dim.

****
It took another two days before Loki could remain awake. The bruising was very bad, and he was still taking strong painkillers. Wraenyr brought him broths to drink, to try and prevent the need to have a bowel movement. Haewkyr came by every day for hours to talk to him and, when he grew tired, read to him as he lay in bed. Musleen dropped by several times, as did Camtan. Both of them were subdued and nervous, the reflected guilt of what their father had done was pressing hard on their shoulders.

Safely tucked away in his room, Loki was oblivious to the rise in tension between King Dimcken and his sons. He recovered slowly, limping carefully from his bed to the couch every day.

He couldn't sit in the chairs, every time he sat upright he would have visions of something suddenly pressing up from beneath him and would have to roll to the side. It was better to lie on his side on the couches, or curl a leg beneath him when he sat.

One day, while Loki was in the bath, he heard Wraenyr humming as he straightened the soap bottles. It was another Thunder Boys song.

"I didn't know you were a fan," Loki said.

Wraenyr looked surprised, and a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry Your Grace, I didn't realise I was doing it," he said.

"I don't mind," Loki said, "I just didn't realise you knew their songs."

"My son is the drummer," Wraenyr said with a fond smile. "And to think, I was going to sponsor him to be a servant here. But he had a different dream, I'm glad he followed it."

Loki smiled at Wraenyr's expression.

"Is he any good at cleaning?" he asked.

"No," Wraenyr replied bluntly, "judging by the state he leaves his room in he's absolutely rubbish at it."

"Then he made the right decision," Loki said, straight-faced.

Wraenyr nodded at him with a similarly sombre expression.

Loki frowned slightly as a thought occurred.

"Do you live in the city?" he asked. "Or does your family live here?"

"I live here, they live in the city, Your Grace," Wraenyr said. "I visit them when I can, and they visit me."

"That's ridiculous, why don't you live together?" Loki asked.

"His Majesty does not want commoners around if they are not employed, and I am needed here to take care of you, Your Grace," Wraenyr said.

"I'm not so helpless that you can't go home at night," Loki said with a frown.

Wraenyr gave him a servant's shrug, which was more of an expression than a shoulder movement. It managed to convey the sentiment that King's did what they liked, and everyone else just lived with it.
“Have you ever thought of leaving and finding work somewhere else? Somewhere your family can come too?” Loki asked.

“That would require a long explanation to the head servant, and possible suspicion from His Majesty,” Wraenyr said softly, fluffing Loki’s towel for something to do. “To be a servant directly to royalty is considered the greatest role you can attain, leaving it is always suspicious.”

“But you have lives! And circumstances change!” Loki exclaimed.

Wraenyr was doing the servant-shrug again. Loki stopped, he was not telling the man anything he didn’t know.

“Do you know anyone who left?” he asked.

“A few, most could not find work elsewhere. If you leave the palace the nobles assume that you must have stolen something, or committed a different crime, or that you were just very bad at your job,” Wraenyr said.

He placed the towel down and carefully hooked his arms under Loki’s to help him climb carefully out.

“Do you think Dorgen will change things for you?” Loki asked him softly as they stood close together.

Wraenyr risked the smallest of smiles. “Hope is a powerful force, Your Grace,” was all he said.

****

It took King Dimcken four weeks to get up the courage to visit his wife.

Loki was sitting, well, lounging, on the couch while Haewkyr and Musleen sat and talked to him. There was a strategy game going on between the three of them. Loki was winning.

When Femtchyr announced the King, identical looks of alarm crossed all of their faces.

“Sh-show him in,” Loki said.

Haewkyr reached over and squeezed his arm briefly before rising as the King entered.

Loki climbed awkwardly to his feet. King Dimcken’s eyes followed his slow and careful movements.

“I came to see how you were,” he said.

Loki forced himself to stand straight despite the muscles in his stomach protesting.

“I am healing Husband, thank you for your concern,” he said.

King Dimcken came closer and Loki tried not to flinch. Behind the King, Haewkyr took a slight step forwards but stopped when his robe was caught by Musleen’s hand.

“I was worried about you,” King Dimcken said.

Loki forced a smile. “I will be fine Husband, thank you.”

King Dimcken smiled then and kissed him. “I’m glad to hear it, perhaps I was a bit, well, you’re fine,
“The healer has told me to rest for another few weeks Husband, but I will be back as soon as I am able,” Loki said.

King Dimcken gave him another kiss. “Good, good, uh, I will leave you be.”

“Good day Husband,” Loki said.

He remained standing until the King was safely out of the door, only then did he carefully try to lower himself back down onto the couch.

Haewkyr was frowning at him.

“What is it?” Loki asked him.

“How can you do that? The bastard half-kills you and you act with him like everything’s just fine! Aren’t you *angry* about what he did?”

“I have to survive it,” Loki said. “I’m not allowed to fight it, I have to be good, you know that Haewkyr.”

Haewkyr sat and took one of Loki’s hands in his. “I know, I do, but Loki, I think about what he did to you and it takes everything I have not to kill him—“

“Head of security standing right here,” Musleen said from behind him.

“How can you stay so calm?” Haewkyr continued as though there had been no interruption.

“I have to,” Loki repeated. “I just have to survive it Haewkyr, there is no point in getting angry, it’ll just upset me, and he’ll do something else next time anyway.”

Haewkyr looked at him with great concern. “You should be angry Loki, even if you are helpless. You’ve lost the fire in your eyes, and I’m afraid for you, I’m afraid he’s broken you.”

Musleen came and sat by Loki’s other side. “He’s not wrong,” he said in his measured way, “you have been very accepting of his actions, we say that it’s wrong and you just shrug your shoulders.”

Loki looked from one to the other. When *had* he lost his will to fight? Was it when he found out there could be five hundred more years on his sentence? Or was it when Fosxyr left? Maybe it was the chair, perhaps he’d just taken too much abuse and had finally reached some kind of limit?

“I…” he started and then stopped. He didn’t have anything to say.

“Don’t upset yourself Loki,” Musleen said gently. “You have enough to worry about, if this is better for you then you do it.”

“I wish I’d known what he was planning,” Haewkyr muttered, “I could have broken the bloody thing.”

“He would have had it repaired,” Loki said.

“Not the way I’d have broken it,” Haewkyr muttered darkly.

“I should have had the damn thing melted down in secret when I found it hidden away years ago, instead I locked the door behind me and went and threw up in my chambers.” Musleen said bitterly.
Loki shook his head. “Neither one of you are to blame,” he insisted. “No more thinking about how things *could* have been.”

“But-“ Haewkyr started.

“I’d rather not discuss it,” Loki insisted. “Let’s finish our game.”

The other two sat back down again, neither of them looked happy.

‘Five hundred more years,’ Loki thought, ‘and I might be already broken. What will I be like in five hundred more years?’
Loki’s healing took a long time. It was even longer before King Dimcken took him to bed again, although, as always, it was only a matter of time.

Time past and physically, Loki healed.

“My grandparents have invited me to come and stay with them for the summer,” Loki told Musleen one day as they trained. “But I don’t think I’ll be allowed to go.”

King Dimcken had been very free with his gifts for Loki following the night with the chair, but he had also become extremely clingy, wanted to see Loki often, almost as though he was trying to prove to the world that he really did care about his spouse. Loki hated the extra attention, and did everything he could to reassure the King that he did not need to be so coddled.

“Ask him tonight at dinner,” Musleen suggested. “I’ll try to help you convince him.”

****

"Husband," Loki said, pulling the letter from his robes that night.

"Hmm?"

"I received a letter today from my grandparents, they have invited me to go and stay with them this summer."

King Dimcken frowned. "All summer?" he asked.

Loki looked down at the letter. "They didn't say how long, just that they hope I can make it," he said.

King Dimcken scowled deeply. "I want you here," he said.

Loki slowly put the letter back into his pocket. "Yes Husband," he said sadly.

Musleen took a slow drink of wine. "It's better that you stay here Loki, you are the King's Consort, you can't go ironing off to the country."

"What was that?" King Dimcken asked.

"I said he can't go riding off to the country," Musleen said. "Especially in the summer, the people need to see you."

"Why?" Camtan asked on cue, "They know that he'd fine now."

King Dimcken looked at them in alarm. "Of course he's fine, he's completely fine, who said he wasn't fine?" he asked.
Camtan looked innocent. "Oh, no one Father, there was some speculation that he was not strong, you know, when he got so ill for so many weeks, but no one thinks of such things now."

A flash of guilt crossed the King's face. Loki knew exactly what 'illness' Camtan was referring to.

"I don't know," Musleen said. "Reputations are difficult things to shift, he should stay and *iron* out the last of the rumours. Stop people from pressing and poking into our intimate affairs."

"He should go and prove that he is nice and strong," Camtan argued. "He won't do that by sitting around in the capital."

King Dimcken's head went back and forth between his two sons, trying to keep up.

"I suppose you have a point," Musleen conceded. "We wouldn't want anyone thinking that he couldn't take a little discomfort."

"Discomfort?" King Dimcken asked, looking guilty.

"From his illness Father, he was quite unwell for a long while. What exactly was wrong with you Loki? You never said." Musleen asked.

"It was an illness," King Dimcken practically shouted. "Just a bad illness, but he's fine now, he's been fine for months, and of course you should go Loki, for the summer, we don't want people thinking you are still unwell."

Loki didn't have to fake the smile that spread across his features.

"Thank you Husband," he said.

"You are well, aren't you Loki?" King Dimcken asked.

"Yes Loki, are you? Some illnesses can linger after all," Musleen added, swirling his wine glass in what Loki thought was a superior kind of a way.

King Dimcken flinched slightly at his words.

"I'm very well Husband," Loki lied. "After all it was just an illness."

The King relaxed. He reached over and patted Loki's hand gently on the table.

"Of course you are," he said. "Of course you are."

****

Loki and Haewkyr set off at the beginning of the summer with a carriage full of fancy robes and other things that Loki wasn't planning to use.

Wraenyr was going with them, as was his wife and daughter, who were waiting for them just past the city gate.

They insisted on riding on the top of the carriage as they were common folk, although Wraenyr's wife did give Loki a home-baked cake for his generosity in letting them stay together over the summer.

"Why were they all the way out here?" Haewkyr asked Loki as the carriage set off again.
"The King doesn't allow the servant's families to stay with them in the palace," Loki said.

Most of the servants, Loki had discovered by careful questioning, were unmarried. They went into service as young men and women, often from very poor families, and they worked their way up through the ranks from that point on.

The conditions were quite good, *especially* if they came from a poor family. They could sleep at night even when on duty, they ate well, were paid a decent wage and had the occasional day off. But while it wasn't specifically stated, they were expected to give their lives to their work, families were not encouraged.

How Wraenyr had managed to woo, win and make some form of life with his wife Loki had no idea. Loki told Haewkyr all of this as the carriage rattled down the road.

"That's insane," Haewkyr said. "I knew that the servant's rarely left, but the idea that to do so is somehow suspicious and a sign that you're untrustworthy is ridiculous."

Loki nodded. "You're not saying anything I don't already agree with," he said.

He sat back and watched the fields pass him by through the window.

There were a lot of things wrong with the realm under King Dimcken, and Loki had no doubt that Dorgen would be making changes, but had he thought of the servants?

Right now, when a servant left it was always to go to a new profession entirely, as they would not be able to find work as a servant elsewhere. But even when they had a legitimate reason to go, they still had a cloud of suspicion hovering over them. King Dimcken expected his servants to be grateful for the work, he saw them leaving as a personal insult.

Lord Fallconyr did not run his household like that, and there had been other noble estates on Progress where the servants' families had lived under the manor roofs. It was King Dimcken's dislike of commoners that kept them out of the palace. Surely Dorgen would do things differently?

It seemed to Loki that everyone was quietly waiting for the King to die and for Dorgen to save them. It was a lot of pressure on the Crown Prince's shoulders and Loki did not envy him.

****

The carriage rattled its way over the fields for three days until it reached the tea fields. Loki inhaled deeply, letting the scent of the tea fill his lungs and relax him.

Lord Fallconyr was on hand to welcome him to the castle.

"Eadi's inside, he's running around trying to make everything perfect for your bedroom," he said, giving Loki a hug.

"Grandfather I would sleep in the stables if it meant I got to stay here," Loki said honestly.

"Come along inside and have a cup of tea, you can tell me about your journey," Lord Fallconyr said.

The hall was crowded as always that night, and Loki actually sat on the thick wooden benches for just over an hour before he had his first flash of fear. He took a deep breath and shifted slightly, letting himself sit to one side for a few minutes before deliberately sitting straight again. He would not let this rule him. If anywhere in this realm was safe, then this place was. No one here would trap
him, no one here wanted to hurt him for their own pleasure.

After dinner he sat in one of the living areas with some of his cousins and played the strategy game. He was winning, and Spaottyn was complaining about it to the amusement of the others.

"Are you heading out to the fields tomorrow?" Haewkyr asked.

"Is that an invitation?" Loki answered.

"Of course."

"Then I’m free to come."

"This lot here were thinking of going for a nine day camping trip in a few weeks to the far reaches of the land. The border of the realm is out there," Haewkyr said. He lowered his voice. "There's old ruins out there, of the *old* old settlement, from when our ancestor ruled these lands as the first king."

"We're gonna go poking around like uncultured ruffians," Spaottyn filled in. Loki grinned. "I'd love to go," he said at once.

****

There was a surprise waiting for him in his room that night. It had dyed blond hair and was wearing a wide grin.

"I told Wraenyr to go and have a holiday Your Grace, I do hope you don't mind," Fosxyr said as he held up Loki's nightshirt.

"I wasn't sure you'd be here," Loki said. "I thought you'd be in a village or something."

"Villages are smaller and everyone knows each other, they make terrible hiding places," Fosxyr said. "Not that I need to hide, I'm just a travelling tailor me, name of Reidyr, but business is bad, and I'm quite good at cleaning, so I'm stopping here for a bit until business improves."

"You look... different, with that hair. Have you been taking good care of my grandparents?" Loki asked him as he pulled his nightshirt on.

"As much as they've been taking care of me," Fosxyr replied with a smile. "I understand you are here for the whole summer?"

"Yes, the King let me go after Musleen and Camtan persuaded him."

"They're good boys, are they staying out of trouble?"

"As much as they can do, Camtan and Sofftia are talking about trying for another baby," Loki said, "although it's all still just discussion at this stage."

"That's wonderful news, little Roa should have a sibling, they help to knock off odd corners," Fosxyr said fondly.

He tucked Loki into bed like he was a child. Loki let him, he enjoyed being fussed over.

"A group of us are going camping in a few weeks out to the edge of the land. We're going for nine days," he said.
"I'll get your things ready for you, Your Grace," Fosxyr said.

"Thank you, and please tell Wraenyr to stay here, I haven't been camping properly in a very long time. I want to see if I even remember how to take care of myself," Loki said.

"I will be sure to tell him," Fosxyr said.

He stopped and regarded Loki from the end of the bed.

"Wraenyr told me what he did to you," he said softly.

Loki froze.

"That was months ago now," he said, "I'm fine."

Fosxyr regarded him seriously. "If you need me Your Grace, I am here," was all he said.

Loki nodded. His throat felt thick and he felt as though he was going to cry. He'd missed Fosxyr greatly, and just the simple act of *being there* was almost enough to tip him over the edge.

"Thank you Fosxyr," he said through trembling lips.

****

The next few weeks were spent getting ready for the ride out to the border, before at last they were ready to go. Loki saddled Lightning with an astride saddle and mounted him with a smile.

Fosxyr had taken some old clothes from the scrap pile in the laundry and had sewn the robes into shirts and pants for Loki the moment he'd found out about the camping trip, now they were all packed in a bag for him to go camping with.

"You really are a tailor," Loki said as he pulled on the first set.

"I grew up surrounded by hemlines, some of it had to stick," Fosxyr said to him fondly, "have fun Your Grace."

****

They rode all day, reaching the outermost fields in the late evening.

"The lands beyond here are all for herds and timber," Haewkyr said. "We'll camp here for the night and get going nice and early in the morning."

Loki got the fire started with a waggled of his fingers. Then he went and helped Spaottyen and Faliren to set up the tents.

Haewkyr had a silent word with each of the horses, and then let them roam.

They ate a meal of bread and cheese, with bowls of stew that had been packed by the kitchen for them.

"We'll go hunting tomorrow as we ride," Haewkyr said. "Maybe even take down a deer."

Loki breathed in the cool night air. He still had to remind himself to relax at times, but out here like this, far from the palace and the King, he felt the tension slide from his shoulders.
He wished he could stay out here forever, in the quiet of the country.

He stayed up longer than the others, sitting quietly and staring into the fire as the night passed slowly around him.

That is until Haewkyr crawled back out of his tent.

“T- I want to talk to you,” he said, settling himself by the fire, “about King Dickhead.”

Loki froze in the semi-darkness, his eyes automatically scanning for spies.

“Haewkyr-“ he began.

“I know that you are doing what you can to survive, but Loki you are breaking under his hands. I’m worried about you, truly worried. What will you be like in another ten years?”

Loki was wondering that himself.

“What can I do?” he asked instead. “I cannot refuse him, I’m his wife, and if Fa- if *Odin* was willing to protect me he would have. I am nothing to that man. But if I can survive this, then I will be with Thor.”

“And that’s all that matter?”

“Yes.”

“And that will make everything better?”

Loki stared into the fire. “I hope so,” he said softly, thinking of the inky substance that coated his whole body.

“If you could kill the King right now, how would you do it?” Haewkyr asked him, his tone casual.

Loki felt a smile creep onto his features. “Surely this conversation is treason,” he said.

“Only if you’re planning to carry it out, I speak in the hypothetical, now, how would you do it?”

“I’d dig out that bloody chair, lock him into it and then threaten to use it until he had a heart attack,” Loki said.


Loki shook his head. “If I have learnt anything from my time here, it’s that physical injuries heal, mental ones do not. I wouldn’t kill him, I’d make him kill himself, either from terror or mental trauma. Let *him* be the one who is afraid to sit down without leaning to the side.”

Haewkyr reached over and gently touched Loki’s shoulder.

“The log won’t hurt you,” he said softly, “try to relax if you can.”

Loki took a deep breath and tried to obey, settling himself straight on the log beneath him. After a minute he began to imagine something pushing up from below and he began to fidget.

“Move if you have to,” Haewkyr said.

Somehow the sound of his voice was soothing enough that Loki could relax again.
Perhaps it was not so strange, Haewkyr did not want to hurt him, so his presence meant safety, out here, with him, Loki could relax.

****

They reached the border after three days. The last day had been on foot as they navigated the thick forest that grew all around the eastern edges of the realm.

The trees gave way abruptly to a clearing, in the centre of which was the remains of a wooden hall.

"There's a preservation spell over the whole place," Faliren said, "It was put into place when it became obvious that it was falling down, collapsing under the ravages of time."

Loki walked quietly through the scattered remains of the wooden structures that lay throughout the clearing.

"It's all so old," he said. "Look at how primitive they were."

"From this civilisation rose," Haewkyr agreed, "and from out there of course."

Loki followed his pointing finger and looked out over the landscape beyond the border. The preservation spell must have been cast before the war, as the little township remained out there as well. Loki could see houses, well, huts, and even some road.

"Is that a temple?" he asked.

"From the distant past, before we discovered Valhalla and still believed that gods created the realms," Haewkyr said. "I've always wanted to go inside it, but sadly it falls outside the border and I couldn't get through."

"You've tried? Even knowing that Thanos might be out there?" Loki asked.

Haewkyr shrugged. "Either he was vanquished, or he wasn't. But I find it hard to believe that he's sitting out there waiting for me to cross the border, from what I've read of him, he always seemed to me like the sort who got on with things. If he wasn't killed then he won't be out there, he'll be off somewhere building his army back up."

Loki nodded, intrigued by the only stone building in the area.

"I think Odin just wants to keep us in here and he's using the threat of Thanos to stop us from searching our own land. One day I want to break through and just go and see what's out there," Haewkyr said.

Loki bit his lip. Haewkyr's assessment of Odin sounded disappointingly accurate, and the thought of getting away into the wilderness was incredibly tempting.

"Don't you just want to get out there?" Haewkyr asked. "Don't you just want to see?"

Loki nodded.

"Yes," he said.

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The border was built out of powerful magic. It had to be, to hold back such a powerful threat.
Loki and Haewkyr constructed a doorway out of fallen branches. All around it Loki drew runes for opening and pathways. He was trembling with excitement. This would be a powerful working, if it worked.

The others stopped their exploring to come and watch. They stood around with varying levels of scepticism as Loki began the spell.

Between the branches, the barrier began to flicker. Loki pushed more power into the spell, trying to force the barrier back to the edges of the branches. Haewkyr stood nearby and held his breath in excitement.

The barrier dropped away to the edges of the branches, leaving a small opening that they could crawl through.

Loki and Haewkyr exchanged a look. They felt like children who were about to sneak down to the kitchens at night for cake.

"Let's go," Haewkyr whispered.

Spaottyen and Faliren watched as they crawled through the opening and out into the land beyond the borders.

They paused for a moment on the outside, waiting for Thanos to show up and destroy them. When this failed to happen, they inched forwards towards the remainder of the town.

"So, do you want to see the temple?" Haewkyr asked.

"Yes," Loki answered, "and that larger building at the back there."

"I think it's a sweat lodge," Haewkyr said.

They stayed close together as they made their way to the temple.

It was a low, squat, building with a single doorway cut into the stone and no windows.

Loki created a flame from magic and carefully stepped inside.

There was a broken alter in the centre, and half-faded paintings on the walls depicting the old gods: Ymir, Buri and Audhumla.

Loki and Haewkyr crept around the old temple, careful not to disturb the scattered objects around them.

"Ever since I first saw this as a child I wanted to see the inside," Haewkyr said quietly, although in the silence of the temple even his low voice sounded like shouting. "It is incredible, and you have given this to me."

Loki just stared about him in wonder.

"I never even knew that this place existed," he said. "The old places did not survive on Asgard, too many wars, too much expansion, and not enough space."

"It's incredible," Haewkyr said again.

They spent about an hour exploring the preserved village. The building at the rear was indeed a sweat lodge and bathhouse. It had once been fed by a natural spring, although its course had changed
some time in the past, leaving only the stains of the minerals on the dry walls of the deep pool.

They were tempted to try hunting in the undisturbed forest around them, but Loki wasn't certain that the spell would hold, and neither one of them wanted to be caught on the wrong side of the barrier.

"Maybe we could petition Odin to lower the barrier," Haewkyr said.

Loki shrugged. "He won't do it," he said.

"You're sure?"

"Positive," Loki said. "Like you said before, he has greater control if you can't go roaming."

"This is our land," Haewkyr said, his voice low and dangerous, "if we want the barrier down then it should go down. And one day, I will see it happen."

****

Loki spent the summer months just trying to forget his life in the palace. During the day it was easy, he spent his time riding and working. But during the night he would dream of the King and wake up screaming.

It was worse than it had ever been before. It didn't matter how much Loki tried to put the King out of his mind, eventually the nasty painful thought would slide back:

_Five hundred more years._

He'd barely made it through two hundred.

Fosxyr would sit by his side at night and comfort him. Haewkyr would take him out and try to exhaust him with riding and work during the day.

His grandparents would sit with him in the evenings sometimes, and let him cry, let him rage, let him hurt and try to recover.

“If you do kill him, you can hide here,” Lord Fallconyr told him bluntly one evening.

They had both been shocked when Haewkyr told them what had happened. After carefully getting the full story out of Loki they had both vowed to return to the palace as soon as the summer ended, although Loki had eventually talked them out of it for the sake of Lord Eadgleyr’s healing.

Lord Eadgleyr put a hand on Loki’s shoulder as he shook his head in reply.

“Thor,” he said, and left it at that.

“I received a letter from Frigga today,” Lord Fallconyr said.

His tone was very careful, which made Loki look up in suspicion.

“It seems Heimdall did not see what you went through, and as such could not report it to Odin or her. I think King Dimcken might be using magic to block the gatekeeper’s view.”

Loki’s hands started to shake.

“So Odin doesn’t know what he’s put me through?” Loki asked.
“Possibly not, although this cannot be happening all the time, or else Heimdall would get suspicious,” Lord Fallconyr said.

“He must know how unhappy you are here,” Lord Eadgleyr said. “Enough people have told him.”

“I don’t think he cares,” Loki said miserably. “He’s always favoured Thor, he opposes our betrothal, and it isn’t because he thinks Thor is unsuitable.”

Lord Eadgleyr just drew him into a hug.

“My poor baby,” he said. “Forgive me but your father is an idiot for not seeing what lies in front of him.”

But all the comfort in the world couldn’t erase Loki’s fears completely. If he didn’t have to go back, it probably would have worked better. But every day Loki lived under the shadow of the King, and it was getting longer.

After a long and wonderful summer, Loki tearfully said goodbye to his family and climbed back into the carriage to go back to the palace.

‘I will survive, I will survive, I will survive,’ he thought over and over to himself as the carriage rattled down the road.

Haewkyr sat opposite Loki silently. He wasn't happy about any of this, and his helplessness frustrated him greatly.

"You'll get through this," Haewkyr said as they rattled up to the gate.

Loki looked at the enormous statues of the King that flanked them. They looked terrifying.

"I'm here when you need me," Haewkyr added, looking at Loki in concern.

Loki looked as though he was about to cry.

From the front door, King Dimcken stepped out and headed towards the coach.

Loki's expression changed from nervous to perfectly calm. It was unnerving.

King Dimcken pulled the door open himself and reached an arm into the coach.

"Loki my darling wife, welcome home. I have missed you!" he exclaimed.

Loki smiled at him and climbed out of the coach. "I've missed you too Husband," he said. "Thank you for letting me go, I had such a lovely time."

"Of course my darling, of course, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, now come along, it's almost dinner time."

Ignored by the King, and preferring it that way, Haewkyr climbed out of the coach and watched them walk away. The expression on Loki's face had been alarming. It was so... blank, like a doll.

And that's what Loki was here, a living doll for the King to play with.

Haewkyr gave the palace a sneer out of habit, and headed inside to dump his bags.

' The sooner Loki gets away from here forever the better,' he thought.
Twenty years later it was Wraenyr who Loki trusted enough to help him put the new amulet into the inside of his lip. It was done in the dead of night, and by morning the only sign was some bruising on the inside where it couldn’t be seen.

Time slipped by day by day, month by month, year by year.

When Loki had been gone for two hundred and fifty Aesir years, the skies filled with black clouds that hung low over the realm and filled the higher areas with thick fog.

Loki stood on his balcony and let the dampness seep into his robes. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine that the mist was Thor's arms encircling him.

It was difficult, Thor was larger than life and hugged like a bear. The wispy cold mist was so gentle it felt more like Thor's ghost than Thor's arms.

Loki sighed and made his way inside. His Vanir anniversary was still three and a half years away. King Dimcken had mentioned it a few days ago. He wanted to have a masque-ball, where everyone would have their faces covered until the big reveal at midnight.

He'd spoken about inviting Dorgen, which had immediately put Musleen on edge, and he'd even hinted that the ‘lovely young’ members of the court might find a special someone in the crowd.

This was a not-so-veiled hint at what he was thinking, and Loki already knew that he'd be approached by a 'mysterious stranger' during the night and would have to act flattered and delighted.

He wondered if there was any way he'd be able to claim he didn't recognise the King, and refuse him on the basis that he didn't want to cheat on his Husband.

Maybe it was a trap, and that's exactly what he should do to avoid landing himself in trouble.

Too much to stress about, and the ball wasn't even out of the concept stages yet.

Loki sighed and lay down on his bed heavily.

All he wanted was for the King to die. Was that so much to ask?
Loki stopped walking at the edge of the Bifrost site and turned to face the three princes.

"Well," he said, "I'll see you at the coronation."

"I'll dance with you," Camtan said brightly, giving Loki a hug.

Loki smiled at him, then turned to Dorgen and gave him a bow. "Your Majesty," he said in parting.

Dorgen reached out and clasped his wrist. "If you need anything, come and ask," he said seriously.

Loki nodded in acknowledgement, and turned to Musleen, the silent, secretive brother.

They clasped each other's wrists in farewell. Loki could feel the two remaining fingers of Musleen's right hand, and the strange, non-feeling where the other two should have been.

"Good luck," Loki said to him.

Mulseen nodded, as serious as ever, but the tips of his ears turned pink. He was going to ask Daenceia to dinner, just the two of them. His face may not show it, but he was terrified.

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Thor was shaking slightly. This was it. This map was written by the Last Seer herself. She had hidden her precious Emerald and this was the map! It was real, it wasn't just a myth!

The map had been in Thor's possession for quite some time, but now, only now, he'd finally found someone to decipher it, the location of the Emerald was known to him!

Unfortunately, it was also in Vanaheim, beyond the protective barrier, somewhere on the far side of
"Can you get me there?" Thor asked Heimdall.

He had finally returned to Asgard, but only as far as Heimdall's observatory. Thor refused to return officially until Loki was allowed to return as well.

"As you wish my Prince," Heimdall intoned.

Then he stopped.

"Your Father is coming," he said.

"Heimdall send me now," Thor said urgently, "please Heimdall, now!"

Heimdall pushed his sword into the mechanism and the Bifrost began to move.

"Good luck my Prince," Heimdall said seriously. "Save him."

Thor's brow creased, Heimdall and Loki were not too fond of one another, mostly due to Heimdall refusing to lie to Odin when he asked about Loki's pranks, when otherwise the trickster would have gotten away with it, but there was something in his tone now that made a stab of worry run through Thor's heart.

*What had he seen?*

But it was too late to ask him, as the Bifrost picked him up and pulled him away.

This side of Vanaheim was a wilderness. Thick vines and jungle trees were everywhere. The Bifrost had flattened the area where Thor landed, but everything else was thick with vegetation.

Thor had to climb out, working his way up the sides of the mighty trees until he reached the canopy, where he was finally able to move forwards.

There was the remains of a castle in the distance. It was crumbling with the ravages of time, but Thor could still see the peak of the last remaining tower.

*By the castle's front gate*

He made his way over there slowly, branch by branch. It took most of the morning, but he was able to climb down and reach where the gates once stood.

*To the right a courtyard waits*

Thor stepped through, on the lookout for traps. Seidr took longer to fade than stone.

*Over the fountain as daylight fades*

Thor saw what looked like an old fountain. It was round, with a raised centre. He turned to locate the sun and saw that it was almost directly above him; he had time to kill.

Keeping Mjolnir close to hand, he made his way inside the castle and began to explore.

Vanaheim was old. So was Asgard, but Vanaheim had more space to be old in. The castle had been built a long time ago, and Thor could feel the age of it weighing down on him.
He found the throne room, where the wooden throne had long since crumbled into dust. He found empty rooms and long corridors, nothing that was a threat, and nothing terribly interesting.

The staircase was next, it was large, made of stone, and seemed stable enough. Thor walked slowly up to the second level.

More of the same: quiet, dusty, empty. But slowly, as he adjusted to his surroundings, he became aware of little things. Scraps of cloth, different coloured dust in different places throughout the room, a scrap of leather that might have once been a shoe, a belt buckle rusted almost beyond recognition.

Slowly the dust patterns made sense. Around the edges of the room it was piled up in arrangements that indicated furniture, in what had to have once been a bedroom Thor even found the almost-rectangular shape of the bed still preserved.

But there were other shapes, random shapes, but they weren't that random, not when you knew what they had once been.

People, bodies, in amongst the dust which showed where they had fallen there were fragments of bone, bits of robe, jewellery and slivers of metal that might once have been swords.

'There has to be some kind of seidr on this place,' Thor thought. 'Not on the people, but on the castle, the stone is too well preserved for the contents to be dust, the jungle should have taken it apart by now.'

Instead it stopped at the gate.

Thor went through the rest of the rooms. The castle was more of a keep, with a single central tower surrounded by a large wall. The style was functional, but old, perhaps built in the time when Vanaheim was divided, and each section ruled by a separate king.

Thor wondered briefly who had been the last king of this place, and what had happened to him. If there were bodies left to lie, then the end of this castle must have been violent, perhaps the king had fled? Perhaps the dust where the throne had sat contained more than just wood?

But why then did the victors not stay? Unless they had come only to kill, to wipe out the others entirely. It had happened before, when space was at a premium and food was low, but this place was surrounded by jungle, surely in the past the trees would have been cleared and the land able to be farmed.

It occurred to Thor then as he found the treasury that if this castle was as old as he'd thought, then maybe the jungle hadn't been there at all. Hadn't Vanaheim once been warmer? Or was it colder? He probably should have paid closer attention. But he did remember that the climate had changed *after* the kingdoms had been united.

Thor had been wrong, this place had not died violently. The treasury was as intact as it could be, the tables and cabinets were gone, and the metal that could rust had done so, but the gold and gemstones remained.

Thor looked around with a growing feeling of unease. Jewellery was something made by civilised people, fine jewellery even more so, it required mining, smelting, crafting and skill.

This room was the death of civilisation, this room was where all that work lay in the dust.

Thor squatted down and carefully picked up a ring. It had a deep green stone set into a thick golden band. There were words inscribed on it in the old language of the Vanir. Thor couldn't read it, but
Loki would know what it said.

It was mid-afternoon, and he had hours of time left as he made his way back down through the castle. Now that he knew this place hadn't been ransacked, he looked at it with new eyes.

There were fragments of bone in every pile of bed dust. There were larger piles of it in the kitchens and in the smaller bedrooms downstairs where the servants would have lived.

Illness, a virus of some kind that killed everyone, some even where they stood. The bodies that lay out on the floor were probably servants, Thor decided, who had fallen dead while still trying to carry out their duties. The nobles and elite had died in their beds, unable to rise and help themselves. Whatever this plague had been, it had spared no one.

Thor wondered if this place had been cursed, or if the fear of such a thing had protected it until the Last Seer chose to hide her most precious creation there.

There were golden rings and chain links in the dust where the throne had been. The King had died there, possibly one of the last to do so, or else he would have been buried by the servants.

There was a thin band of shaped gold that might once have been a crown. It seemed flimsy to Thor's eyes, considering the thickness of the other golden objects scattered around that place. Perhaps it was the finest example of their skill? To show how thin and delicate they could craft their gold?

But such questions would likely go unanswered, if this place had sat undisturbed for as long as it had, then it was likely that no one still living actually knew it had ever existed.

It was with a kind of melancholy feeling that Thor made his way back outside to the fountain in the courtyard. He was not used to feeling the sadness of places, the lost potential. Clearly they had been very advanced for their time, and illness had stripped them of their identity, of their history and, most importantly of all, their future.

Thor waited for the sun to set, thinking quiet thoughts and chewing on some dried beef.

Soon he would have Loki in his arms again, soon he would be back in time, and able to change Loki's fate.

He already knew what he was going to go ask for. The night after their first kiss, he was going to make it so that he went to his father and demand Loki's hand in marriage once he'd come of age, and Odin would give his consent. Thor was determined to come away with Odin's promise, thus protecting Loki from anyone else who might request his hand.

That would change Loki’s fate completely.

Somehow Thor would make this alright.

The light was fading, he stood up and, taking a deep breath, walked over the top of the fountain, looking down for some kind of sign as he did so.

All you need to change your fate

'All I need,' Thor thought, 'all I need.'

Nothing. Nothing happened. Thor looked about him in bewilderment. Had he walked the wrong way?
He'd have to stay and try again tomorrow.

The light was really gone now, down below the trees. Below the trees! The trees that once weren't here!

Thor ran out of the front gates and grabbed a handful of branches. Then he climbed up to the top of the wall and dropped them in a pile where the sun's light would have been if it had not been blocked by the enormous canopy. He ran back and forth, building up the pile of branches until it was big enough to sustain a decent fire.

His hands shook slightly as he set it ablaze. He had to succeed, he had to save Loki.

He climbed down and went back to the courtyard, the fire was burning brightly now and the flames sent flickering light down onto the fountain.

Thor took a deep breath, and crossed again.

This time he saw it, a small carving on the side of the fountain's opening, where the water would once have rushed out.

Thor knelt and examined it, it was difficult to do in the firelight, but it looked like an eye.

Thor grabbed the map from his pocket and looked at the seal in the bottom corner, it was the same.

He took a deep breath and pressed the little carving.

The fountain opened beneath his feet. Thor jumped back, reflexes honed by years of training, and brought his hammer up as precisely nothing happened.

Cautiously, he approached the fountain. A glance down told him what he needed to know. The Last Seer had indeed set a trap, but time had wasted it. There was a large skeleton down below, it must have once been a fearsome beast, but whatever spell had preserved it originally was gone.

Thor carefully climbed down into the fountain. He used the skeleton as a ladder.

The Emerald was protected by another spell, a force field, and this one was still active.

Thor checked the map again. It had been left as a part of the Last Seer's will, although no one at the time had been able to decipher it. It had nothing to say on the subject of magic force fields.

Thor sighed. "Just once I'd like it to be easy," he muttered.

An examination of the room revealed nothing but old plumbing and natural crevasses. Thor returned to the Emerald.

He braced himself, and hit it with Mjolnir. The force of it rebounded his arm slightly, but nothing else happened.

Thor had encountered force fields like this before, and they usually threw him across the room. Like the preservation spell on the beast, the power here was fading. Great Seer she might have been, but she may not have been the most powerful of mages.

Thor thought again about the castle, and how he'd casually explored it that day. It may not have been as well preserved as he'd originally thought.

He hit the force field again. The rebound was weaker, only slightly, but it was. Its power had not
been recharged since it was cast.

Thor took a deep breath and sighed. It was going to be a long night.

It took two thousand and forty eight hits before the force field finally broke. Thor stood there panting with effort. His arm was screaming at him, and his back hurt from winding up his strength.

But the Emerald lay there unprotected.

Thor reached out and picked it up. It was tiny, hardly worth it as a piece of jewellery, but then what it contained was far more precious.

There was the faintest of noises from behind him, and Thor turned.

He'd been wrong. The spell cast on the beast had not faded, it was merely waiting for him to set off the trap.

Thor jammed the tiny emerald into his pocket and leapt to the side as the fully restored beast tried to bite his head off.

It was quite a clever trap, Thor thought as he jammed himself into a crevasse in an attempt to stay alive. Breaking the force field would require either sheer force or a powerful spell, either way it left the thief exhausted and confined with a ravenous beast five times his size.

He struck out and hit the beast on the nose. It snarled but did not otherwise appear to be affected.

Thor struck again as it lunged for him, before rolling out under its front limbs and trying to reach the hole.

The hole that had sheer sides and no convenient skeleton ladder to climb.

'It's a good thing I can fly,' Thor thought, but he had barely started to spin Mjolnir when the beast tried to bite him in half. He lunged away from the opening and ran back into the small chamber. The beast followed, and Thor knocked it back as best he could.

Aesir he might be, and strong he might be, but Thor was tired, and that was a problem. The beast could be knocked back, but he didn't appear to be doing any actual damage.

Thor ducked and rolled again, coming up on the other side of the beast and running to the hole. He turned and faced it as he raised his trembling arm to the sky above him.

Lightning shot down and out, hitting the beast squarely in the face.

It stumbled and fell, but almost immediately began to rise. Thor swung Mjolnir frantically and took to the air just as it leapt into the hole-shaft. From high above Thor saw it climb out of the fountain with its eyes still firmly fixed on him.

He had to kill it, even though this place was isolated and the jungle made it difficult to reach it, in fact, especially so. Thor had come here for the Emerald, disturbing the fragile peace of the fallen Vanir was not a part of the plan. It wasn't right to leave the beast alive to trample through the castle and mix the dust up into the air.

Thor gathered his strength as best he could and flew back down toward the beast. It saw him coming and snarled. Thor flew faster, his aching body protesting as he hurled down towards it. The beast opened its mouth as Thor shot into it.
Lightning shot down and fried the beast as Thor punched his way out through the back of the its neck.

Thor hit the ground and rolled, out of control, until he hit the wall on the far side of the courtyard.

He clambered painfully to his feet. The beast was lying in the courtyard, smoking slightly.

Thor wondered blearily if it tasted better than dried beef.

His thoughts turned to the Emerald, and his frantic fingers searched through his pocket for the tiny gem. He sighed in relief as he found it, along with the ring he'd picked up earlier.

Still trembling from exertion, Thor held the Emerald between his thumb and finger and spoke aloud the words he'd been told would work by an ancient old sprite from Alfheim.

"Oh Norns, I plead, oh Norns, I ask, oh Norns, I demand," he said.

The world seemed to fade around him, twisting and turning and - there were people! In old fashioned robes! Walking around in a hurried fashion, a group of them carried another and placed him on the courtyard cobbles. A moment later he rose and staggered away backwards.

Thor realised that he was moving backwards in time.

But then suddenly the castle was still being built, then it was abandoned, but the jungle was overgrown fields, then suddenly it was being poured over by men in modern robes, the jungle partly cleared - the future? - Thor wondered as he was swept back and forth across time.

But then he was in a quiet place, a peaceful place. There was a small hut with a garden, a well and a spinning wheel. The three Norns sat behind it, watching him.

Thor approached carefully. It dawned on him as he walked that the small hut was not very small at all, it was just very far away.

Urd, Skuld and Verdandi. The three Norns that spun the fates of all. Thor had been fascinated by them when he was younger, and had vowed to change his fate just to prove it could be done. As he'd grown he had not taken such a vow as seriously, as his life seemed to be quite good the way it was. Now he would be keeping his childhood vow. He wondered whether the Norns knew this, and whether it made them angry.

They were a lot bigger than their pictures.

Thor kept walking until he stood before them like a naughty child. He tried to gather his courage -

"Rest easy Thor, son of Odin. We know why you are here, and we to not object," said one.

Thor was surprised.

"I thought changing your fate was forbidden," he said.

"Oh yes, very much so, but every so often, the nine realms require changing, or else things grow stale," she said.

"Do you know what it's like to know the end of everything?" asked another.

Thor shook his head, his eyes had been drawn to the spinning wheel, the spokes were blurring
together and making an image.

It was Loki.

Thor stepped closer, his mouth suddenly dry, as he watched Loki's life play out in front of him.

- Loki as a toddler, waddling around on unsteady legs -
- Loki as a young boy, playing a prank -
- Loki as a youth, arguing with Thor -
- Their first kiss, the way the boat rocked wildly and almost dumped them both out -
- Loki's wedding, he looked so young and vulnerable -
- The wedding night -

Thor gripped Mjolnir tightly as he watched Loki cry.

- The lessons, the Progress... the rapes -

When he saw the iron chair and what the King did to Loki, Thor roared in fury, and in Vanaheim the sky shot down lightning through three layers of palace and blew the chair into molten fragments.

- Loki sitting with people Thor assumed they were his friends -
- Loki sitting by the King at dinner with a careful mask to his features -

And here the image went blurry at the edges, and Thor realised that he was now watching Loki's *future*.

- Loki in an actual mask at a ball, approached by the King in a poor disguise -
- Loki being kissed by him, and trying not to fight it -
- Loki in bed with him, the look of disgust on his face over the King's shoulder -
- Loki growing thinner and paler as the stress of his life built up against him -
- Loki being tortured in the bedroom for the King's pleasure -
- Loki being held by guards with another young man with dark blond hair, as in front of them a pretty woman with brown hair and eyes was hacked apart, the King watching them both with hard, cruel eyes -
- Another man, wasn't that the Crown Prince? What was his name? Dorgen, that was it, stood in the throne room before his father and was declared a traitor who was plotting to overthrow the King, before being sentenced to death -
- Loki grieving, the young man looking equally shattered as they sat alone by a fire -
- Loki sitting nervously by the King's side as the young man was wed to a noble he couldn't even look at -
- Loki protesting as his servants were changed with new ones from the King -
- Loki isolated and alone, with only approved people for company -

- Loki frantic, trying to re-seep old tea leaves -

- Loki lying on his bed staring at nothing, his hand on his stomach -

- Loki screaming and banging on the windows from inside the palace as another man, a young warrior by the look of him, was executed in the main square, the King's face marred with an ugly scar -

- Loki pregnant and pale, the young man with the dark blond hair sitting by him in silence -

- Loki crying in the healer's chambers as he laboured to bring the child forth -

- Loki lying still and staring at nothing as, in the far corner of the room, a tiny body was wrapped in a shroud -

- Loki watching with dead eyes as the babe was buried in a tiny longship, beneath an equally tiny mound -

- Loki growing thinner, paler, the King glancing across at him during feasts with a look of growing disgust -

- Loki next to the King in the throne room, with the young man looking on from the side, both of them looking sick and fearful as the King disowned his two grandsons and declared the young man his true heir -

- Loki holding onto Thor's knife and weeping in the night -

- Loki receiving news that the two grandsons of the King, along with their mother, had died in a fire that destroyed her whole family -

- Loki with the new Crown Prince, both of them shattered, both of them struggling, both of them hurting as they leaned towards one another and kissed -

Thor wished his heart could break in that moment, as he watched them cling to one another, but it had already shattered just watching as his love was broken down into an empty shell. The look in Loki's eyes was one of pure desperation.

'I will save you,' Thor thought. "I will stop this.'

- Loki sitting alone, staring into the fire -

- Loki, at a funeral, tears in his eyes as he watched his grandfather being buried in a longboat -

- Loki sitting with his grandmother as they both wept -

- Another funeral, it was their grandmother, and Loki was barely able to stand for grief -

- Loki alone and dead-eyed in his chambers as a guard came to tell him that the King was dead -

- Loki standing staring at the dead King as he was buried, nothing in his eyes but a blank stare -

- Loki standing on the Bifrost site, only it wouldn't activate -

- Odin arriving, telling Loki that he'd failed, having an affair with another was most definitely
causing trouble, even if the King never found out about it -

- Loki at a different place, fields all around him as he worked and worked and worked all day, but still with his blank-eyed stare -

- Loki rising one morning, the veil of despair still on him as he saddled up his horse and rode out far into the fields -

- He reached a fence and stopped for a moment, regarding it, then he began to gallop towards it. There was a look in his eyes that Thor did not like, a look of a decision having been made, and it wasn't the right one -

- When the horse leapt over the fence, Loki let his feet leave the stirrups, he was thrown backwards towards the hard packed earth below -

Someone screamed; Thor realised that it was him as he watched Loki hit the ground and snap his neck. He had outlived the King by less than a year.

"No," he gasped, "no, no, you can't, you can't let that happen. Not to my Loki, what did he do to my Loki?!"

"That is the fate of Loki Odinson, an otherwise exceptional man who had the misfortune to be caught between two men who did not love him enough to stop themselves destroying him," said one of the Norns.

Thor held out the Emerald.

"Is it true?" he asked. "What I have read, is it true that I can change his fate with this?"

"It is true, we will accept the Emerald as payment for the changing of one fate," said the third Norn.

Thor looked again at the spinning wheel, but the images were gone.

"Make it so that the Vanir King never desired him," he said. "Never, I see what my father did not, it was always about Loki, about having Loki, there was no reason other than this in the King’s mind, don't let him have my Loki!"

"That is not what the Emerald does," said the first Norn.

Thor stopped and stared at her.

"You said I could change his fate! I am changing it!" he screamed at them.

"You can change his fate, but his fate is his future. You can change it from this point onwards only, you cannot change the past," said the middle Norn.

Thor fell to his knees. "Please," he begged, weeping, "please let me save him."

"We cannot change the past," she repeated. "If you wish to save him you must save his future."

Thor looked helplessly at the spinning wheel, but saw nothing but the spinning spokes. He opened his mouth to demand that Loki be sent home immediately... and then closed it again.

He could not let his emotions rule him, not now, not with so much at stake. He could not save Loki from the past, but he *could* save all those people in the future. The girl who the young man so obviously loved, Dorgen, that warrior, who knew how many others?
Thor rose to his feet and took a deep breath.

"The King, how does he die?" he asked.

New images appeared in the wheel. The King was sitting at lunch, two pretty, if slightly panicky servant girls were trying not to look horrified as he fondled them in turn, when suddenly his head seemed to wobble in place. He slumped in his chair as they called for help.

Then he was lying in the healer's chambers, blinking slowly as the healer described his condition to the young man and another, fairer man who looked as though he was related to him.

They stood silently by and watched as the life drained out of their father. Their eyes were hard and cruel.

Thor nodded as the image faded.

"It was natural causes then?" he asked, just to confirm.

"Yes," the first Norn said.

"Then I want that to still happen, but I want it happen now," Thor said.

The Emerald in his hand glowed brightly, then evaporated into vapour.

Thor watched as the Norns cut the life-thread of the King in two places, and carefully wove the last little piece onto the already lived strand.

The rest they dropped onto the ground, and it shrivelled and turned to ash.

Behind them, Thor saw the threads of others grow longer, still more shrivelled shorter, and Thor could only hope that meant they were the King's allies and therefore deserved their new fates. Loki's thread lengthened until it pooled at Thor's feet.

"He survives," Thor breathed in relief.

"He does," agreed the Norns, "but it is up to you to help him live."

And then Thor was moving again, through time, through space, through the branches of Yggdrasil itself, to find himself back in the courtyard of the old castle.

The beast was still smoking.

"Heimdall!" Thor called upwards out of habit. "Heimdall bring me home!"

The light came and the Bifrost pulled Thor away.

The castle slept onwards.

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Loki took a deep breath and turned back to face the Bifrost site again. In two more steps, he would be taken to Thor. This was it.
Ninety Nine Steps

Chapter Summary

The Fall of the King

There was a crowd on all three levels of the palace where the lightning had struck. They gathered on the edges to look down and around at the smoking crater.

Loki stood on the upper level with the King and Musleen, trying not to look guilty.

It had to be Thor, surely there was no one else with the ability to do such damage? What in the nine realms had he done that for?

The King was going to ask Loki about it, any minute now, and Loki was going to have to come up with an explanation for his love's actions.

There was a piece of metal stuck to the underside of the floor across the hole. It was finally cooling enough for the red to fade. Loki squinted, and realised with a jolt of terror that he recognised the pattern.

It was the iron chair. Thor knew about the iron chair. But how? Heimdall hadn't seen it, Odin didn't know, Frigga had not been told all the details, Lord Fallconyr had only asked her if Odin was aware of the King's latest 'incident' and left it at that.

How could Thor have known?

And what else did he know?

Loki felt fear rise within him. How much would it take for Thor to be unable to look at him? He'd never wanted him to know about this.

Behind him, he heard Musleen call out, but his own thoughts consumed him.

What would Thor even do with someone so damaged? What look of disgust awaited Loki upon his return?

Maybe Thor could look past it? Maybe his anger and destruction of the iron chair was enough? Loki hoped so, he had nothing else to hope for.

The yelling behind him finally broke through and Loki turned, just in time to see the King fall into Musleen's arms.

Loki looked at the King in confusion, he'd been fine only a moment ago while staring in shock at the wreckage, now his head was wobbling and the left half of his face was, was...

'Stroke' Loki thought as he started forwards. 'He's having a stroke.'

The healer was nearby, having come to see if anyone had been hurt in the lightning strike. She pushed her magic into the King as he lay on the ground.
Over his prone body, Loki and Musleen exchanged glances. They both knew what the other was thinking, and they would never, ever, say so out loud.

"Do what you can for him," Musleen said instead.

The healer was too busy working to acknowledge him. Servants brought a stretcher and lifted him onto it. Musleen and Loki stood aside wordlessly as they watched him being taken away.

"I'd better find Camtan and tell him," Musleen said.

"I'll come," Loki said, "Then we can go to the healer's chambers together."

They walked down the corridors side by side, both of them looking straight ahead without talking, without saying what was on both of their minds.

The King had a stroke, he might be dying, this time tomorrow he might be dead.

They reached Camtan's chambers and knocked.

The servant ushered them in and went to fetch him. They could hear crying from beyond the doorway.

Camtan appeared, looking concerned, his robes were slightly askew.

"Roa got a huge fright from the bang, we're still trying to calm her down," he said by way of explanation. "She didn't want to let go of me, so I hope this is important."

"Father is in the healer's chambers, he's having a stroke," Musleen said without preamble.

Camtan looked shocked.

"Will he be alright?" he asked.

"We don't know, we're going to wait in the healer's chambers for news," Musleen said.

"I will join you as soon as Roa is calm," Camtan said.

Musleen nodded and they left.

There was a strange feeling in the air, as though the entire palace was holding its breath.

"Should we send a messenger to Dorgen?" Loki asked quietly as they walked.

"Probably," Musleen said. "I will do so, it may take him a few days to get here."

They reached the healer's chambers and sat in the outer room in silence.

Loki didn't know exactly how to feel. The last time he'd started to hope that the King was dying, the bastard had pulled through. But this time was far more serious, he might still live but be paralysed, he might lose mental faculties and have to have a permanent nurse to care for him.

He might just die, and do Vanaheim a favour.

Loki didn't dare hope, not until it was truly over.

Musleen wrote a message for Dorgen and sent a servant to deliver it.
Loki had a book delivered from his chambers and sat reading as the hours ticked by.

Camtan eventually arrived with Roa asleep in his arms and Softitia beside him. They settled Roa on one of the couches and then sat down near Musleen and Loki.

"Any word?" Camtan asked.

"None at all, they must be still working on him," Musleen said, he looked bored.

Camtan shot him a look of warning. "Remember what happened to Dorgen," he said quietly.

Musleen's jaw tensed briefly. "I remember," he said, equally quiet, "believe me brother, I remember."

It was two more hours before the healer came out to see them.

"Your Graces, it is my sad duty to inform you that His Majesty, King Dimcken, is dying. He has suffered a major stroke that has robbed him of his ability to move his body, and has severely restricted his ability to speak. He is conscious, and aware, but his body is shutting down, there is nothing we can do."

She looked nervous.

'Fifty years ago she promised him five hundred more years of life,' Loki thought. 'No wonder she looks nervous now. How did she miss this? It must have developed very suddenly.'

"Thank you," Musleen said. "I have sent word to Dorgen already, will Father survive until he arrives to see and farewell him?"

"No Your Grace, he is fading rapidly," the healer said. "I believe he has less than an hour. He has asked for His Grace, King's Consort Loki."

Loki felt a jab of fear, the same one he always felt when the King asked for him alone, but what did he have to fear now?

The thought didn't make him feel better. King Dimcken had spent too many years doing things to make Loki fear him, the feeling wasn't about to go away just because he was dying.

Loki followed the healer into the inner chamber and to the King's side.

King Dimcken's face looked strange, the droop on his left side wasn't so obvious now that he was lying down, but there was still a look about it that wasn't quite right.

Loki sat down on the little chair by the bed and tried to look sad.

It was an effort.

"Llki," King Dimcken said through lips that didn't work properly, "Llki."

"I am here Husband," Loki said gently as the healer moved away to give them some privacy.

"Gdd beh, gdd. Cn't goh te th bol nw. Nn msk bol," King Dimcken mumbled.

Loki had to lean down to hear him. It was an effort to figure out what he was saying, but Loki managed it.

"No, there won't be a masque ball, you are very unwell Husband," he said.
"Dyn," King Dimcken said.

Loki nodded, still working on his 'sad' face. "Yes Husband, you are."

King Dimcken sighed heavily, the effort of talking was getting to him.

"Sns," he said.

"I'll get them," Loki said.

He went to the door and stuck his head out.

"He wants you," he said to Musleen and Camtan.

"I'll go first," Musleen said, his voice had an edge to it that Loki had never heard before. He did not know that it was the one Musleen used in interrogations.

Musleen entered the room. Loki went back to the King's side and took his hand, the picture of a perfect wife.

'He's actually dying,' Loki thought. 'It's really happening, he's dying.'

He couldn't help it, the excitement was building.

He sat silently as Musleen leaned over his father from the other side.

"This has taken us by surprise Father," Musleen said, his voice cold, "Dorgen is still days away, I doubt he'll get here in time."

King Dimcken was drooling from the corner of his mouth. He clearly braced himself before he started to speak.

"Nn Drgn, yoo, yoo beh Kng, yoo mah sn, Drgn tretr, Drgn bd kng."

"No Father," Musleen said softly, so that the healer couldn't hear from the other room. "Dorgen will not be a bad King, he will be a great King, greater than you, and I am a far worse son than you realise. After you are dead I will be asking a lovely young woman to have dinner with me, we will talk and laugh and maybe even go dancing. She is a dancer Father, from a troop of dancers-"

Half of King Dimcken's face looked shocked, the other half hung slackly.

"-and even though she is a commoner, she is the least common woman I know. I am in love with her, and when you are dead I will do everything I can to woo and marry her. We will live happily, and you will never, ever, be in our thoughts."

King Dimcken looked horrified, he was struggling to find the breath to speak.

"I wanted you to know that Father, before you died, I wanted you to know that, if not for your interference, I would have been happy years ago, and I shall be far happier with you gone than I ever was when you were here."

Loki looked at the floor, inside, a flicker of a flame leapt and danced to Musleen's words, even as the old fear still made his heart pound. There was no going back for Musleen now, if by some miracle the King lived his life would be forfeit.

Musleen patted his Father's hand in a parody of affection.
"I'll go and work on your funeral speech," he said with an almost manic glint in his eye.

Loki recognised the look, it was the look of a man with nothing to lose.

Musleen walked out of the room without looking back.

Loki picked up a cloth and dabbed up the drool at the corner of King Dimcken's mouth as Camtan entered the room.

King Dimcken looked as though someone had swept the ground from under him, and the desperate look he shot his youngest son was so needy it was painful.

"Cmtn," he managed.

Camtan took his father's hand and held it with a look of resignation.

"Father," he said, "I, I don't know what to say."

"R-a," King Dimcken managed, his eyes flickering to the door.

"She's asleep outside," Camtan said.

"Seh R-a," King Dimcken managed.

Camtan sighed gently and looked at his father with a great deal of sadness in his normally cheerful face.

"No, I don't think so," he said calmly.

Loki blinked in surprise, of all the sons of Dimcken, Camtan had the least responsibility, the most cheerful disposition, and the least reason to hate his father.

"I don't want her to remember you," Camtan said as his eyes hardened, his voice took on an icy tone. "I don't want our son to know of you either, did I tell you Sofftia and I were expecting again? We are, and you won't see him, ever. I will never even mention your name. I have hated you since I was a child, Father, I have loathed the very sight of you. The mere thought that I might have something in common with you sickens me so much that I want to vomit, and occasionally have. After your death Sofftia and I are going back to the high mountains to stay with her father, my father too, Lord Fetatheren has always been good to me, treated me like a son. Did you know I call him Father when you are not around? I want him to know his grandchildren. We've discussed it over the years and I think we'll start packing right after Dorgen is crowned."

King Dimcken looked as though he'd been punched in the stomach. His eyes looked up at Camtan, filled with pain and betrayal.

Camtan rose without saying goodbye and walked away.

"Wai? Wai?" King Dimcken managed to say.

Loki watched with a strange fascination as Camtan paused at the door and turned.

"Mother used to throw such lovely parties," he said in the dreamy tone of memory.

The sound of the door closing echoed loudly in the silent room.

The King was silent where he lay, his breath was laboured and becoming more so. Loki stared
awkwardly at the floor.

No one else entered. No one else wanted to say goodbye.

For a few minutes there was nothing but silence, then a door opened soundlessly in the wall and Hieddenyr stepped out. He stared silently at Loki, before his eyes went to the King.

The look on King Dimcken's face made Loki turn away in disgust. Even knowing how horrible he was, fearing him, hating him, wishing him dead, Loki never wanted to see that look, especially not as he gazed at a servant, a commoner, a person he looked down upon for being born.

It was hope.

And it was pathetic.

It didn't matter how much of a monster you were, everyone wanted comfort when they were dying. The King had been abandoned by his sons, all he had left was hope in his servant.

A hope that was utterly false, which Loki knew all too well.

Hieddenyr walked to the King's side and looked at him in silence for a moment, then he began to speak.

"Your sons were the best thing you ever did," he said, his tone so vicious that Loki found himself leaning slightly away from him.

"But then they all take after their mothers," Hieddenyr spat. "Night after night I had to hear you torture your wives, night after night I held my hands over my ears as they screamed and begged you for mercy. I have nightmares where I hear them scream, sometimes even in the day the thought of them jumps to my mind and I feel as though I cannot breathe."

Hieddenyr paused for breath as King Dimcken tried to get up enough air to dismiss him.

"The first time I saw her she was in a dress made by her mother from offcuts, a typical tailor's child, nothing special, but she was spectacular. I have never forgotten that moment in the kitchen, I have never forgotten the way she clung to me at night after you were done with her."

King Dimcken had frozen, his eyes were locked onto Hieddenyr's as he realised what the man was saying.

"I'll tell you this, you sadistic bastard, servants can't order a woman to kiss them, when she kissed me, it was because she damn well wanted to." Hieddenyr hissed.

He turned and left then, rage still etched onto his features as King Dimcken choked on a mixture of anger and humiliation.

Loki watched the servant disappear the way he had come. So many people feared the King's power, without it, he was just a horrible old man. They had feared him, but they had never respected him.

He looked down again to find the King looking up at him with a look of fear in his dying eyes.

'He thinks I'm next,' Loki realised. 'He damn well knows what he's done to me and he fear what I will say.'

'He fears me.'
The thought was strange and unsettling. After so long living in terror of what King Dimcken could do, suddenly, Loki had the power.

‘Odin will be watching by now, there is no way he'd miss this, my final moments of marriage.’

No Trouble, No Mischief.

Loki put on his best look of hurt and gentle confusion, as if he couldn't understand why everyone was being so *mean*.

"You were a good Husband," he said.

His voice did not crack. The sky did not shatter open. A thousand things that should have happened did not happen. The lie was told and it held.

The look of gratitude in the King's eyes was pathetic.

Loki leaned down and kissed the King's cheek, right by his ear, before breathing, "Thor will be a better one."

As he pulled back he saw the pain in the King's eyes, the realisation that he was indeed, all alone in his death. No one would mourn him. No one would miss him. They were all waiting for him to die.

"I just wish Fosxyr could have made it to say goodbye, he's only three day's ride away," Loki continued in a sad tone. "I'm sure Lord Fallconyr would have lent him a horse."

King Dimcken's breath was fading, but there was the faintest spark in his eyes that told Loki that the barb had hit home, but it was too late, he was minutes from death.

"Don't worry Husband, Dorgen will make a great King, he has *big* plans for Vanaheim," Loki continued in the same, sad, comforting way.

He patted King Dimcken's hand soothingly as the King began to cry.

Loki realised, in a strange kind of way that he was *enjoying* this. These were his last few minutes before freedom, and he felt as though he was fighting through his chains.

"Musleen's girlfriend is lovely, they met through me you know, she's one of my friends from the Tower. You've nothing to worry about with her, she's the best dancer in Vanaheim, she'll look so graceful at the coronation," he said. "I wouldn't worry about Camtan, he's an *excellent* skier, he and his family will be just fine in the high mountains."

King Dimcken was still breathing, but the light was fading from his eyes. Loki patted his hand gently and added one last thing.

"He might stick around here for a little while, after all, he'll want Roasia to meet her grandmother."

There was but the slightest twitch in the King's hand, he'd heard it, he knew what it meant.

Loki leaned over him, just in case he could still see through his crying, pain-filled eyes.

Then he smiled, not the bright, overly happy smile he had perfected during his time in Vanaheim, but a slow, narrow-lipped one that spoke of pleasure in pain, of joy in sorrow, of delight in suffering.

For all his mischief Loki had never been evil before, but watching that smile it was possible to believe that he could be.
"Goodbye Husband," he said in that same, sad tone, "goodbye."

King Dimcken died.

They say when a King dies there is often a sign in the sky, a comet, a shooting star, that night Haewkyr climbed to the roof of the palace and pissed as high as he could, because, as he said later with a very straight face, he couldn’t stand seeing a tradition unfulfilled.
The King’s funeral was an enormous affair. He had ruled over Vanaheim for over five thousand years after all. Change like this was a big deal, and everyone from the highest noble to the lowest pauper was given the chance to mourn.

Loki sat through it all with a suitable sad expression on his face. Very few people actually bought the act, but no one was about to say so. There was such a thing as dignity.

He didn’t cry. Not once in the whole proceedings did he cry for the dead man in the golden boat-coffin.

There was a great orator who told the life of the King from his beginnings as the eldest son, to his first marriage and tragic loss, to his second marriage and the birth of Dorgen, to the war against Thanos, and the second of his great losses.

The orators glossed over his third marriage, choosing instead to focus on the two younger princes and how much they had contributed to the realm.

Then, finally, the orator reached the King’s fourth, and final, marriage.

Loki was perfect in that moment. He sat with poise and grace as the best possible spin was put onto his torture. How the realm of Asgard had sent one of its own into the Vanir court, for peace and for unity, how the King had taken the young Prince Loki under his wing and taught him the ways of the court and the duties of a consort, how Loki had blossomed here in Vanaheim, protected and guided by the King.

Loki even bowed his head at the end, a graceful acknowledgement of the people and their King.

Unnoticed, a small drop of blood fell from his palm and hit the floor, he’d dug his nails in too tightly and cut himself.

Lord Fallconyr rose and spoke of his old friend. He spoke about their time together as young men, and the many times they had courted death with their antics. There were some chuckles from the crowd who liked to imagine their old and wrinkled monarch as an adventurer.

Nobody noticed how Lord Fallconyr only spoke of the distant past, and had not a single word to say about the King’s more recent behaviour.

Dorgen spoke about what the King was like as a father. He was very eloquent for a man whose parent had tried to kill him. He spoke of King Dimcken’s fine qualities, without, somehow, defining what those qualities actually were.

Then it was Loki’s turn to speak. Traditionally the wife of a fallen warrior would say a short speech, make a toast to the fallen, and pour a glass of wine on the ground for the dead to drink.
Loki stood up.

“Lords and Ladies, people of Vanaheim. It is considered a great honour to be wed to a King. I was wed to yours. You welcomed me warmly into your realm, and I thank you. His Majesty may have been busy running the realm, but he always made time for me in the evenings, and I don’t think I’ll even forget that. To his Majesty, King Dimcken of Vanaheim!”

He held up the glass as the people cheered, and poured it on the ground, taking care to splash just a tiny bit onto the King’s robes, so that they would be stained forever.

Then he sat down again. It was only as he relaxed his shoulders that he realised that he was covered in sweat. The play-acting was getting to him, the honour and grief that the King received was getting to him. He wanted to shout out that their ruler had been a sick pervert who deserved to be put down long before his natural death.

But he couldn’t.

It wouldn’t be proper. And in three more days Loki would be going home, he’d see Thor again, he’d be betrothed and then married and happy. He’d survived this, he’d *made* it. He wasn’t about to ruin it now.

His eyes finally glanced up to where Odin and Frigga sat. As representatives of Asgard they were near the great ship, but on the other side to the Vanir family and close friends. Odin would not have missed the way Loki had worded his speech, but the people had cheered so there was no argument he could make.

A signal was given, and the great ship was hauled from the square in front of the palace down the main road. It would be dragged by horses all the way to the burial grounds where an enormous mound of earth would cover it forever.

Loki walked beside Dorgen behind the ship, his eyes downcast. Inside his heart kept jumping in excitement.

The King was dead. The King WAS dead. The King was DEAD. The KING was dead. Dead, dead, dead. All dead. Never to return. Dead.

It was a beautiful day with the way the sun was shining and everything. Truly lovely.

Loki looked up then and nodded to the crowd as he passed them. A lot of them were crying with grief. But then King Dimcken was all they had known, and they had never known what he truly thought of the common folk.

Loki saw Fosxyr up on a balcony with Shiarpia and the rest of their family. Fosxyr’s brother had his arm around Fosxyr’s shoulders and was holding on tightly as they watched the procession go by with solemn faces.

It took four hours for them to reach the burial grounds. The older and weaker members of the court had been taken in carriages, but the younger and stronger ones were expected to walk, to show their devotion for the departed.

Loki had to resist the urge to kick off his shoes when he reached the gravesite. There was still a job to do.

The Master of Ceremonies, whose name was still a mystery, handed Loki a shovel.
There was a circle marked out on the ground all around where the ship now lay.

Loki walked forwards to the circle and dug out a single shovel full of earth. Then he walked to the ship, carefully keeping the earth balanced on the end of the shovel.

He placed the earth at the base of the hull and walked back. With great ceremony, he handed the shove to Dorgen, who dug out his own piece of earth.

Loki’s job was done. He retired to the tent set up for the royal family. He didn’t need to watch the rest of the ceremony.

Dorgen placed his own piece of earth before handing the shovel to Musleen. One by one, in descending order of importance, the people of Vanaheim buried their King.

Haewkyr almost threw his earth into the air so that it would land with a splat on the King’s face, but a warning look from Lord Fallconyr stopped him. He put it neatly at the base with the others.

The foreign visitors were permitted to shovel as well, although their place was after all the nobles, and just before the commoners.

There were a lot of nobles, Frigga came to sit with Loki as she and Odin waited for their turn.

Odin stayed outside and watched as the earth began to pile up in the middle, and a barrow began to form out of the circle on the ground.

“Care for some wine?” asked his least favourite voice in the whole nine realms.

“Lord Fallconyr,” he said stiffly.

“Your Majesty,” Lord Fallconyr replied.

Odin raised an eyebrow. “That was surprisingly respectful,” he said.

“One of my grandsons is to return to your realm, I would like to visit him occasionally,” Lord Fallconyr said.

“You are surprisingly bad at negotiations considering that you create your wealth from trade,” he said.

“Oh, I hold all the cards here Odin, I was just giving you a chance to redeem yourself. Loki will come to me, and he will bring Thor with him. Now that Dimcken is gone, there is no one here who would object to either of your sons’ presence.”

“Thor has his duty as the crown prince of Asgard,” Odin began.

“And he’s been doing it faithfully these past two hundred and fifty years?” Lord Fallconyr inquired, all politeness.

Odin scowled.

“Just say yes, it will be easier on all of us,” Lord Fallconyr continued. “You won’t even know I’m there.”

“Yes I will,” Odin growled, “Frigga will be happy.”

“You can’t make her happy? Oh dear, I wonder why not? You seemed like such great husband
material when you were a young man,” Lord Fallconyr said.

Odin gave him a look.

“I have done all I could to keep that boy from losing his mind, but I fear that it may not have been enough. He needs something from you Odin, more powerful than any magic, believe me, and it has to be real, so if I were you I’d work on it straight away.”

“And what is that?” Odin asked.

“As an apology,” Lord Fallconyr said simply, reaching out and clasping Odin’s shoulder and staring into his eyes with a piercing gaze. “From one stubborn old man to another, it’s not worth the pain to hold onto your pride. You did this to him, you are the cause of his anguish, face that, admit that, and for the love of the nine realms and the sake of your family, apologise to him.”

With that he turned and left, leaving Odin standing there alone by the barrow.

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Three days later and Loki was almost packed. Fosxyr had returned to the palace, still technically with his new name as Dorgen couldn’t pardon him until he was crowned King in another three months, but everyone kept forgetting.

Loki pulled his Aesir clothes on that morning and stood examining himself in the mirror.

“I look weird,” he said. “I shouldn’t, but I feel as though I do.”

“You will get used to it,” Fosxyr assured him, “just as you got used to the robes.”

Loki fidgeted slightly on the spot.

“My smallclothes are itching,” he muttered quietly.

Fosxyr laughed, his broad smile on full display.

Loki knew why. Last night the Lady Visxena had arrived in Vanaheim. She had been immediately granted a fine set of rooms by Dorgen, who welcomed her as his honoured guest.

He had then taken both of his brothers aside and spoken to them quietly about a dangerous night which had finally reached its happy ending.

Fosxyr had taken advantage of their absence and slipped into her rooms. Brother and sister had spent half an hour together before the door had burst open and mother and sons had laid eyes on one another for the first time in twelve hundred and fifty years.

Loki had been happy for them, although it was a part of their lives that he took no part in. His life and the lives of the Vanir royal family were on separate paths from the moment the King died.

He would miss them.

But there was no time for dwelling on it, he had to make his goodbyes to a fair number of people.

He gave Wraenyr, Femtchyr and Canryen a purse each as a thank you present.

He slipped down to the kitchens with Fosxyr’s help and said goodbye to the butcher and his pet alpec, who now stood taller than his head.
He went to the stables, and stood in the doorway waiting for Haewkyr to notice him.

“So, what are you going to do with Lightning?” Haewkyr asked him.

He was leaning against one of the stall doors and looked just a bit too casual for the occasion.

“Would you take care of him for me?” Loki asked him, reaching out and touching Lightning’s nose.

“You could take him to Asgard,” Haewkyr said.

“Tempting, but he needs running daily, I can’t give him that, and none of the grooms would be able to handle him,” Loki said.

“Curse me for being so incredibly tough,” Haewkyr said with a grin.

Loki smiled. “You’ll take him?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Haewkyr?” Loki looked at him dead in the eye so that there would be no misunderstanding. “Thank you, for everything.”

Haewkyr’s face turned serious. “If you need to hide out in a field shelter, the offer is still open.”

Loki shook his head. “I’ll be fine, I’m going home, I’m going to see Thor again,” he said with a smile.

Haewkyr’s face remained unchanged. “It’s there if you need it,” he repeated.

They clasped wrists in farewell, and Loki left to finish his goodbyes.

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“I can’t believe you’re going!” Daenceia exclaimed. “I always knew you would but now you’re going far away and I won’t see you. I only just got back!”

“I’ll write all the time,” Thainia promised. “Don’t go forgetting us now will you?”

“How could he?” Shiarpia said from behind them, “we’re unforgettable.”

“How are your parents?” Loki asked her.

“Stunned, Father has just regained his two siblings, and with the Bastard dead we’ve been invited to the palace to meet my aunt and cousins, officially,” she said.

“That’s right, you are the cousins of Vanaheim’s youngest princes, be careful Shiarpia, you’ll be in hot demand from the nobles,” Loki teased.

She rolled her eyes. “They’d better watch out for me,” she said, “All I want is to meet the Thunder Boys’ drummer.”

Loki grinned. “Ask Fosxyr about arranging it, I’m sure there’s a way,” he said.
She raised an eyebrow at him but he didn’t say anything more.

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The last goodbye was with his grandparents.

“I’m going to miss you,” Loki said, hugging each of them in turn. “You’ve done so much for me, I can never repay you.”

“Just come and visit now and again,” Lord Eadgleyr said, “You are always welcome Loki, you know that.”

“Whatever happens now, know that you have a home with us if you need it,” Lord Fallconyr told him seriously.

Loki wanted to tell them that everything was going to be fine now. He was going to see Thor again, and be with his true love for the rest of their lives. But everyone seemed so worried, it was a little insulting, but mostly sweet.

“I’ll visit, we’ll both visit,” he promised them sincerely.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Loki stood beneath the Bifrost site and glanced upwards out of habit.

“Heimdall?” he called out.

For a moment, nothing happened, and Loki began to feel panic rise in his chest, but then the light came down around him and the Bifrost activated.

The last thing he saw before he was lifted away was the three sons of Dimcken, the elder statesman, the quiet spymaster, and the young party-lover.

They looked free.

Then Loki was falling upwards at an extraordinary rate, tumbling through the void toward Asgard, Thor, and his future.

Chapter End Notes

Right, that's it for the 'hurt' part of the story, the 'comfort' part will be going up in a little while. It will involve lots of Thor and Loki trying to figure out where they stand with one another after all that has happened.

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