Despite of All Your Losing

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Summary

There was a pause, then Thor noticed Syn poke Loki. He sighed. “I may have stolen a few of his access codes. Including one to his hanger.”

Brun looked at him. “Do you just steal things for sport?”

He shrugged. “I don’t mock your hobbies.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll figure out which is the best one to steal. We’re only going to get one shot.”

Thor looked at her. “We?”

“If you fly out of here in one of the Grandmaster’s ships, anyone left behind associated with you is going to get melt-sticked.”

“There’d be no evidence you were involved.”

Syn munched another grape. “You’re expecting logic from a lunatic.”

“Give me a couple hours to do some recon,” Brun said. “And then we can meet again.” She reached out and touched her sword and then looked up at him. “I don’t know. Maybe I owe Hela a sword in the gut.”

Thor smiled. “I’ll be sure you get the chance.”
Notes

In our grand tradition of putting our OCs in different of AUs. . . What happens when Syn has been on Sakaar for a couple of millennia, too?

See the end of the work for more notes
Magic could be a fickle thing. Most of the time it responded to will and intent. Move this object from here to there. Start a fire in the fireplace, not the bed. Syn the Truthful, queen of Alfheim, had wielded magic since she was a child. Other than the early years when she was still learning, her magic had always done exactly what she wanted it to.

But it was very hard to focus your will and intent while impaled with a sword. All she could think about was that Alfheim was lost and she didn’t want to die. And then everything faded in a flare of bright gold light.

When the light dimmed, she was no longer on the polished marble floors of her palace, but a hard, cobbled street that smelled of refuse. The sword that had pierced her was gone, but her chest hurt and blood still coated her dress. She was... somewhere else. Somewhere with no invaders, no army. Somewhere she might possibly be safe.

A man swathed in robes that had seen better days and in desperate need of dental care lurched out of a nearby doorway. “Well, aren’t you a pretty one.”

She supposed half dead and covered in blood counted as pretty for someone who looked like that. “Where am I?” she asked him, leaning on a nearby building to get to her feet.

“You’re on my front step, that’s where.” He looked her up and down. “Clean you up, the Grandmaster might pay good money for you.”

That didn’t sound appealing at all. A glance around told her her staff was gone, and she wasn’t entirely sure her magic wasn’t depleted. Still, she tried to be as threatening and queenly as she could when she said, “What realm is this?”

He stared at her. “Realm? Seriously? I should have known from the outfit, another fucking Asgardian. How many of you are going to fall from the sky today?”

She spat. “I’m no Asgardian.” The rest of his words penetrated. “Who else is here?”

“A woman in bloody armor who tried to stab me. She didn’t introduce herself. Would have gotten good money for her, too, if she hadn’t had that sword. And been strong enough to throw me.” His eyes narrowed. “You don’t look strong enough to even stand too well.”

Could her magic have brought them both here? His description certainly sounded like the bitch that had stabbed her. Summoning the last of her power, she created a fireball in her palm and lifted it threateningly. “Where did she go?”

His eyes widened, then he turned and pointed. “Bar over there.”

“Thank you,” she said almost politely. She let the fire dissipate and started to walk where he had pointed. The first few steps were agony, then she found a bit of metal rebar she could lean on like a staff and it went a bit easier.

The bar was dim, and didn’t smell much better than the street. It was mostly empty, people clustered in dark corners. She really couldn’t picture Odin’s evil angel of death just hanging around drinking an ale in a dump like this.

A scan of the room proved her to be right. She did spot a woman in one dark corner, in what looked like bloody armor. If for no other reason than if she didn’t sit soon she would fall, Syn
staggered over to her table and dropped into the empty chair. “You are of Asgard.”

The woman eyed her, slugged her drink back, and said, “Asgard can rot.”

Syn felt herself smile, almost despite herself. “You are . . . formerly of Asgard?”

Reluctantly, she said, “Yeah. You?”

“I am Syn the Truthful, of Alfheim. I thought, from a disgusting man’s description, you were the bitch you stabbed me. But that doesn’t appear to be true.”

She squinted. “The Queen of Alfheim?”

“Up until a few minutes ago, yes. I imagine Asgard has claimed it now.”

“Bartender told me time is really fucked up here. There’s a bunch of wormholes and . . . I don’t know.” She waved to said bartender. “You want a drink?”

“Given I’m slightly low on blood, I think it would be a bad idea.” She pressed a hand to the wound on her chest. “I would think if this was Hel, I wouldn’t still be bleeding.”

“It’s called Sakaar,” she said. “Like I said, Time is fucked up. The conquest of Alfheim was years ago. You could be bullshitting me, but it’s more likely you lost a couple centuries to a worm hole.”

She blew out a breath. “Well. Fuck.” Maybe a drink was a good idea, blood loss be damned. “And what, in the last few centuries, did Asgard do to piss you off?”

“My entire brigade was turned into cannon fodder for a coward.”

The bartender arrived with her new drink, and a bottle to go with it. “I’m tired of getting up,” he said.

Her new friend gave him a toothy smile with no humor in it. Syn waited for the man to walk away again before asking, “Odin?” The other woman nodded while drinking. “Finally realized he couldn’t control her?”

“He decided he was done with conquering. Wanted to get a wife and spend more time sitting on his big gold throne. He wanted her locked away. Didn’t tell anyone how powerful she’d gotten. If I’d known I would never have—” She broke off, shook her head and took another drink. She stared somewhere in the middle distance for a moment, then whispered, “She killed every last one of them.”

“I know exactly how you feel,” Syn said quietly, thinking of her guards and her brothers. They had died fighting Asgard. Fighting Hela. All for nothing.

She looked over at Syn. “Do you want to bleed to death?”

“Not really.” She looked down at the wound with a certain detachment. Must be shock. “I ended up here because I didn’t want to die and my magic tried to save me. I’m a decent healer, but it was a grievous wound.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt your glorious death, if that’s what you wanted. Can’t say I’d patch the wound if any of this blood was mine.”

“Alfans are really less glorious death and more dying of old age in bed.” The room was starting to
grey out at the edges. “Could you do me a favor?”

She put her glass down. “Possibly.”

“When I pass out, could you make sure none of them sell me to the Grandmaster? I don’t know him, but the name does not fill me with confidence in his altruism.”

“I promise,” she said. Then she stood up. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

Syn gestured vaguely, staring at a single spot on the table and breathing slowly. Her ears were still roaring a bit, but she thought her grasp on consciousness was a bit better. She looked up to see the woman talking to the bartender, gesturing in her direction. She sure hoped she wasn’t going to sell her. She was Asgardian. But her grief and her anger were real. Syn’s eyelids were heavy. Maybe she’d just close them for a second.

When she opened them again, she was laying in a bed.

Her chest still hurt, though less than it had before. Her armor was gone. All of her clothes were actually gone and her torso was wrapped in bandages. She took a deep breath and tried to get an elbow under her to prop herself up. The room was clean but shabby, hopefully not the sort of place a Grandmaster put his purchases.

The door opened, and in stepped a woman. Out of her armor, it took a moment to recognize the woman from the bar.

“You didn’t sell me,” Syn muttered, leaning back on the bed. “It’s nice to be pleasantly surprised once in a while.”

“I have nothing left, by my word is still good,” she replied. She carried over a box to the bed, one that smelled delicious. “I got some food.”

That seemed worth sitting up. She managed to get upright, leaning back on the head of the bed while the warrior put the box down next to her. It had several pieces of roast . . . creature, as well as a little container of what looked liked mashed vegetables, and a few bread rolls. Syn’s stomach rumbled and she reached for what she’d decided to call a drumstick. “Thank you.”

“Your predicament is my people’s fault. The least I could do is help.”

They ate in silence a moment. Food helped clear her head and the mashed vegetables tasted almost like something from home. “So. We appear to be stuck here.”

“I noticed that.”

“It seems to me, being trapped in a strange realm might be a bit easier with an . . . ally.”

“Make sure neither of us gets sold to the Grandmaster?”

“Or whatever other dangers this place presents. I’m fairly useful when not dying. I don’t know how you arranged the room and the food but I imagine eventually we’ll need to find ways to make money.”

“I stole money from a smelly guy who told me the Grandmaster would pay good money for me.”

“We have so many friends in common,” Syn said, chuckling. The only thing to drink was some sort of ale, which was tragically weak in comparison to Alfan wine. She sipped it and leaned back on the head board. “Do you know anything about this Grandmaster?”
“He’s the King or Overlord or whatever. Lives at the top of that giant building, hosts gladiatorial games and has a lot of slaves.”

“Pleasant.” She sipped her ale and sighed. “Are we sure this isn’t Hel?”

That got her a matching sigh. “If only.”

They sat in silence a few moments and to Syn’s surprise it wasn’t awkward, but oddly companionable. There was something to be said for shared trauma to bond you to someone. “What should I call you?” she asked.

“I am Brunhilde, the last of the Valkyries. Most people call me Brun, unless I have particularly pissed them off.”

Syn smiled. “Nice to meet you, Brun.”

“You said you were a healer?”

She nodded. “Spirits know what kind of herbs they have here, but I have healing magic. As well as magic in general. Based on the smelly man’s reaction, I don’t know how common that is here.”

“There is probably a living wage in that,” she said thoughtfully. “My skills are mostly in fighting.”

“Seems like a place with a gladiatorial arena would appreciate someone who could fight.”

“I get the sense the Grandmaster would want me to, er, gladiate in two handkerchiefs and a loin cloth.”

Syn made a face. “Right. How much stolen cash do you have left?”

Brun emptied her pockets onto the bed between them. “Maybe enough to last us a few days. I can steal more, but I shouldn’t make that a habit.”

“No, I don’t want to know what the legal system is here.” She rubbed a hand against her chest idly. “Well, I’m healing quickly. We can put out word that I’m a healer, see if I can get a few customers while we sort ourselves out here.”

“It’s a start. Keep us fed while we figure shit out.”

And so it did. Syn was up and walking the next day and they used the somewhat friendly bartender to spread the word about her powers. People were eager to find a discreet healer, and though she saw some truly disgusting things, it earned them money for food and a never ending stream of information about how everything worked on Sakaar.

Brun started out as her bodyguard and bouncer, more or less, but as her reputation spread - and her magic stabilized - it wasn’t necessary. By then, they had moved from the shabby room above the bar, to a larger shabby room in a boarding house. There, they made some connections and one of them mentioned how people made made money scavenging in the vast junk sea surrounding the city, full of stuff that constantly dropped from the cluster of portals up in the atmosphere. It was dirty and very dangerous work—the people who lived among the junk were violent and vicious and rumored to be cannibals when desperate. Not to mention the other scrappers who’d just as soon cut your throat. But there was a fortune to be had if you could survive.

Syn didn’t know where Brun had gotten all the weapons she was strapping on herself. Possibly stolen. Syn didn’t ask. “As long as you can drag yourself home on one piece, I can heal you.”
“I’ll be fine, I’ve fought worse,” she replied, running her thumb along the blade of her sword to test it before returning it to her sheath. “Don’t worry.”

“I can’t promise that,” she admitted. “But I’ll try not to wait by the door for your return.”

“It could be pointless,” she said. “No evil people, and nothing to sell. I could spend a day in stinky trash and come home empty handed.”

“I make more than enough for you to experiment for a while. I know you’re restless.”

“Hey, it’ll give me something to do other than drink.”

Brun drank far too much for Syn’s tastes, though she hadn’t said anything. Adults could do what they liked. She wasn’t starting fights or blowing more of their money than they could afford. As long as that stayed true what she did was her business. “Well,” Syn said. “Have fun and good hunting, I suppose.”

The first day she came back bloody and empty handed. The next day she came back empty handed but unharmed. The third day she came back with a gash in her forehead, a hole in her side, and electrical burns all over her next. She walked in, pronounced, “I have a ship,” and then promptly passed out.

After Syn had healed her, bathed her and made her eat something, she allowed Brun to drag her out and see said ship. It was small and had clearly been in a battle, but it was sky worthy and relatively sophisticated. It also made her hunting much more efficient.

“So I figured something out,” she told Syn once night over dinner. Their earnings were enough to get them meals in decent restaurants lately. “If you want to make real money, you need a license of sorts from the Grandmaster.”

“That makes sense, he does like to keep his fingers in all the pies.” She took a bite of steak. “So we have to deal with him after all?”

“Seems like it. It’s probably better to be on his good side.”

It was likely some sort of miracle they’d managed to avoid him this long. “Well, I’ve dealt with many politicians. He can’t be that different.”

“I’ve been told the easiest way to get said license is to bring him something you’ve obtained that he wants.”

Syn arched a brow. “Did you have something in mind?”

“Well. . . I’m told the only thing he wants from a newcomer is people.”

They were good enough friends now, Syn felt comfortable joking, “Is this where you finally sell me?”

Brun laughed. “Nah. He wouldn’t appreciate what you’re worth.”

“Why thank you.” She sipped her ale. “So are you going fugitive hunting? Bring him a contender for the arena?”

“That’s what I was thinking. Most people bring him women. Easy to capture, and his appetite for sex slaves is boundless.” She tilted her head. “He will apparently take men for that, too, though is very picky about their appearance. I haven’t seen one pretty enough on this whole planet.”
Syn had seen holograms of the Grandmaster. She supposed you’d have to be master of a whole planet before you could look like that and be picky. “Do you want help hunting?”

“Seems like it might be a two-man job, yeah.”

She found herself smiling. “I’m going to need a stave.”

“The junk sea has lots and lots of metal rods.”

“Well. This will be fun, then.”

“The better the fighter, the more money. And if we can find someone who is an asshole, my conscience will feel better.”

“It will be nice to fight again. Stretch my muscles.” She hadn’t enjoyed war in general. But she was a good fighter and it was always good to keep in shape.

She went out with Brun the next day and they found a good, sturdy bit of metal piping. A little tweaking with her magic and she had a solid staff with a blade at one end. Then came the hunt for a good contender.

Two days later, she ventured into Brun’s room and poked her out of her hangover induced stupor. “I found us some prey.”

She rubbed her eyes. “You have my attention.”

“Some of our local ladies of the night have been coming in with... very particular injuries. Painful ones. I finally got a couple of them to tell me what’s going on. Apparently, there’s one man doing it all to them. Buys them for the night, hurts them too bad to fight back, then takes the money back.” She wanted to spit just saying it. “I’m thinking he might like to fight some people his own size.”

Brun sat up. “I need some caffeine and my sword.”

“There’s coffee downstairs.”

She slapped Syn on the arm. “Let’s go get us a contender.”

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Brun would have felt worse about selling a person if they hadn’t unearthed such a quality scumbag. Beating him up was a privilege. They made sure not to injure the visible parts of him so he’d fetch a good price.

They tied him up good and she took him alone to the Grandmaster’s tower, where he was put in some sort of electric-restraint hover chair, so she didn’t have to drag him around anymore. And apparently he passed muster with the gatekeepers, because she was taken to present her catch to the Grandmaster.

He was just as ridiculous in person as he was in hologram. Still, he smiled at her like they were old friends, clapping his hands in delight. “What have you brought me?”

“A contender,” she said. “He’s a good fighter, but widely disliked in certain areas of the city. You’d sell a lot of tickets to people who’d love seeing your Champion break him in half.”

That got her a delighted little laugh and he moved forward to inspect the man she’d brought.
“Good,” he murmured, sniffing, then making a face before stepping back. “Very good.” He peered at Brun again. “Have you been here before? I don’t think I’ve seen you. I have a memory for faces. A very good memory for faces.”

“This is my first catch,” she said. “I’m hoping to do it more.”

“Aha! Ahh, ah. You need one of those things. The things I give out. To say you can do it.” He snapped his fingers, then turned to the short, armored woman next to him. “The things!”

“A license,” she said boredly.

“Yes! You want a license,” he said, turning back to Brun.

“I do,” she replied. “I think you’d find me an asset.” She clasped her hands behind her back, parade-rest style. She and Syn and put a lot of thought into making her look as tough—and unappealing—as possible. She didn’t want him to decided he’d keep her.

“Well, if this is the sort of contender you bring me without one—” He waved his hand at the woman. “Get her set up. What number are we on?”

“One forty two,” she said in the same bored tone.

The Grandmaster smiled at Brun “Welcome aboard Scrapper 142.”

She bowed her head. “Thank you, your eminence.”
He paid her a fortune for the man. And for the next one Brun found, again on a tip from some of Syn’s clients. It kept them in food and ale and nice clothes, and let her fix up her ship with new weapons and a little smuggler cache to keep her catches in.

They developed a bit of a reputation, in that people in the slums—particularly women—would report the local asshole and he would mysteriously find his way into the gladiator ring. Finding her contenders didn’t take much work, so she still scavenged the junk sea for things that were useful or valuable. If she found something really odd sometimes the Grandmaster would buy it. It was easiest to fly around the portals and watch what fell out.

With her income, they were able to move again, to a proper house, on the edge of the nice part of town. They could have gone farther in, but most of Syn’s clients were from the slums and there was only so far they would travel. It wasn’t the glory of riding a winged horse into battle. But it was a life. Syn was clever and funny and a good woman to have at your back when things got messy. It was, perhaps, a better life than she deserved.

Time on Sakaar didn’t seem to make a lot of sense. News drifted in from the wider Universe that indicated long stretches of time were passing, but it didn’t feel that way. At some point the Grandmaster figured out she was Asgardian, and would tell her bits of things from the 9 Realms. Odin had succeeded in locking up Hela, gotten a wife and had two sons, and been involved in a long bloody war involving both Jotunheim and Midgard.

“Some things never change,” Syn replied when Brun relayed the tale.

“Think one of the giants will kill the old bastard?”

She shrugged, looking down at the embroidery she was working on. Sometimes she was every inch the queen she’d once been. “He’ll die someday. As long as we live here we won’t. I suppose that will be our revenge.”

“This is a very strange world.”

“It is,” she agreed. “But it’s not so bad. Without it, we never would have met.”

Brun looked over at her. “I honestly don’t know if I’d be alive right now if we hadn’t.”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t be.” Syn looked up at her. “But I know what you mean. We saved each other.”

“And, look, now we save others.”

“So we do. There are worse fates.”

Brun wondered how long it would last. The last time she’d been happy, it had ended in disaster. Her grief took her a while to get through. The last person she’d loved had been killed in front of her. She’d worn armor soaked in Eir’s blood for days, and all this time later still saw her in her dreams. But time passed, and the edges of it blunted. Brun spent a little time nursing a foolish crush on Syn—who rather clearly preferred men. That faded, too, back into a comfortable friendship. She decided then that she missed sex, and needed to find a lover.

Syn did the same. They had agreed on a rule that none of them ever got brought home. Unspoken,
they also seemed to have each decided on a second rule—no commitment, and no emotion. If Brun could avoid full names, she did.

They made friends in the neighborhood and among the other scrappers, though they remained each other closest friend. Brun didn’t really trust anyone other than Syn, and she had heard Syn refer to her as her sister.

She continued to be one the the Grandmaster’s favorite scrappers, which was a good place to be. Syn avoided the palace like the plague, and Brun wasn’t sure if anyone there knew about her. The court and some of the better gladiators were a good place to find a night’s entertainment, though, so she hung around after dropping off her catches.

They had top shelf booze, too. She got her drink and listened to the voices around her for one that sounded appealing. She had a fondness for voices in the lower octaves—on either gender. But tonight she ended paying attention to the annoying nasal voice behind her, talking about how the Grandmaster’s favorite mistress had burned herself badly during some sort of experimental beauty treatment.

She pulled out a communicator and sent Syn a message. *How much do you hate the idea of coming to the palace?*

*So very much. Why? Did you get arrested?*

*The Grandmaster is apparently willing to pay a lot of money for a medical treatment for his favorite mistress.*

There was a long pause. *Do you know the mistress? Is she worthy of help?*

*No idea. But let me repeat: A lot of money.*

A longer pause. Syn had some sort of personal code of honor, Brun knew that. It was why she continued to help people from the slums, why she found her abusive assholes to send to the arena. They were comfortable in their finances. Maybe the lure of a payday wasn’t enough anymore.

Then her comm beeped. *Fine. I’m on my way.*

Satisfied, she went and found one of the Grandmaster’s staff, to deliver a message to him that 142 had found him the medical miracle he was looking for.

She met Syn at the palace doors half an hour later. She’d brought her brown leather satchel, mostly for show, Brun thought. Syn didn’t look particularly happy, but she followed her inside and up to the Grandmaster’s private quarters.

He looked genuinely concerned when they were ushered in. “Come in, come in. 142, you might be my favorite.”

“This is Syn,” Brun said. “She’s the healer. She has magic.”

“Ah.” He turned to Syn, pressing his hands together. “Magic. We don’t get magic here often. Please, Vedi is in the other room, she’s in terrible pain.”

Syn studied him, confusion and surprise on her face. “Your concern is genuine. You actually care for her. I didn’t expect that.” She pointed to the door. “This way?” He nodded and she strode into the other room.

“Why wouldn’t I?” he asked. “I’m very fond of Vedi. She’s my favorite of all my mistresses, and
“They’re just baubles to show off, like any of the other fancy things he owns.”

Brun followed them to the doorway, not really interested in seeing disfiguring burns, but a little worried Syn was going to get herself executed.

Grandmaster seemed nonplussed. She supposed most people didn’t talk to him that way. “Have you known a lot of kings?”

“I was a queen, before I came here. Hi, Vedi,” she said softly to the figure laying in bed. “I’m going to help you, darling. Just lay still.”

The only sound she made was a miserable whimper. Well, at least they were going to do this poor woman some good. Syn murmured to her a bit more, carefully peeling off the bandages covering her face. Brun got a glimpse of reddened skin and visible muscle before Syn put her hands on the woman’s cheek and forehead. Golden light spilled out of her hands, skimming over the surface of Vedi’s skin. She whimpered again, the light got brighter and then she sighed, relaxing into the cushions.

When the light faded, Syn removed her hands to reveal smooth, perfect skin.

“Wow!” Grandmaster said. “I mean, wow. It takes a lot to impress me and even more to surprise me. Where are you from?”

“Alfheim,” she told him, inspecting her work a moment. She dug in her bag and handed Vedi a little tub of cream. “Rub this on twice a day for a week. The skin will be very sensitive.” She turned back to Grandmaster and dipped a curtsy. “Syn the Truthful. Former queen of Alfheim. At your service, your excellence.”

“I think I’ve heard of you. Aren’t you supposed to be dead?” He looked over at Brun. “A lost magic queen, 142, you really do bring me the best stuff.”

Hoping she wasn’t about to get executed, Brun replied. “I brought you healing, I did not bring you her. She is mine.”

“Everyone has a price,” he told her.

“I’m not for sale,” Syn said. “If you have need of my healing, I will provide it for a fee. But I am not a slave to be purchased.”

He turned back to her. “Of course not!” He sounded sincerely shocked at the suggestion. “I would never treat such a unique treasure poorly! I want you for my court.”

Syn glanced at Brun, then back to him. “Your court.”

“Yes. Surely you had a royal court at your palace. I have one. I want you to be a part of it. Do some healing, meet some interesting people. You can live here in luxury, or if you really want to, go home at night and be a lesbian.” He gestured at Brun. “That’s fine.”

Amusement was now dancing around Syn’s mouth. “You should know, I can’t lie. Part of my magic. I cannot lie and I see the lies of others.”

“Gosh, that’s even better. You’re wonderful. So many tricks.”
Syn shook her head slowly and arched a questioning brow at Brun. She shrugged and raised her eyebrows, not sure how to respond. This was either a great idea or a terrible one. She had no idea which.

“You can bring 142 with you if you want. Live in luxury and be lesbians at the same time.”

Brun rubbed her forehead. “We’re not actually lovers, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh good!” Grandmaster said. He looked over at Syn. “Because I did not want to be the person who had to tell you how many people around here 142 has had sex with.”

She was definitely fighting a smile now. “Well, now that that is sorted, I’ll join your court. But I’d still like to bring her. She’s like a sister to me. And it will make her carousing more efficient.”

“Of course, of course.” He looked from Syn to Brun and back again. “I don’t think she can be helped, but how about we get you a more worthy wardrobe?”

Now Syn grinned. “You should have started with that.”

A week later they were in an enormous suite, one so fancy that the bathrooms and closets alone eclipsed the square footage of their previous flat. Brun could still hunt for sport, but she didn’t have to do it for income anymore.

Syn was treated like something between a court jester and a fine piece of art by the Grandmaster. He liked her to do simple magic to wow the crowd and used her as a lie detector and a healer. Once she explained that touching her caused people to speak the truth as well, he abandoned any overtures at getting her in bed. She was surprisingly happy with the arrangement, given how much she had avoided contact with him before.

“I missed court,” she admitted one night as they sat in their common room, midnight snacking on fancy little cakes. “The intrigue, the drama and gossip. It’s no different than any other court I’ve been in. And I’m much better at the game then any of them are.”

“You look happier.” Brun told her. And she really did. She looked... calmer. And like she was someone very comfortable in silk.

“I am happy.” She studied Brun a moment. “Are you?”

There was no lying to Syn. “Happy might be too far. But I am... content with my existence most days.”

She nodded, nibbling her cake. “Is there anything that would tip you fully into happy?”

“If I knew I’d go after it. Some days I want bloody revenge. Some days I want a family. Mostly I want my faith in the order of the universe back—which isn’t happening. I knew who I was and what my purpose was, when I was a Valkyrie. Now I’ve been a thief and a slave trader. I scavenge junk and drink too much. Content is probably the best I’m ever going to muster.”

Syn reached out and squeezed her hand. “I hope you find happiness. I hope you find a purpose. You are worth more than this place.”

That made her smile. “Thanks. There’s always tomorrow, right? Maybe something really interesting will fall out of the sky.”

The next day an eight foot tall green creature fell out of the sky.
Well, from Brun’s perspective, a relatively intact, if primitive, shuttle fell out of the sky, just as she was thinking about calling it a day. She even debated leaving it alone - it was bottom end as far as tech, and she didn’t actually need to scavenge it. But she was bored and a little extra spending money never hurt, so she kicked her brake off and headed over to crash site.

She set down on a pile opposite it, turning sideways to put her ramp down. She could see the occupant inside was green and very large. Not any species she recognized, and they saw many on Sakaar. She hopped down and circled it cautiously. Then the giant green creature burst out the back of it, roaring at her loudly.

Brun knocked her fists together to turn her gun controls on. She hoped she didn’t have to kill him/her/it, because that was a contender that might actually beat the champion.

It huffed at her, looking from her fists to the ships guns and back. “Where?” It rumbled the question.

“Sakaar,” she replied, not expecting him to have heard of it. She hadn’t. “It’s where the universe’s detritus goes. Where are you from?”

He glanced back at the ship he’d been on, then up at the sky. “Earth. Had to leave. Hulk dangerous. Earth puny.”

Earth. Midgard. That was . . . interesting. She had no idea there was anything like this there. “Hulk, eh? I’m Brunhilde. I agree with you about the puny.”

With a snort that might have been a laugh, he looked around again. “Sakaar puny?”

She held her arms out. “Very wide range. Do you break things a lot?”

He nodded. “Hulk smash,” he told her, sounding rather proud of himself.

She put her hands on her hips. “How would you like to get paid to smash?”

Tipping his head back, he seemed to consider. “Hulk interested.”

The Grandmaster was as delighted as Brun had ever seen him when she brought Hulk in. He actually clapped. “142 you bring me the best things.”

Brun’s account was as full as it had ever been and she was damn near walking on air when she went over to meet Syn at the bar. She’d been in the palace when Brun had brought the Hulk in, but they hadn’t had a chance to do much more than nod at each other.

“You know, that’s not his true form,” Syn commented once they had their drinks.

Brun blinked. “What do you mean?”

“The one you brought in, Hulk. There’s something else underneath that form. A regular looking person.”

“He told me he was from Midgard and had to leave because it was ‘puny’. You think he’s human under there?”

Syn nodded. “It was hard to see, he made my kind of cross eyed, looking at him. But there was definitely a man under there.” She sipped her liquor. “Midgardians had barely gotten out of caves last time I saw them. I suppose it’s possible they’ve developed some sort of rudimentary magic.”
“The shuttle he came on was, I think, quasi space worthy. I mean, he got here.”

“Interesting. I suppose the rest of the universe really does move along without us.” She played with the little umbrella that had come in her drink. “He seemed enthusiastic about fighting.”

“He said he likes to smash.” She took a swallow of her drink. “I do get the sense he’s smarter than his vocabulary would indicate.” Syn had an odd look on her face, one she didn’t like very much. “What?”

“If I talked to him. . . I could probably get the real form to come out.”

“Is. . . is that a good idea?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea. But there is someone stuck in that big green Hulk and it seemed a bit unfair to put him in the arena without him knowing.”

“What if he doesn’t go back? The Grandmaster will be pissed.”

“I didn’t think of that.” She sipped her drink and shrugged again. “Well, it was a thought I suppose I’ll try not to look directly at him.”

The idea stuck in her head, though, and Brun couldn’t put it down. Irritated she apparently still had a conscience, in the morning she went in search of Hulk. The Grandmaster had given him a rather generous space in the gladiator quarters, including some gym space to smash. The doorway had a forcefield on it, she couldn’t help but noticing. It did open for her.

He was lounging on the bed in a sarong thing. From her angle coming up she was able to confirm that he was definitely a him. He looked happy to see her. “Angry Girl! You come visit Hulk?”

“I’m not angry,” she replied. Usually.

He shrugged. She had pointed guns at him, she supposed. It was possible he didn’t recognize a lot of emotions. “Shiny Man say I’ll get to smash soon.”

“You will.” She paused. “I did have a question. My friend can see magic, and she said she can see you have another form.”

“Banner,” he rumbled. “Very puny.”

“Is that why you’re like this?”

He paced away from her, agitated. “Banner get angry, Hulk come out. Banner not like Hulk.”

She followed him, but kept a non-threatening distance. “Are you still angry?”

“Hulk always angry!”

He punched the wall and she did her best not to flinch. “So you stay this way?”

“Banner puny. Can’t tell Hulk to go away. So Hulk stay.”

“I understand,” she said. Then she smiled. “Good luck on your smashing tomorrow,” she told him.

He nodded. “Hulk looking forward to it.”
Brun appeared in their living room doorway. “So. Yeah. I think the other guy is stuck in there.”

Arching her brow, Syn said, “Any you’ve decided you want me to do something about it?”

“No. I don’t know. I see you and I want to tell you whatever is in my head.”

Syn smiled. “And I’m not even trying.” She glanced across the room to the window. A giant moving billboard advertised the Hulk’s debut fight. “We could wait and see how his match goes tomorrow.”

“That might go over better with that guy.”

“If we can’t get him back to being the Hulk - or he doesn’t want to stay - maybe we’ll be able to convince him that he died of his wounds. Or ran away. Or something.”

“Will you be able to do that?” Syn suffered serious pain if she tried to lie.

She rubbed the back of her head. “I’m sure I’ll be able to think of some way to phrase it.”

Brun didn’t usually watch the games from the Court Box—she wasn’t that high on the favorite list. But because she’d brought in Hulk, she’d been invited. She didn’t really want to go, but Syn liked the company.

There was a handful of early fights, mostly criminals who worked off their debts acting for the crowd, getting them riled up for the main events. The Grandmaster went to the other room to announce the Hulk and his champion, then everyone gathered around the window to watch the match.

The Hulk was . . . brutal. Smash was the best word to describe his fighting style. The other gladiator really didn’t have a chance.

“Wow. I would not want that guy angry at me,” Grandmaster exclaimed. “You know what I mean?”

“I would have to agree,” Syn said, in the patiently serene tone she often used with him.

“He’s very efficient,” Brun noted.

“Remind me to give the arena cleaners a bonus,” Grandmaster said to his assistant.

He made a big, festive deal about crowning Hulk his new Champion. Told him that he could have anything he wanted, and Hulk asked for a bathtub. A large hot water pool was quickly ordered to be constructed in Hulk’s quarters, and Grandmaster asked Brun to entertain Hulk while the work was being done.

Figuring it would be good to have privacy, she booked out one of the gladiator training rooms and let him throw things around while they waited for Syn. She’d gotten stuck entertaining Grandmaster’s court with some tricks so it was a while before she appeared.

“We have time,” she told Brun, eyeing the Hulk. “He’s having an orgy, he’ll be occupied all night.”
“Oh, good. He’ll probably be asleep most of tomorrow. In case this goes really sideways.”

“Yeah.” She was still watching him. “I think I’m going to need to touch him to knock the other guy out. Is he going to smash me when I try?”

“Will it hurt?”

She tilted her head. “I don’t think so? When I dispel illusions it doesn’t hurt. This is a little more solid, but it’s a similar theory.”

“I think it should be fine.” She turned towards her green friend. “Hulk,” she called. “Come meet my sister.”

He ambled over, looking as happy as he ever did. He hunched a little to look at Syn. “Sister.”

She smile sweetly. “Hello Hulk. I’m Syn.” She held out her hand to shake and he took it, his hand engulfing hers. Usually dispelling illusions just required a touch. This was a little stronger, so she pushed some of her truth magic into him, reaching for the smaller form she saw inside him. Gold light seeped between his fingers and he looked started before it laced up his arm and engulfed him.

When it faded, Syn was holding the hand of a stocky, naked man, with an impressive amount of body hair. He blinked up at both of them, and then said, “What the hell?”

Syn unpinned her cloak and handed it to him as Brun said, “Hi. You’re on a planet called Sakaar.”

He wrapped the cloak around himself automatically. “I’ve never heard of a planet call- I’m on another planet?!”

Right. This might take a while.

As it turned out, Banner was a scientist from Midgard who’d created Hulk during some sort of industrial accident. He had no idea how he’d ended up on Sakaar, or even in space. His last memory was transforming into Hulk after being shoved off a cliff by a woman he had feelings for. Everybody who ended up here had a sad tale.

The story got more interesting has he told them a little of how he’d gotten to the point where he was pushed off that cliff, as he’d been in a battle with a group of warriors working to protect Midgard. A group that inexplicably contained Thor, son of Odin.

“Wait, hang on, hang on. He’s an adult now?”

“Yeah.” Banner sipped the tea they’d fetched him. Transforming apparently left him hungry as well as naked. “Well, their lifespans run different than ours, so he looks like he’s in his thirties but I guess he’s around a thousand or two? I never really got a straight answer.”

Syn and Brun exchanged a glance and Banner looked worried. “Why? Is that bad?”

“It means we’ve been here much longer than I thought,” Syn told him. “Seeing as how he hadn’t even been born when we got here.”

“Time on Sakaar is very, very strange,” Brun said. “Thor is the older one?”

“You know, I have no idea. But the other one is dead. And he was evil, so . . .” Banner shrugged.

“Odin raised an evil child. You don’t say. Shocking.” Syn had always appreciated that her truth
curse could recognize sarcasm when it was used.

“He tried to conquer Earth. Killed a bunch of people. Just a nasty situation. Thor is a really, really
good guy, though. He has this magic hammer only he can lift. Supposedly it judges how ‘worthy’
you are. Says it was forged in the heart of a dying star. Or something. Molecular scans of the
metal categorize it as unidentifiable. The only other person who can even move it a little is one of
the best men I know.”

Brun put her hands on her hips. “Moljnir?”

He pointed at her. “The hammer. Yes, that.”

“Considering the last person to wield that thing, I’m not sure it’s much of a judge of character.”

He looked confused, but she let the matter drop. “We need to talk about what to do with you.”

“I’d really like to get home.”

Syn shook her head. “That’s not possible. No one leaves Sakaar. Trust us, we’d have found
somewhere else to be if we could.”

“I’m stuck here?”

“I’m afraid so. The ship you came in isn’t really space capable and even if it was, you’d have to
make it through one of the wormholes which could drop you pretty much anywhere in space.”

He looked miserable and lost, which was probably why Brun offered, “If it helps, your alter ego is
super popular here.”

Arching his brows, he looked up at her. “Hulk is? Really?”

“Yes. The ruler of this place hosts extravagant gladiatorial combat events. You are the current
champion.”

“Did he kill anyone?”

She and Syn exchanged a glance. “Yes,” Syn said slowly. “But he was an asshole.” Banner
looked skeptical and she added, “No, really. I can’t lie.”

“She has a truth curse,” Brun elaborated. “She can’t lie, and she can see lies in others.”

“It’s how I could tell the Hulk wasn’t your true form.”

“You can tell people are lying?”

“Yes, there’s a shadow on their face and sometimes their voice sounds different or wrong.”

His brow furrowed and he shifted a little, rearranging the cloak wrapped around him. “So it’s a
combination of reading tone and haptics? Maybe a form of cold reading.”

“I suppose, but I’m never wrong. Even with the best liars.”

“Maybe it’s a sort of secondary sense. You said it’s a curse, are you the only one-“

“Okay,” Brun said, clearly sensing they were going to go on this all day. “Focus. Can you turn
back into the Hulk?”
“No.”

“That’s a lie,” Syn said immediately. He glared at her.

“Look,” Brun told him. She was using the tone she used when her patience was thinning but she still hoped to talk her way out of it. “You’re stuck here. As you are, there’s not much you can do. You’re not interesting enough or pretty enough for the Grandmaster to like you, so at best he’ll chuck you out on the street. As the Hulk, you get a suite with a hot tub and everything else you want. Plus fame and glory.”

“I can change you back to this,” Syn continued. “So spend some time as the Hulk being the champion. And the rest of the time you can be Banner, and learn about life on other planets. It’s better than you seemed to have it on Midgard.”

He looked from one to the other a moment, a calculating look on his face. “All right.”

It worked out pretty well, all things considered. The Hulk was a bit more willing to change back, now that he knew Banner would let him out to smash again, so Banner got to enjoy some of the luxuries his alter ego earned. The Grandmaster found out about it eventually, but as long as the Hulk showed up for all his performances, he didn’t care what color he was the rest of the time. Banner was intelligent and curious and Syn enjoyed bringing him books from various planets that had made their way to the junkyard.

Court life dragged on, very much the same from one day to the next. Syn’s position was strong, even as other entertainments came to the Grandmaster’s attention. Her healing was useful and her magic always entertaining. It was a comfortable position. And after bringing in his Champion, Brun had cemented her place in his favor.

Life was as good as it could get on a place like Sakaar.

* *

“She didn’t tell me she had a husband. I wake up at dawn to this angry little fat guy throwing a temper tantrum. Don’t laugh,” Brun added, but Syn was laughing anyway. She’d come up in Brun’s ship to hover and watch things fall out of the portals. Two pairs of eyes were better than one, and Brun liked the company. Syn liked the break from Court. “The poor sod tried to punch me and broke his hand.”

She was now leaning on her side of the ship, laughing hard. “Oh, spirits. You have the best stories. Nothing that exciting happens the morning after my conquests.”

“I should have snuck out in the middle of the night.” She shook her head. “It could have been worse.”

“The few times I’ve run into wives I’ve gotten tears or breakfast. Sometimes a request to come back so she can have another break.” She shook her head and reached over for the bottle they were passing back and forth. “It does not speak well of the virtues of marriage.”

“Once, years ago, the guy wanted to join us.”

Syn arched a brow. “Did you let him?”

“No way. My taste in women is expansive, my taste in men less so. They really need to look pretty much perfect. He didn’t pass muster.”

“I can understand that.” She squinted out at the landscape. “That purple one looks like it’s gonna
“Right.” She took her ship closer, so she could get a better look. The portals sometimes glowed or flexed before they belched something out, especially the ones without a constant stream.

They watched it a moment, and then a shape emerged. It took a moment to realize it was person shaped. A person alone being flung out of a portal was not something you saw often. “Ugh. Dead body.”

The watched it fall to the ground through the glass nose of her ship. They winced together as it hit the ground in a cloud of dust.

And then it dragged itself to its feet.

“Ooo,” Syn said. “Not dead.”

Brun pulled closer, wanting to get there before the cannibals got to him. It was a him, best she can tell, despite the shaggy dark hair. He was clad in dark leather, with a strange coat-cape thing.

“He’ll fit in just fine,” she muttered, parking and opening the hatch to climb out.

Syn caught her arm as they started out. “He has magic, be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” Brun said, which was kind of bullshit.

Sure enough, Syn called, “Lying,” after her as she went to greet the new comer.

He was swaying on his feet a little and when she approached she saw him pull a black handled dagger out of his shoulder. Lucky thing she had a healer with her. “Don’t move,” she warned.

His head jerked up and he looked at her, narrowing his eyes. “Where am I? What is this place?”

“Sakaar. It’s where the universe’s leftovers end up.”

“I am Loki, of Asgard,” he announced, like it would matter. “I demand you take me to the ruler of this realm immediately.”

“You’re not exactly in a position to make demands, bub.” She came closer. “Are you Loki the dead Prince?” She tilted her head, taking him in. “I bet you are, your look is right out of Hela’s closet.”

“How do you know of Hela?” He thrust his arms out and daggers appeared in his hands. “Are you an agent of hers?”

She knocked her fists together but they only made a sad beep. The one day she forgets to charge her fucking batteries. She pulled out her own knife, though she thought this was probably for show. If he wanted to hurt her she imagined the magic would be enough. “I know she’s an evil hag and Odin’s oldest child.”

“So you say.” He thrust with a knife and she blocked the thrust and the next, reaching up to punch him in the nose. His head snapped back and she smiled a little in satisfaction.

He came at her and for a few moments, it was almost fun. It had been a long time since she’d properly sparred with anybody. He didn’t look like much, but he was decent with the blade. At one point he caught her arm under his and spotted the mark on her wrist. “You’re a Valkyrie?” he said in confusion. She used the distraction to punch him again, getting the leverage to turn him around and shove him into the piece of wreckage behind them. He grunted, swiped, and missed.
Then he said, “I thought they all died gruesome deaths.”

It had been a long time since Brun had actually felt anger like that, the kind where your scalp tingled and you could hear your own heartbeat. Seeing red, as the saying went. She shoved her knife under his chin and growled, “Choose your next words wisely.”

“I’m terribly sorry. That must be a very painful memory.” Before she could react he reached up and slammed a palm into her forehead. And she was no longer on Sakaar, but flying above a barren field while her sisters fell around her.

Hela threw a maelstrom of swords, each one hitting their mark perfectly. Dead center. A mortal wound that took too long and hurt too much. Time was moving in slow motion, and it was silent, though she remembered the screaming. No matter how strong you were, some pain no one endured silently.

She saw the sword that came for her, aimed with the same precision. She raised her sword to try and hurl it back at Hela before she was hit. In her peripheral vision she saw Eir off to her left. Brun had a heartbeat to be grateful she was still alive before she leapt in front of the sword, pushing Brun back. Eir turned her back to Hela, and a moment later the sword split her.

They fell, Brun backward and Eir forwards. For a moment she forgot Hela existed, and hoped only the sword would run her through when they hit the ground. It didn’t, sliding across her armor on a sea of blood. There was so much it must have hit an artery, and she was gone before Brun could get any words out. A swift death was Eir’s reward for a final act of love.

She gave up. She stayed where she fell, waiting for Hela to fling another sword and kill the last of a Valkyries.

Reality pierced the memory, and she wasn’t laying in a field of bodies anymore. There was no blood on her clothes. She was on the ground in the junkyard, a man with a pair of knives and a satisfied smirk standing over her.

Then a staff made of twisted, filagreed metal slammed into his jaw, dropping him like a bag of rocks, out cold.

Syn planted the staff in the ground next her and looked down at him. “Five thousand years and Asgard is still, apparently, full of assholes.” She glanced over at Brun, smiling, then it dropped off her face. “Are you all right?”

Brun took an unsteady breath. “He got in my fucking head. He made me see. . .” Her hands were shaking and she rubbed them together and tried to stop it. Then she stood up, looked down at the man’s prone form, and kicked him in the ribs.

“If you want to stab him I won’t tell a soul,” Syn offered. “But he’s pretty and he has magic, the Grandmaster will like him.”

She sighed. “We’ll take him back. He might be worth something.”

Syn reached down and grabbed the tail of his coat, Brun took hold of the other tail and together they dragged him to her ship. He better pay enough to buy her a very big drink.

When they got in the air she sent a message back for landing clearance in the tower, and an audience with the Grandmaster. Somewhere between landing and hooking the Prince of Assholes into a welcome wagon chair, Syn had changed from her hunting gear to one of her slinky silk court dresses.
Just before they went into the audience chamber, she crouched and healed his shoulder wound and the bruise blooming on his jaw. “Think he’ll scream at the end?” She asked Brun as she straightened.

Brun tilted her head and looked at him. “I don’t know, by I want to have a good seat to watch.”

They left him to the guards and went in to see the Grandmaster. He smiled at them, dour Topaz at his side as always.

“There’s my two favorite girls I haven’t slept with,” he said brightly. “What have you brought me today? A contender? Another champion?”

“An entertainment,” Syn told him, tucking an arm through Brun’s to pull her to stand next to him. “We found you a magician.”

“More magic!” He rubbed his hands together. “I love magic.”

The chair arrived a moment later, and there was no screaming. But their now awake captive did blink a few times and ask, “What the ever loving fuck was that?”

Brun heard Syn snort a laugh, which she covered with a cough. Grandmaster was studying him in that way he did. Until he opened his mouth, he could be rather imposing. “Delightful,” he said finally, glancing back at them. “A magician, you said?”

Syn nodded. “I can sense his magic, though I haven’t seen it in action.”

“You must be the Grandmaster,” the prince said. Clearly he recovered quickly. “I am Loki and I’ve come from a great distance to meet you and witness the . . . majesty of your realm.”


Loki looked at her. “Excuse me?” Brun couldn’t fathom how any being could sound that haughty while strapped to a chair. It was almost impressive.

Grandmaster waved a hand. “She can see when people are lying. It’s very handy. Try another one, see if you can stump her.”

“It won’t be much of a test if she knows in advance I’m lying. Besides, how would you know if she were?”

“I can’t lie,” Syn told him, sounding tired. Brun knew she got tired of explaining it to everyone knew. “But we’re talking about you right now. Show us some magic, prince.”

“Oh, he’s a prince, too?” Grandmaster looked up at Syn. “Are you related?”

“No,” Syn and Loki said in unison, with equal scorn.

Grandmaster clapped his hands. “Magic! Let’s see it.”

“I need my hands.”


“I don’t like you.”

“Now, that was the truth.”
He sighed, stared at the Grandmaster a moment, and then transformed himself into the man’s exact replica.

Brun’s brows went up and she glanced at the real one to gauge his reaction. His mouth opened in shock, then split into a wide grin. “Well, that’s just incredible. Isn’t that incredible?” He didn’t seem to be asking anyone in particular, so no one answered. “Topaz, let’s get closer, I want to see it closer.”


“This is an amazing likeness,” Grandmaster was saying. “Can I touch him? Can I touch you?” he asked Loki.

“Seeing as I am strapped to this chair, there’s not much I could do to stop you,” Loki replied, but in the Grandmaster’s voice.

“Oh God is that what I sound like?”

“No, sir, you’re much more dignified,” Topaz said tonelessly.

He reached out and poked Loki’s cheek, then giggled. “One forty two, you bring me the best stuff.”

Loki turned back into himself. “I have a wide variety of tricks that I would be happy to show you if you let me out of this chair.”

“Oh, of course, of course. Please, release his restraints. You shouldn’t be in this chair!”

Brun ground her teeth. This was... just great.
Sakaar was an odd place. Rough and uncivilized, but with delusions of grandeur. Loki found he fit in quite well. It helped that the Grandmaster was quite enamored with him, enough to send him shopping for a new wardrobe and outfitting him with an opulent suite in the palace. He attended the salons and parties and Court. It was rather nice to have a new batch of people who had never heard his stories. And he made a point of avoiding the walking lie detector in a sexy dress like the plague.

It kept him busy, and when he was busy he didn’t have to think. He’d woken up one morning King of Asgard, then been publicly unmasked by his brother, then watched his father die—after all Loki had done, on his deathbed Odin had called him his son, and suddenly he couldn’t shake it.

And then, of course, there was the whole bit about the sister he never knew about, who wanted to start Ragnarok and in his panicked call for the bifrost he’d given her an express lift into Asgard. Thor had surely gone up to futilely fight her. He and the rest of Asgard were probably dead now.

Grief wasn’t something he had time for right now. He just reminded himself how vastly better this was than where he’d ended up the last time he fell off the bifrost.

The tournament of champions that had been mentioned in that nightmare of a welcoming video was currently on hiatus, with no new contenders to go up against the Grandmaster’s beloved Champion. Loki hadn’t gotten so much as a glimpse of the man, but from the stories of the other courtiers, his battles were a sight to behold. In the interim, Grandmaster seemed to be throwing an unending string of parties.

It was hard to get the host’s attention at these things, he liked to spend his time DJing and choosing who would be his bedmates once they got to that point of the evening. Food, liquor, and drugs were handed out liberally, though Loki tended to pace himself. He’d never liked being inebriated, especially when he was trying to ingratiate himself.

Of late he’d gotten the distinct sense that the Grandmaster would like him to join his evening orgy, a circumstance Loki wasn’t entirely sure what to do with. It wasn’t really his cup of tea, and he was nowhere near that desperate.

He was regaling a few of Grandmaster’s mistresses with a story of his heroics, when he noticed the lie detecting woman standing beside Grandmaster’s DJ station, chatting with him. She seemed to have his undivided attention and was making him laugh. Loki didn’t know why that sent a jolt of concern through him, other than he knew she disliked him and he suspected backstabbing in every corner.

When she walked away, she spotted Loki’s noticed and gave him a knowing little smile, mouthing “Lying” at him before smiling at the courtier who had come up to her.

He blamed that off-putting little interaction for his lack of caution when the Grandmaster came over handing out “candies.”

They were quite delicious—the man knew his expensive truffles, Loki had to give him that. And then the room started to get warm, and he felt like he’d had a bit too much Asgardian Mead.

But it was a good feeling, so he didn’t entirely care.
Things seemed to blur a bit around the edges, but that was all right, it made the party quite pleasant. The mistresses were starting to giggle and lose bits of clothing, and the Grandmaster’s hand found his way to Loki’s thigh a few times. He should probably do something about that, but the room was starting to feel uncomfortably warm and he found himself more concerned about unfastening his top a bit.

Time passed, there are a great deal more skin showing and Loki felt quite warm and heavy, as if he could sink into the couch and never leave.

Fingers curled around his arm and tugged him gently. It took a long time to turn his head to see who was pulling on him, and he was a little surprised to find it was Syn, the truth telling woman.

She was quite pretty. She was gorgeous, actually. Even her quirky smile. Perhaps because of it. Now her, that’s who he’d like to take to bed. “Hello, my friend,” he said.

“Mmm.” She was smiling that twisted smile now. He rather wanted to touch it, but lifting his arm felt like a monumental task. “You had some of the liquor truffles, didn’t you?”

“They were delicious,” he informed her solemnly.

“I’m sure they were.” Someone on one of the other couches moaned but he kept his eyes on hers. They were green, like spring leaves. “Come with me,” she ordered him, pulling his arm again.

Well that sounded just wonderful. “Anywhere.”

She had to help him get to his feet and walking was very strange, as if his feet were sticking in mud.

“Going so soon?” someone called.

Syn had put an arm around his waist to help him and half turned to respond. “Tonight I think I’ll keep him to myself.”

There was laughter as they left, though he couldn’t fathom what the joke had been. He was usually good with jokes.

They were in his room and he didn’t really remember the walk there. She looked flushed and he wondered if she was as warm as him. He had the urge to take his shirt off, but discovered he was not wearing one. He had no idea how that had happened. No matter. “Come to bed, love.”

She sighed softly and he felt her hands on him, backing him up towards his bedroom. He was very pleased it had been that easy. He tried to hold her, the way she did him, perhaps cup her breast in his hand. But he was uncoordinated and seemed to end up with a handful of elbow, which made her laugh softly.

He lay back on the bed and tried to tug her down with him. They had all night, he could make his hands work. But she didn’t join him, just leaned over him, studying him. She brushed his hair out of his face, then trailed a finger along the deep scar on his chest. “Sleep,” she told him softly.

It made something ache inside him, a bottomless well of sadness he’d been so afraid to look at. He didn’t want to be alone with it. “Stay.”

He couldn’t read her expression, but he thought, perhaps, she looked as sad as he felt. “All right. But you need to close your eyes and sleep.”

That sounded so tempting that he followed her instructions. They had all night. Plenty of time.
When he woke, sunlight was pouring through his windows and his head felt as if had gone several rounds with Thor’s hammer.

He rolled over with a groan and found Syn sitting next to him on the bed, fully dressed, reading a book. Without glancing at him, she reached over to the bed table, picked up a steaming mug of something and handed it to him. “Drink this, it will help your head.”

Loki took it and sat up. “What’s in it?”

“Chamomile, willow bark, elfroot, jasmine, and some rock sugar for sweetness.”

He nodded and took a sip. It tasted surprisingly good. After a few drinks he lowered it and looked at her. “So... last night...”

“The liquor truffles have a drug in them,” she told him, still looking at her book, turning a page. “For most of the races around here it seems to just heighten sensations. But for a handful - Asgardian, Shi’ar, Centaurians - it’s more potent. Everything from a pure sedative to a powerful aphrodisiac.” She looked over at him finally. “He didn’t do it on purpose. He just forgets.”

Loki blinked at her, alarmed. “What did I do?”

“You took your shirt off in the middle of the party room and seemed to greatly enjoy the early parts of the orgy. That was about when I dragged out out. Then you called me love and tried to coax me into bed with you. I told you to sleep instead, which you did.” Her mouth twisted. “Also, you snore.”

“I beg your pardon, I do not.”

“I can’t lie,” she reminded him in a sing song. Closing her book with a snap, it disappeared, and she eased off the bed. “They’re going to think we fucked. Fortunately, I’ll be able to confirm I spent the night in your bed. What you tell them is entirely up to you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I wouldn’t want to ruin your reputation.”

Her expression was unreadable, then twisted into that know-it-all smile. “Conquering you would only improve it, darling. You’re quite the enigma. I don’t know of anyone who’s gone as long as you without taking someone to bed.”

“Entanglements are distracting,” he replied.

“No one wants to entangle you, they just want to see what you’re hiding in those leather breeches.”

Almost compulsively, he lifted the blanket to confirm his were still on, something that made her chuckle. “All sex is entangling unless you quite literally never cross paths again. Otherwise you will think of it whenever you see them. If it’s bad, you may have opened a blackmail opportunity. If it’s good, well, then they really have something on you.”

She was studying him again. He was not used to being on the other side of such an assessing look. “No wonder you’re doing so well here.”

“Keeping my pants buttoned is the key to success?”

“No, knowing how to play the game is. Keeping your pants buttoned just keeps you interesting. Sex is seen as more of a biological need here. Eat, sleep, fuck. It’s rather freeing.”
“The first two are much easier to do without exposing one’s stomach to a dagger.”

“Oh, sweetie, that’s not where the dagger goes.”

That surprised a really, full laugh out of him. “You know what, I like you.”

She tilted her head. “Huh. Not lying.”

“You clearly saved me from something unsavory, and I am grateful.”

The gratitude seemed the surprise her. She glanced away from him. “Apparently I still have a bit of a conscience. Even for an Asgardian.”

“Not a fan of Asgardians?” Before she could answer, he added, “Not saying I’m surprised.” And he wasn’t actually Asgardian, technically, but he wasn’t getting into that.

“Considering they conquered my realm, slaughtered my people, and murdered me, no. I’m not a fan of Asgard.”

“Well that certainly sounds like Odin’s style.” He looked her up and down. “Though I am curious how you were murdered and yet are still alive.”

“My magic saved me. Hela had stabbed me.” She pressed a hand to her chest, almost involuntarily, he thought. “And I felt my magic rise and then I woke up here. With a bloody wound that took ages to heal, but alive.” Looking back at him, she gestured vaguely at his chest. “I’d rather thought something similar happened to you. That doesn’t look like the scar of a survivable wound.”

He looked down at his scar. It was the only one he’d ever gotten that seemed to be permanent, this and it’s companion exit wound. “You should see the one on my back,” he replied. He rubbed the scar with the heel of his hand because he could feel an echo of the pain. “I got impaled. Saving my brother’s life. I certainly thought I was dying and my brother thought I had. I was very surprised to wake up.”

Syn sat on the edge of the bed, near his legs. “Magic is like any other sense or instinct. It wants to keep you alive. If you were drowning, you’d hold your breath longer than you thought possible.”

“And keep me alive it did.” He sighed. “Was all for naught, though. I imagine Thor is probably dead by now.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“We all have our grief.” He looked up at her. “Don’t we?”

“Yes.” Her throat worked a moment, as if it had suddenly become difficult to swallow. “No one happy comes to Sakaar.”

She stood abruptly, brushing her hands on her skirt. “Drink your tea,” she told him. “Your head will thank you.”

“Thank you for your assistance. I won’t forget it. If it helps you to tell others you had your way with me, that’s fine.”

A ghost of a smile twisted her mouth. “I’ll do my best to sing your praises.” She dipped a little curtsy. “Good day, Loki.”
The court gossips, as it turned out, were quite interested in the supposed affair he and Syn were having. Loki was happy to let them talk. Having been claimed by Syn, so to speak, meant the Grandmaster stopped hitting on him.

It gave him opportunity to talk about her, and hear all manner of gossip about her. Almost all of it contradicted itself. She was as old as the Grandmaster, or she was barely out of her youth. She was a powerful sorceress or just a very good con woman. She had taken a thousand lovers but none had lived to tell the tale.

He was a little impressed that a woman who couldn’t lie - almost everyone agreed on that one point - had managed to gather such an air of mystery about herself.

The Grandmaster liked her, clearly, at least enough to respect her supposed claim on Loki, but knew no more about her than anyone else. He forgets, Syn had said, and Loki suspected that was the essence of the man. He lived in the moment, much like the planet he inhabited.

At the next party, he was cautious as to what he ate or drank, which meant he was far more sober than usual, which made the whole affair a boring slog. People were starting to settle in and pair off in preparation for the inevitable orgy when he noticed Syn curled on a couch with one of Grandmaster’s guardsmen. She was smiling and touching his arm lightly and he was surprised at the jolt of jealousy it caused.

The man must have felt his gaze, because he looked up and noticed Loki. He looked from him to Syn and back again, said something quietly to her, and then got up and walked away. Her mouth pursed and she shot Loki an irritated look before getting to her feet and storming out of the room.

He didn’t know what possessed him to follow her. He could tell himself he was just bored, but that wasn’t all of it and he knew it. In the hallway outside he called, “I didn’t do that on purpose.”

She was halfway down the hall, but stopped and turned to look at him. “Of course not.”

“I was just looking in your direction and he caught my eye. I didn’t mean to ruin your evening.”

“I wasn’t-“ She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. It’s none of your business how I spend my evening.”

He walked towards her. “I never thought it was.”

She crossed her arms, eyes narrowed. “Lying.”

Loki frowned. “Well, perhaps subconsciously—people do think we are some kind of item. It’s probably not a lot of fun to be the court cuckold.”

“If it helps, you can tell everyone you dumped me.” He had the distinct sense she was baiting him a bit. “The others will line up to mend your poor heart.”

He put his hands on his hips. “This is exactly the sort of sophomoric intrigues I did not want to get sucked into.”

“Entanglements and you didn’t even get to have any fun.” She clucked her tongue. “Poor Loki.”

She turned as if to go and he reached out, catching her arm. Turning back, she raised her other hand as if to strike him and he blocked it instinctively. It seemed to surprise her, but she struck out again and he blocked her again. He caught both her wrists and she kicked him in the shin.

Turning, he shoved her back, pushing her into the wall and pinning her hands above her head.
He expected her to be furious. To try to kick him again. But when he looked at her face he found her eyes dark and her lips slightly parted. The look she gave him caused heat to pool in his stomach. Then she leans forward and kissed him, sucking his lower lip between her teeth.

The kiss that followed was deep and explicit, not the sort of thing one should be doing in a public hallway—but he didn’t care. He let go of her hands and they drifted down around his neck. He slid his down her sides, over her hips, pulling her body against his and making it very clear what he wanted.

Right now he wanted her in his bed.


The next breath he exhaled was ragged. He could probably throw up an illusion around them and have her right here. But he didn’t know if it would hold while he touched her. “Hold on,” he whispered, and transported both of them to his bedroom. She swayed a little at the sudden shift, but kept herself pressed against him.

Her hands roamed him a moment and when she spoke there was a thread of exasperation in the arousal. “Why are your clothes so complicated?”

“Magic,” he replied. His clothes could be her problem, right now he wanted her out of that dress. Something that wasn’t complicated at all. He was proud he didn’t rip it. She was as beautiful as he’d imagined, long, toned limbs and soft curves. Her skin was flushed and the dark thatch of hair covering her sex was damp. A vicious scar curved over the top of her left breast, down her sternum, the only blemish he could see. He touched it and she flinched, though instinct told him it was as old and numb as his. So he bent his head and kissed her skin right there.

He felt her cup the back of his head, hand shaking as she tangled her fingers in his hair. “Don’t,” she whispered, voice cracking and he wondered what she was saying don’t to. Don’t touch it, don’t think about it. Don’t be gentle and kind.

“Shh,” he replied, cupping the breast beneath it, kissing down the gash. He backed her up to the chaise in his sitting room, lifting her enough to set her back down on it. Half sitting, half laying, sprawled out for his view. He enjoyed just looking at her while he reached for the fastenings to get off some of his own clothing.

She watched him with interest, probably memorizing how to do it herself. When he had his top off, he stopped to sit and undo his boots. As he did, she spread her legs apart a little farther and let a hand drift down to stroke herself.

He gotten one boot off, but he no longer cared about the other. He reached and put his hand over hers. Their fingers tangled, and his moved with hers as he learned how to touch her. He kissed the inside of her knee, and then started up her leg.

With a soft sigh, she lifted her hips, pressing their hands harder against her flesh. He continued his journey up her leg, tugging their hands away so he could press his mouth to her sex. That earned him a moan and he felt her shudder at the first lap of his tongue. She tasted as good as he’d expected, so he took his time, stroking and sucking and touching her until he could feel her legs trembling and her hands clutching painfully at his hair. He lifted his head and looked up at her.

Her head was thrown back, eyes closed, mouth open as she panted. In court she was always perfectly composed and put together. Immaculate dress, elaborate hair. The perfect musical laugh
and mysterious smile. Seeing her like this, messy and unguarded, was one of the most arousing things he’d ever seen. *He* had done that to her.

She opened her eyes and looked at him because he’d stopped. “What. . .?” she whimpered.

He braced over her, cupping one breast in his hand. He pinched the nipple between his thumb and forefinger and she made a little noise. “Patience,” he whispered.

Curling her hands over his shoulders, she arched, bringing her hips against his leather clad ones. He cupped and shaped her breast, bringing the nipple to a hard peak. “Do you want me to beg?” she purred, running her nails down his spine. “I can beg very prettily.”

He slid his hand up to wrap around her throat, just enough she could feel it. “It doesn’t need to be pretty,” he growled.

She shuddered, lids fluttering. “Please,” she whispered. “Please Loki. Please fuck me.” He felt a tingling heat at the fastening of his pants and glanced down to see the gold glow of her magic carefully unbuttoning them.

When he looked back to her she pressed into his hand, lifting her head to kiss his throat. “Fuck me,” she repeated against his skin. “Make me come around you. It will be so good.”

The way they were laying on the chaise was awkward, and when he sat up to move he got distracted by looking at her, all soft and swollen and wet. His voice was lower and harsher than he expected when he spoke. “Turn over.”

She whimpered again, even as she obeyed him. Her limbs we uncoordinated and he helped her, hands firm, fingertips digging into the soft flesh of her hips, her thighs. They ended up kneeling together on the floor, her upper body draped on the chaise.

Widening her stance, she pressed back against him. “Please, Loki. I ache.” She was so wet, it didn’t take much for him to slide his cock all he way in. She shuddered and let out such a desperate moan he thought for a moment she’d come right then.

Her body clenched on him, and for a moment he pressed his face into the back of her shoulder. She gave a keening noise and pushed back and he started to move, holding her hips still. She had a scar on her back, twin to the one on her breast, just like him. He pressed a kiss to it, tender in the midst of their desperation.

“You’re holding back,” she whispered, twisting a little to look back at him. “Don’t. Let me feel you.”

He pulled her back against his chest, holding her breast in his hands. “I don’t. . . I don’t want to hurt you.”

She rocked on him. “I like rough,” she told him, sounding a little delirious. “I like a little pain. I like how you touch me. I want to come. Make me come for you.”

He tugged on her nipples, hard enough to hurt, and she gasped. Then he tipped her forward onto the chaise, so he could fuck her harder, like he wanted to. One hand flattened on her belly and he sank a little magic into her, touching the places he couldn’t reach. He used it to hold her there, right on the edge, dragging out that intense moment that usually only lasted a heartbeat.

She let out a little wail, trying to push back into him. But he was bigger and stronger and he pinned her harder, keeping the pace he liked. “Loki. Loki, oh spirits. Loki, please.” She was babbling, all of the perfect courtier stripped away. He liked this part of her. Needy and desperate.
He could do this all day, keep her hovering at her peak.

Her hands gripped at the chaise and he heard the metal whine. “Please let me come. Please, please. Anything, I’ll do anything.” It was real begging now, pleas laced with sobs. They way people begged when they broke under torture. This was just the best kind.

But his own self control only went so far, particularly right now, in the midst of the most erotic experience of his life. He couldn’t hold it any longer. His magic gave, and then he did.

She screamed and bucked up to him, hard enough to move him a little. Her muscles clenched on him like a vise, over and over, as if to keep him inside. Her whole body shuddered and the chaise arm she held twisted and bent as she sobbed out her pleasure into the cushions. He rested his forehead on her back as his own pleasure rushed through him, intense and seemingly endless.

The waves faded, the blood roaring in his ears dimmed. He found them slumped against the ruined chaise, both breathing hard. Her body still fluttered around him, gentle pulses of pleasure that made her shiver and sigh. When she spoke, she sounded breathless. “I should be careful what I beg you for.”

He kissed the back of her shoulder. “That was. . .” No. He had no words. Which might be a first. He wasn’t sure he could even move.

They rested there a little longer. He felt her start to stroke his arm where it was wrapped around her, touch light and gentle. He responded, caressing her side and she sighed sweetly, melting a little more. “Can you transport us to the bed?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I’m a little afraid to try and end up inside the mattress.” He did manage to pick her up, though, and lift her onto the undamaged part of the chaise. He was still wearing his pants and one boot.

She curled in his lap, head on his shoulder, a soft, warm weight. He was always cold, but she didn’t seem to mind, cuddling against his bare chest, fingers still dancing along his arm.

“I wasn’t seducing him,” she said softly. “The guard. The Grandmaster’s cousin stole from him and the guard was on duty when he escaped. He asked me to find out what he knew.”

“What did he run?”

“You had murder on your face, Loki. You might not have noticed, but you’re a bit of an intimidating man.”

He chuckled, kissing her hair. “I think ‘murder’ is an exaggeration.”

“You couldn’t see your face.” She closed her eyes. “This was better than I’d even dreamed it could be.”

“Yes, that was. . . something else entirely.”

“Mmm. I’m eager to see if it’s always like that, or just a particular alchemy of our first time.”

“I agree. Though this time I’d like to get all of my clothing off. And perhaps a bottle of water and a couple of protein bars for us would not go amiss first.”

She laughed, softly and sincerely, very different from the practiced laugh she used with others. “Well, you see to your clothes. And I will find us a snack.”
They spent the night trying to top the first round—and came close a time or two. They didn’t do much talking, but the sex was plenty of entertainment. In the morning, he had breakfast delivered, and afterwards they said their goodbyes. They didn’t discuss repeating the experience and he did not see her that day.

After supper, however, there was a knock on his door, and Syn was on the other side, looking nervous. He ushered her in with a grin and so began an enjoyable week of learning all the ways to take each other apart.

On the fifth - or possibly sixth - morning they weren’t five minutes into their morning meal when Syn’s surly Valkyrie roommate—who hated him—showed up at the door. He hoped she hadn’t come to kill him.

Syn sipped her tea, wrapped in his dressing gown, sleeves puddling around her hands. “Is something wrong?” she asked her friend when she stormed past him.

“Well, on the walk over I was going to ask you why on earth you had spent the night with that man, but now that I’ve seen him shirtless... yeah, ok.” She turned and looked at Loki. “Nice scar.”

Now he wished he had put on a shirt when he’d gotten up, as her inspection made him feel like a piece of meat. “Uh, thank you?”

“You should see the rest of him,” Syn told her. “We’ll talk later.” He gave her a startled look and she smiled at him. “It’ll be entirely complimentary, darling.”

“Anyway,” the Valkyrie said. “You will not believe who I found in the junk sea this morning.”

“Animal, vegetable, or mineral.”

She grinned. “The other son of Odin.”
Chapter 5

Thor’s day had started in a cage with a skeleton somewhere in the bowels of Muspelheim. Then he’d stopped the end of the world (he thought), discovered his brother had faked his death and taken over Asgard, found his father wandering the Norwegian fjords, and learned he had an evil, bloodthirsty older sister who’d been locked away all these years.

Then Odin died, and he was left to face Ragnarok entirely on his own.

So really, the junkyard and the cannibals with nets and the crazy woman who electrocuted him were just icing on the fucking cake of this godawful day.

Now he was on some sort of trippy ride, which reminded him very much of the time Darcy had convinced Jane to take him to Disneyworld. It was such a surreal experience, he didn’t catch most of the narration. Something about being lost and unloved and belonging to the Grandmaster. Which didn’t sound pleasant at all.

The end got very intense and red and it was possible he might have let out a slight, manly, scream.

The Grandmaster and the harpy who’d captured him talked about him like he wasn’t even there—or wasn’t even sentient. “It is a he, isn’t it?” was asked.

The crazy woman apparently got paid quite a lot of money for him, which on another day he might have found flattering. Then he was escorted into a different room where he witnessed an execution by melting, which on another day would have been the strangest thing he’d ever seen.

Then the chair followed the Grandmaster into yet another room, where loud music was playing and a party was going on. The man got behind what looked like a DJ apparatus and began messing with buttons and dials while telling Thor all about the Contest of Champions he was apparently supposed to fight in.

Thor turned his head—what little he could—to get a better look at the room. And there, of all things, was Loki.

It made sense, he supposed, that the fall out of the Bifrost would dump them in the same spot. And despite everything, he was sincerely happy to see his brother. Even in that ridiculous yellow cape. “Loki!”

He looked over, hopped up and came dashing over. “Shh!” He didn’t looked surprised to see him, but he said, “You’re alive.”

“Of course I’m alive. Why wouldn’t I be alive?”

“I assumed you went to Asgard and Hela killed you,” he replied. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean what am I doing here? I’m stuck in this chair.” This was a ridiculous conversation to be having, but such was his relationship wit Loki. “What are you doing here? Where’s your chair?”

“I talked my way out of it. Which is not really in your skillset, granted. But yelling at the Grandmaster isn’t going to help you, I can tell you that.”

“Well get me out of this one?”

“I can’t.”
"Get me out."

"I can’t."

"Loki-"

"I can’t! I’m a member of the court, but I’ve only just gained favor. The Bifrost dropped me off here weeks ago-"

"Weeks?!"

"Yes, and I have a situation going here that I would really like you not to rampage through like a bull in a china shop." His brother actually smiled. “There’s this woman—"

Of course. Their father dead, Asgard on the verge of destruction and his brother was plotting and getting laid.

“What are you two whispering about over there?” The Grandmaster asked. “Loki! Do you know this, uh, Lord of Thunder?”

“I’ve never seen this man before in my life.”

“Lying,” a woman’s voice said from somewhere behind Thor.

Loki gave the woman a wounded look. Thor added, “He’s my brother.”

“Adopted,” Loki said, making that face he did when he knew he’d been caught but was going to try and talk his way out of it anyway. Thor had seen that face a lot growing up.

“Is he any kind of a fighter?” Grandmaster asked, though Thor couldn’t tell who the question was directed at.

“Take this thing off my neck and I’ll show you,” Thor replied, because he was too pissed off to try and charm this asshole. Which, he had to give Loki, wasn’t his strong suit anyway.

Grandmaster grinned and laughed in the most condescending manner possible. “Aw, look, he’s threatening me. Hey, Sparkles, here’s the deal: Any contender who defeats my champion, their freedom they shall win.”

“Fine! Point me in the direction of whoever’s ass I need to kick.”

“Oh, that’s what I call a contender.” Grandmaster looked very pleased. “The direction would be this way, Lord.” The chair started moving again.

“Ah! Loki!”

His chair was sent through more tunnels—no creepy narration this time—and he was eventually dumped into a large cell, where he met a man made entirely out of rock. Though, to be honest, Korg might have been the first actually decent person he’d talked to all god damn day.

Exploring his new accommodations took all of five minutes. It was filthy, covered in detritus, with tired and sleeping convicts and gladiators tucked in various spots. Exhausted, discouraged, and very annoyed at his brother, Thor found somewhere apart from the rest of them to have a quiet moment and mourn his father as best he could. The old prayer came to him, as if he’d said it every day of his life.
He heard a noise behind him, and turned to find Loki—or at least an illusion of Loki—standing on
the other side of the room. “Hurts, doesn’t it? That he lied to you. Being told you’re one thing,
then learning it’s all a fiction.”

Thor threw a rock at him, and it went right through the illusion.

Loki chuckled. “You didn’t think I’d really come down here, this place is disgusting.” Annoyed,
Thor threw another rock. Loki made a face. “Are you saying you don’t want my help?”

There were a lot of good throwing rocks here, maybe his day was looking up.

“I couldn’t jeopardize my place with the Grandmaster, it took me time to earn his trust. Not to
mention my actions could have repercussions for others I’m connected to.” That was probably
about his woman. Thor started looking for another rock.

Loki kept trying. “He’s a lunatic, but he’s a useful one. What I’m telling you is, you could join me
at the Grandmaster’s side.” That rock went right through his chest. “Perhaps in time an accident
befalls the Grandmaster and then...” He gestured to Thor, then himself, then upwards.

Why was he not even remotely surprised that Loki had been here a couple of weeks and was
already planning on taking over? It was honestly probably a miracle he hadn’t killed Odin when
taking over Asgard. He hurled a rock at Loki’s head.

Now Loki looked concerned. “You can’t seriously be thinking about going back there? Our sister
shattered your hammer like it was made of glass. She’s stronger than both of us. You don’t stand a
chance against her.”

Thor didn’t think that deserved a reply. Not even a rock.

Loki scoffed, tipping his head back. “Fine. I guess I’ll just have to go it alone. Like I’ve always
done.”

Because somehow, of course, this was all about him. Thor found himself smiling at the sheer
predictability of it all.

“Would you say something?” Loki snapped. “Say something!”

He sounded upset enough Thor felt the need to reply. “What would you like me to say? You
faked your own death. Stole the throne, stripped Odin of his power, stranded him on Earth to die,
releasing the Goddess of Death. Have I said enough or would you like be to go back farther than
the past two days?”

Loki’s jaw tightened, and pressed the heel of his hand against his chest in a way Thor didn’t think
was conscious. “I didn’t fake my own death. I was very surprised to wake up on Svartalheim.”

For a moment, doubt lanced through Thor’s anger. Despite what Loki might think, he was a pretty
good judge of his brother’s tones and mood. And just then he had sounded... sincere. “Bullshit,”
he said, though he wasn’t as sure as he’d been five minutes ago.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “What color was my skin?”

Thor frowned, thinking back those frantic moments on Svartalheim. “It was... greyish.”

He gestured at his face. “Weird lines?”

“Yes.” Seeing where he was going with this he asked, “You’re saying your Asgardian glamour
was fading?”

“I don’t understand how it works. I thought maybe Odin did it, but it survived him. All I know is I
don’t control it. I can’t change back without the Cask. And it’s only happened independently one
other time.”

Despite himself, Thor asked, “When?”

He sighed, like he regretted bringing it up. “Under some pretty extravagant torture.” He turned his
head, looking off to the side at something - or someone - Thor couldn’t see. “No. I don’t want to
talk about it. Shush.”

Thor wasn’t entirely sure how he’d lost the moral high ground in this conversation. His brother
admitting he was tortured had taken the wind out of his sails. He crossed his arms, aware he
probably looked like a pouting child. “You did the rest of it.”

“Heard got out of the spell on his own and chose to stay down there. Where, I might add, you
live. He could have waltzed over any time and told you what was happening. Also, in no way do
I have the kind of power to make the All-Father mortal. Flattered though I am that you thought it
so. He was already dying. Unfortunate considering his heir chose to refuse the throne for a human
woman.”

It was possible he deserved that. “Fine. You’re a model citizen. Get me out of here so I can go
back and save Asgard. If it’s not already too late.”

“Time is abnormal on Sakaar. You have however much time you want to have.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Little here does.”

He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. “Are you going to watch my bout tomorrow?
Maybe place a bet against me?”

“You know, if you still had Moljnir, I’d bet on you.”

“I am more than my hammer, brother.”

Loki didn’t answer, instead looking again at someone Thor couldn’t see off to his left. “What do
you mean don’t worry about it? Of course I’m going to worry about it, he’s still my brother.”
Pause. “That doesn’t make any sense.” He looked back at Thor and held up a finger. “Excuse me
a moment,” he said, and then the illusion vanished.

Thor sighed and leaned his head back on the wall. This day was never going to end.

* *

“I thought he was dead yesterday, I don’t want him to be dead tomorrow.” Loki paced in a circle
around Syn’s chair. “The Champion has killed every single challenger. He’s going to kill Thor.”

“He’s not going to kill him,” Syn said patiently, working on her embroidery. “I talked to him.
He’ll fight to a draw.”

“You talked to him?” Disbelief tinged with sarcasm dripped from his tone.

She was probably going to need to learn to ignore that tone if this was going to work. “Yes, we’re
friends. Well, sort of. Brun was the one who brought him in, when he first arrived. He likes us.”

Loki fussed with his sleeve cuffs for a protracted amount of time, and Syn knew she’d won the argument. “Fine.”

Finishing her stitch, she put her cloth aside and stood, standing in front of him. He’d let her witness his half of the conversation with Thor, something she sensed had been hard for him. He was worried, and afraid, and glad to see his brother and trying to hide all of it. She lifted a hand and stroked his cheek, tucking his hair behind his ear. “It will be all right, Loki.”

He sighed. “I suppose I am going to have to trust you.”

“Trust is hard. For both of us.” She pressed a kiss to his jaw. “We’ll have to learn how to do it with our clothes on.”

“We should practice more with them off,” he suggested.

Her mouth curled into a smile and she felt her insides melt into something warm and pleasurable. When she thought of the previous week she was a little shocked at the things they’d done, the things she had begged him to do. “Would that take your mind off your worries?”

“I think it might just,” he said, lifting her up.

He was much stronger than her, she wasn’t used to that. When he pinned her down, she couldn’t toss him off. That particular discovery had been extremely arousing. She sank her hand into his hair as he walked towards the bedroom. “I am happy to distract.”

She woke in the morning to the sound of her comm beeping insistently. She crawled over Loki to fish it out of her bag. There was a message from Brun. If you can take a moment to pause in your fucking, we have a problem.

Slumping back in the bed, she responded, What problem? It’s too early for problems. Loki was awake and his hands were wandering. She swatted him away.

Brun replied a moment later. Banner says he won’t fight Thor. Come down here.

She thumped her head on the pillow, I’ll be right there. She tossed the comm into her bag and kissed Loki, edging off the bed “I have to go.”

He tucked his arms behind his head and looked very tempting. “Mmm, I’ll see you tonight?”

“In the box,” she promised, really tempted to touch him again. If she did, he would touch her and she would melt and it would be an hour before she left. “And after,” she added, dressing herself with a gesture. He’d torn the dress she’d been wearing the night before.

“I’m particularly looking forward to that part,” he said with a grin.

The smile made him look young and stirred things in the vicinity of her heart she’d long thought dead. Now was not the time to think of that. She blew him a kiss and grabbed her bag, heading out of his suite and down to the gladiator rooms.

She found Brun with her arms crossed, leaning against a wall and looking irritated, and Banner pacing around the room. When Syn walked in, he said, “You didn’t tell me he didn’t have Moljnir.”

“I didn’t think it was relevant. Also, Grandmaster generally doesn’t let his captives keep mystical
weapons of infinite power.”

“The hammer is how we can spar. Well, Thor and Hulk. Puts them on a reasonably level playing field. Without it, I can’t promise Hulk doesn’t kill him.”

Well that wasn’t good. “He’s still an Asgardian. Hulk spars with her all the time,” she added with a gesture at Brun.

“He’s very fond of Brun and is careful. He’s going to expect the hammer and fight to it. I’m telling you, this is a bad idea.”

Syn spread her hands. “We don’t have any others. Grandmaster wants a fight and Thor agreed to it.” And she’d sort of promised her kind of boyfriend it would work out just fine. Best not to mention that.

“I don’t care what the Grandmaster wants. You... the both of you. You lost everyone. Me too. And then one of them falls out of the sky. How you feel about being asked to potentially beat them to death before you even got to say hello?”

Living on this planet had been much easier when the only person she gave a shit about was Brun. She turned to her. “Do you think you could convince the Hulk to go easy on him?”

“I can try. Could just rile him up, though.”

“It seems worth a shot.” She turned back to Banner. “Brun will try to talk to him. If it doesn’t work then Loki and I will figure out some way to disrupt the fight if things look bad.”

Banner rubbed his temples. “I don’t want to do this.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I promise I won’t let Thor die in that ring tonight.” She’d already promised one man that, what was one more?

“I know you can’t lie, but I don’t know how you can promise that. You’re not strong enough to stop him.”

Brun sigh and pushed off the wall. “Bruce. If you don’t fight, this whole thing comes crashing down. Maybe Hulk survives the melt stick, none of the rest of us do. Including Thor. I’ve been here a long time. There’s a thread of malevolence in the Grandmaster that I’ve seen enough of to know I don’t want to see more. You have to.” She lifted her chin. “Voluntarily, or else I’ll punch you until you transform.”

Syn was impressed Brun gave him the honest warning. There was a time when she’d have rolled her eyes and just punched him without trying to negotiate at all.

He looked from one of them to the other, mouth pressed in a thin line. Finally, he cracked his jaw. “You promise to save him if it looks bad?” he asked Syn.

Knowing she was absolutely going to regret this, she lifted a hand. “I swear by the Tree.”

Brun sighed and tipped her head back, because she knew what that meant. Breaking a vow on the Tree was a lie, and Syn couldn’t do it.

“All right,” he said finally. “I’ll do it. He’ll be more riled and more likely to hurt Thor if he gets pulled out against my will.”

Syn relaxed a little. Thank the spirits, that could have gone worse. “I know you lost everyone,”
she told him. “But that doesn’t mean you’re alone. Try to remember that.”

He sighed and nodded. “I’ll will.” He looked at Brun. “Come back in a couple of hours and see if you can come to an agreement with the other guy.”

She nodded and they left him be. Brun was pointedly silent as they made their way through the halls. “Do you have something you’d like to say to me?” Syn asked calmly.

“What are you doing with that man?” she had to give Brun credit for not being one to beat around the bush.

“Sex,” she replied. “Lots of it. Frequently.”

Brun chuckled. “Yeah, I picked up on that part.”

“He’s extremely good at it.” Though she got the sense that, while he was generally good at it, he was better at it with her. As she was with him. That was a phenomena that probably bore examining, but she was a little afraid of what her conclusion might be.

“Is that all it is?”

She wanted to say yes. Tried valiantly to get the word out, but it wouldn’t come. “He’s mine,” she said instead.

“I wasn’t asking you to share,” she said, holding her hands up. “I’m having nightmares again thanks to that asshole.”

Syn shook her head. “No. I mean, I’m sorry about that, but. . . he’s mine. Some part of me is drawn to him. I can’t explain it, I’ve never felt it before.”

“Maybe it’s some magic he’s doing to you. He is an illusionist—a far more powerful one than the little tricks at court.”

“There isn’t an illusionist in the Universe who could fool me, let alone put some sort of spell on me.” She paused, rubbing her scar idly. “I know he hurt you. I know he’s an asshole. I am sorry if my being with him causes you pain. But I don’t know if I can stop.”

Brun rubbed her eyes. “Ran into his brother downstairs. Saw my tattoo and bid me to come help him save Asgard. Called me a coward and a traitor while he was at it. They’re really just a wonderful family.”

“Oh, Brun.” Neither of them were much for touchy feely stuff. But she couldn’t help but stop and step forward to hug her.

“I’ll kill him if he hurts you,” she mumbled into Syn’s shoulder. “I will dismember him alive and feed his parts to the cannibals.”

“I know you will.” Clearly she meant it, since she was holding onto Syn. “And I’ll tell him if he hurts you again I’ll cut off one very particular member.”

That made her laugh, and then she leaned back. She looked sad more than anything else. “Please be careful.”

“I will,” she promised. She tucked a lock of Brun’s hair back. “I love you, sister. I don’t think I tell you that enough.”
That got a small smile. “I love you too. Even if when think you’re being really stupid.”

“Well, that’s how you know we’re sisters.”

“I don’t really feel like socializing with him tonight. Or, really, anyone, so I’m going to watch the fight from my ship.” Ships with permanent landing clearance were allowed to hover over the arena and watching it from above.

“All right.” That probably meant she’d be putting away a case of ale, but Syn decided not to comment. They were, apparently, both allowed their terrible mistakes. “Hopefully Hulk will listen to reason and no one will end up a smear on the arena floor.”

“I will do my absolute best.”
Chapter 6

They parted ways and Syn went back to their rooms to shower and change into something appropriate to watch the fight in. She had long given up on anything resembling what she’d worn on Alfheim. Sakaar didn’t have anything by way of traditional fashion. Grandmaster dressed like something neon and brocade had vomited on him. Syn preferred dark colors and long skirts.

On this particular occasion, because she knew Loki would be there, she wore something that left most of her stomach and hips bare. A little perfume and an elaborate plait in her hair later and she was ready for join the other in the Grandmaster’s box.

Loki was already there when she arrived, sitting on the other end of the Grandmaster’s couch. He looked up when she stepped in, and stared.

It was nice to have signs that whatever connection she felt with him, he seemed to feel something similar. She glided over, picking up a cocktail on the way, and leaned on the arm of the couch nearest him. “Have I missed anything?”

“The warm-ups are starting. Nothing new.” He put a hand on her thigh. Gossip had run rampant about their ‘affair’, but now that it was real he seemed to be making it publicly obvious.

“Mmm.” She lifted a hand to play with his hair. If they were going to be obvious, then she was going to indulge herself. She’d never been much for long hair on men, but for some reason it worked on him.

“It’s nice to see you two kids getting along,” Grandmaster commented. “I love bringing people together.”

“That we are,” Loki replied with a grin.

They watched the next match like that, his cool hand curved around her leg and her fingers toying with his hair. It was oddly peaceful, despite the violence happening on the other side of the window. No one was paying them much mind and it felt far more private than it really was.

Time came for the main event and the Grandmaster hopped up. “Time to do my duty,” he announced, moving to the back of the room to announce the final bout.

Syn looked down at Loki. “Here we go.”

His hand left her thigh and found her hand to squeeze. Out in the arena, Thor seemed very happy to see Hulk. In fact, he shouted “YES!” so loudly that the entire arena fell silent.

He turned and waved at the box. “It’s all right! We know each other. He’s a friend from work.” Gesturing at Hulk he added, “Loki, look who it is!”

Loki’s hand had gone even colder than usual and when she glanced at him he was white as snow. “Loki?”

“I need to get off this planet,” he muttered. He glanced at her. “I did not know that was the champion,” he said quietly. “He beat the shit out of me once.”

Right, that was a story she was going to need one of them to tell her. “It won’t happen again,” she promised him, stroking his hair back.
The crowd was chanting Hulk’s name and it seemed to spur him into attacking Thor. She couldn’t
tell from this distance if he was acting or really fighting. He did miss his first few attacks, though,
which she hoped was a good sign. Weapons clashed, sending up sparks and they danced around
the arena, throwing each other around in ways that would have obliterated most other species.

Loki had gone tense and fidgety, wringing his hands and glancing over at Grandmaster. He, for
his part, was giddy and excited at usual, watching the carnage with glee. Syn stroked Loki’s hair
again, trying to soothe him. They had to put on some sort of show or the game would be revealed.

Of course, it was possible Hulk had started out acting and was now pissed off at getting hit in the
face with a maul. That was well within his repertoire.

For a few moments it actually looked like Thor might win without any intervention. Syn could
feel Loki relaxing a little, starting to enjoy the show a bit. Then Hulk managed to pin the
Asgardian, hammering his face with his fists. Syn was craning her neck, feeling the weight of her
vow to Banner pull at her, urging her to do something.

Then lightning seemed to strike in reverse, arcing up from Thor’s body and blasting Hulk off of
him.

The crowd went silent. Grandmaster lurched to his feet and even Loki leaned forward, jaw open.

“Did you know he could do that?” Syn asked out the corner of her mouth.

“Not in the least,” he murmured back.

The crowd was now chanting “Thun-der, thun-der” because the people of Sakaar were nothing if
not fickle and opportunistic. Thor stood in the middle of the arena, electricity crackling around
him, running down his arms.

Hulk got to his feet, shaking his head, looking winded and dazed for the first time since she’d
known him. Thor started towards him, lighting still arcing around him, and she swore for a
moment Hulk looked scared.

Then Grandmaster lifted his control stick and hit a button, activating the electric node on Thor’s
neck, dropping him like a bag of rocks. Loki’s head snapped around, staring at him in shock. Hulk
leapt in the air, coming down for what was certainly going to be a death blow, and Syn reached
for her magic to shield Thor.

When Loki had turned his head, her hand had slipped from his hair to his neck, touching bare
skin. When she called to her magic, it came, but so did his, surging into her, icy cold and potent.
She gasped in surprise and sent out a blend of both their powers to wrap around Thor, protecting
him like a shield. Because she had a bit of Loki’s skill in it, it was invisible, forming over him like
a second skin.

When Hulk struck it there was a concussive blast that sent him flying once again. He landed hard
on the other side of the arena and didn’t get back up, as unconscious at Thor.

There was a moment of perfect and utter silence. Syn moved her hand away from Loki, finding it
red and sore, as if frostbitten. The crowd broke out in raucous cheering and she tucked the hand
behind her back, grinning at a stunned Grandmaster. “I’d call that a draw, wouldn’t you?”

“I. . . I guess now I’ll have two Champions.”

*
Brun brought her ship around back into its berth, and ran down to the gladiator area. She hadn’t expected the fight to actually knock Hulk out, and while the Grandmaster didn’t seem to care about his various forms, if the crowd saw him turn back into Banner it could be very bad.

By the time she got down there though, Hulk was on his feet again, and had the still-unconscious Thor slung over his shoulder. None of the handlers down there were interested in arguing with the Hulk, so they’d let him. They probably thought he was going to go have him for lunch or something.

When he saw her in the hallway, he looked sheepish. Like a little kid who’d broken something of his mother’s. “Hulk got carried away. Sorry.”

She sighed. “I watched, I know you tried.”

They started walking to his suite in the gladiator building. “Good fight though. Thor always good for a fun fight.”

“It looked very exciting.” Someone giggled behind them, and she turned to see a couple of the lower-tier court ladies behind them. “Yes?” Brun asked.

“We wanted to come tend to his wounds,” one of them said, pointing at Thor. They giggled.

Brun ground her teeth, then sighed. “Too bad. He’s mine.”

They stared in shock. She took a threatening step towards them and they shrieked, running away.

Hulk grumbled a laugh. Brun rolled her eyes. She opened the forcefield in the hall to let them in to his rooms, and then closed and locked the mostly-decorative inner doors. They didn’t need any more visitors.

He put Thor down on the floor next to the massive bathtub, and then stripped and got in it, apparently done with helping. Brun messaged Syn, *Come down when you can, I think he’s really hurt.*

In the mean time, she decided to peel off his battered and bloody armor to see how bad it was.

The top came off in one piece, up over his head. He’d lost his helmet somewhere along the way. There were bruises blooming along his ribs and shoulder, she was guessing most of his ribcage was busted in one way or another. The electrode was gone; nothing but a burn mark in its place. And there was a collection of superficial scrapes and cuts. All in all, not bad for someone who’d gone toe to toe with the Hulk.

He was, admittedly, fairly filthy. And they’d put ridiculous greasy red war paint on his face. Yet is was impossible not to appreciate just how very, very nicely he was built. It was too bad he was a jerk.

“Well dirty,” Hulk commented. Apparently he didn’t like that, so he reached over and picked Thor up, unceremoniously dumping him into the water.

He surfaced, sputtering and yelling, which Hulk seemed to find extremely amusing. Thor held onto the edge of the tub, breathing hard a moment, taking in where he was. He saw her and slumped a little, then pressed a hand to his side. “Ow.”

“Hello, your majesty,” she said. “A healer is coming.”

Nodding, he glanced back over his shoulder at Hulk. “We cool?”
Hulk grunted a nodded, flicking a little water at him.

“How long have you been like that? Big, green. . . stupid.” The last was under his breath.

“Hulk always Hulk.”

“Since this afternoon,” Brun said, getting up to look for wash cloths and soap she thought she’d seen. “The healer will get Banner back out.”

“Huh.” He watched her walking around. “I confess to being surprised I’m not dead.”


Brun found soap and a cloth, and held them out to Thor. “Well, you look like roadkill.”

“Thanks.” He took the supplies and dunked the cloth in the water, lathering it up. She wandered over to the bar as he wiped himself down, wincing all the while.

The doors creaked up and Syn stepped inside, in one of her more revealing court dresses. Brun noticed her right hand was bandaged. “Please tell me they’re both alive.”

“Amazingly so. Thor is pretty beat up.”

“Hulk feel great!” Hulk told them helpfully.

“I’m so glad to hear it.” She walked over to the tub and crouched by Thor. “Hi, I’m Syn, I’ll be your healer this evening. Stay still.” She placed her non bandaged hand on his shoulder and stared in the distance a moment. “That is a lot of broken ribs.”

Thor grunted in reply. The healing process could be uncomfortable, particularly knitting bones. Syn’s gold glow shimmered over his skin, then faded and he noticeably relaxed. “Thank you.” He sounded far more sincere when he said it to her.

“Any time.” She stuck her hand in the water and a bolt of gold lanced over to Hulk. Who promptly turned back into Banner. “Look, he’s alive.”

Banner sputtered a little, with that dazed look he always had after switching. “Thor!”

“Banner!” Now he sounded thoroughly delighted. Then frowned. “Why did you try to kill me?”

“Did I? I’m sorry.” He reached for one of the towels Brun was holding, and she held it out to him so he could climb out of the tub. She appreciated that the human side of him had a sense of modesty. Hulk just sauntered around naked, swinging around way more green dick than anyone needed to see.

“I think a little bit was lost in translation,” Syn said. “Hulk started off going easy and then forgot.”

“He said he was sorry,” Brun offered.

Banner got the towel tied off and went to clap Thor on the arm. “It’s good to see you, man.”

“You too,” he said, gripping his arm in return. “You have no idea. Well, maybe you do.”

Thor climbed out of the tub, looking down in dismay at his sopping wet pants and boots. Brun hadn’t had time to take them off before Hulk dumped him in the water. “I’ll have someone bring clothes down,” Syn said.
“Thanks,” he and Brun said in unison.

That amused her, but she smothered the smile. “Right. I’m sure you have a lot of catching up to do. I’ll see you later,” she added to Brun, heading for the doors.

She chugged the drink she’d started. “Oh, no, I’m coming with you.”

“Wait!” Thor said. “I want to talk to you.”

Brun sighed and turned towards him. “Yes?”

“Asgard is in danger. People are dying. I need your help.”

She tipped her head back. “Not this again.”

“Please,” he said quietly. “Odin is dead. Hela, the Goddess of Death has invaded Asgard. If I don’t get there and do something the other realms will be next.”

She took a slow breath. “If Hela is back, the Asgard is already lost.”

“Not if we do something to stop her.” He took a step forward, expression heartbreakingly earnest. “You’re a Valkyrie. You were legendary. Elite warriors sworn to protect Asgard. You, me, maybe the big green guy—“

“Please don’t involve me in this,” Banner said, rummaging in the mess by the bed for clothes that fit him.

“We can stop her,” Thor finished.

She put her hands on her hips. “I am not being dragged into another one of Odin’s family squabbles.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your sister. Her power comes from Asgard, same as yours. But it grew beyond Odin’s control, she massacred everyone in the palace and tried to seize the throne. When she tried to escape her banishment, he sent the Valkyrie to beat her back. She mowed us down in minutes, all by herself. We never got near her. I only survived because—”

The chorus of screams. Blood soaking her. Eir’s eyes closing.

She took a step back from him, and pointed silently at Syn, who was still in the doorway, telling her not to get involved. Brun knew the look on her face and she couldn’t even see it. Instead she went over to the bar and blindly found a bottle to chug.

The damn man followed her, and she cut him off just as he opened his mouth. “Look. I faced Hela once, when I still believed in the throne, and it cost me everything.” Odin had known how powerful she was, known they couldn’t survive, and he’d sent them anyway. She’d buried it once, but now it was raw again. As raw as those first weeks living above the bar with Syn.

And now she was staring at his son, and had an overwhelming urge to punch him in the face. She put the bottle back down. “That’s what’s wrong with Asgard. The lies, the secrets, the whole golden sham.” She stepped around him to join Syn at the door.

He caught her arm, turning her back to him. The knife was out and at his throat before she could think. “Don’t get familiar.”
“I agree,” he said quietly, gently pressing on her hand so she’d lower the knife. “That’s why I turned down the throne. But this isn’t about the crown it’s about the people. And they’re dying. And they’re your people too.” He shook his head. “If you won’t help me, I have to do it alone.”

She drew her other knife with her free hand, just to make a point, and annoyed she felt the pull of some long forgotten noble instinct. “Then I guess you will.”

“Brun,” Syn said quietly from the doorway.

She turned her head, enough she could see Syn out of the corner of one eye, but without letting Thor out of her sight. “Yeah?”

“He’s not bluffing.”

She looked back at him and the determined set of his jaw. She could see his father in him, just a little bit. “That I believe.”

“He’s also about to do something stupid,” Syn said tiredly.


The ball promptly bounced back and smacked him in the face.

“See?” Syn said.

He hopped back up and said, “Because that’s what heroes do,” without missing a beat. Then he started towards the window, which he’d cracked. She reached for her control box, and remembered he’d lost his electrode to the lightning (she assumed). So she reached to grab his arm to stop him.

Thor swung around to knock her back, and in return she threw that punch she’d been wanting to. Because he was Odin’s son and because she was tired of feeling all of this all over again. Because his brother was stealing Syn and because he looked so damn distractingly good without his stupid shirt on. Because she wasn’t a traitor and she wasn’t a coward.

Whatever started it, he swung back, and now they were fighting for real. The kind of fight where they smashed into things and Banner and Syn were both yelling to try and get them to stop. But he’d bottled up something just as bad as she had, and they were both aiming their anger at each other.

He slammed her back into the shelves of liquor bottles and she grabbed a good solid crystal one and aimed it at his head.

“That’s enough!” Syn’s magic slammed into both of them, pinning them to opposite ends of the sitting area. She was standing between them, hands flung out. Brun tried to get up but couldn’t. “It’s late. I am exhausted, and you are both acting like bullheaded Asgardians.” She spat the word out like the worst insult in the world.

“You,” she pointed at Thor. “Take one step out of this palace on your own and the Grandmaster will have the entire city looking for you. You don’t know your way around and you don’t have a ship that will get you off the planet. Asgard will certainly fall if you get yourself melted.”

“And you,” she told Brun. “Need to take a deep breath and think about what really matters to you. If you don’t want to go fight Hela, I understand, believe me. But the least you could do is help
outfit and arm him so he can fight her properly.”

She dropped her hands. “I am done with Asgardians tonight. Kill each other, don’t, I don’t care. Just don’t call me to clean it up.”

“Don’t do it in my room, I don’t want to clean it up, either,” Banner said.

Brun dropped her head back against the wall behind her, trying to catch her breath. But she held up her hands in a gesture of peace.

Thor coughed a little, looked at Syn warily. “I suppose. . . waiting a day to formulate a proper plan won’t hurt.”

“I’m not going to touch him,” Brun said. “Can I get up?”

Syn gestured and the pressure released. Thor took a deep breath and sat up. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “About the things I said to you. It was unfair.”

“At least half of it was true,” she said, pulling herself to her feet. “But. . . sometimes all you get for running towards your problems is a sword in the gut.”

He nodded, but said quietly, “Better to die doing the right thing than live doing nothing.”

That somehow hit her harder than any of his punches. “Dying is always easier than survival. No one ever asks you to do it twice.”

“I shouldn’t have asked you to come. You’re right, it’s not your job. It’s just. . .” He sighed, shoulders slumping. “It’s been a terrible couple of days.”

She certainly had to give him that. “Get some sleep. There’s plenty of booze. Tomorrow we’ll figure out how to get you out of here.”

He nodded again, and slowly got to his feet.

Syn reached out to help Brun up. “Are you all right?” She asked softly.

She nodded. “Nothing a hot bath and a strong drink won’t fix.”

“All right.” She rubbed Brun’s arm, then winced, flexing her bandaged hand. “I’m going to go home and sleep.”

“I’ll come with you.” She turned a little. “Good evening gentlemen.”

Thor gave a little bow that reminded her he was still a prince. Banner waved in that goofy, awkward way of his. She and Syn went out into the hall, and Brun hooked an arm through her friend’s. “I’m sorry about that.”

“I forgive you. I know you’ve been particularly sensitive about it all recently.” She leaned on her. “Those two princes have caused quite a bit of chaos in our lives, haven’t they?”

“They have. What happened to your hand?”

“I - I’m not really sure.” She glanced down at it. “I have to talk to Loki about it, but we didn’t get a chance.”

Immediately her hackles were up. “He did that to you?”
“Not intentionally,” she said soothingly. “I think I borrowed some of his magic, when I was trying to protect Thor in the ring. It burned me.”

“Huh.” Brun didn’t know enough about magic to have anything useful to say.

Then they arrived at their suite, and found Loki sitting in the living room.
Chapter 7

The looks of surprise on the women’s faces almost made Loki’s long wait for them to arrive worthwhile. Of course, the Valkyrie’s expression almost immediately turned murderous.

Syn squeezed the other woman’s arm. “Breathe.” Steering her towards one of the inner doors she said, “Go take your bath. I will deal with him, I promise you won’t hear a sound.” She kissed her cheek, then turned to Loki and imperiously pointed at a different door.

He followed her orders and went into what he assumed was her bedroom. “We need to talk,” he said when the door closed.

“Oh, this day is never going to end,” she muttered under her breath. She walked past him, toeing her shoes off and sinking on the end of her bed. “Talk.”

“You hand,” he said. “It’s frostbite, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I haven’t had a chance to heal it.” She picked at the end of the bandage and carefully unwound it, hissing in pain. Her palm was blotchy white and red and there were dark blisters on her fingers. “Ow,” she said rather blandly.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “It may be some trouble to heal. It’s not regular frostbite. It’s... the burn of a Frost Giant.”

“I’ve seen a Jotun burn before,” she told him. “They were quite a nuisance when I was alive.” She blew lightly on her fingers and her hand glowed a moment. When the light faded her skin still looked red and blotchy, but not as bad. “It’s better to let it finish healing on its own, or the skin can get tight.” She nodded towards the vanity next to him. “Could you hand me the lotion in the gold jar?”

He brought her the jar and waited for her to say something else. Anything else. Saying the things that would put and end to this... whatever it was. It shouldn’t be anything, because it hadn’t been long. But the thought of losing her made him ache.

She rubbed the sweet scented lotion on her injured hand and flexed it, examining her fingers again. Apparently satisfied, she looked back up at him. “Are you staying? I’m exhausted, but I wouldn’t say no to using you as a pillow.”

“You want me to stay?”

“Of course.” She started unbraiding her hair. “Brun and I have an unspoken rule about having sex in the apartment, but if we’re very quiet we could probably manage a quickie in the morning while she’s hung over.”

“No, I mean the...” He shook his head. She didn’t seem to care and he didn’t understand.

Shaking out her hair, she stood and walked to him, placing a hand on his chest. “Loki, my darling. I slept with you when I knew you were Odin’s son. That you’re Jotun is practically a step up.”

He chuckled darkly and ducked his head. “All right.”

She kissed his cheek, soft and warm and welcoming. “I’m tired. It’s been a long day. I’ve had to play at court, heal Thor, break up an Asgardian fist fight, and shared magic with you, something I didn’t know was possible. I would very much like to curl up in bed with my lover and forget most
of that.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “Sounds like a plan.” He lifted her up and carried her to the bed. She slipped out of her dress and he shed his leathers so that they were skin to skin as they curled together.

Clearly as tired as she’d claimed, Syn yawned, tucking her head under his chin. “Goodnight, *mo cuisle,*” she mumbled. He recognized the lilt of Old Alfan, if not the words.

He kissed the top of her head. He felt content when he held her, not something he was used to. Not something he’d felt in a very long time. He didn’t need much sleep - especially when she hadn’t worn him out with their bedroom exercises - but he enjoyed laying in her warm, comfortable bed and listening to her breathe before dozing off.

Thin dawn sunlight was trickling around the edges of her curtains when he woke. Syn had rolled away from him at some point in the night and was fidgeting restlessly, breathing hard and panicked. He touched her back, just next to the long scar by her spine, and she jerked awake, sitting up and pressing a hand to her chest.

He sat up beside her. “It’s okay. Just a dream.”

She nodded, letting out a long, slow breath before taking the next. She looked down at her hands and chest, as if expecting to see a wound. He noticed her frost bitten hand was still red and chapped, but much better.

When she was satisfied it had, in fact, just been a dream, she sighed and leaned into him a little. “Good morning.”

He rubbed her back. “Good morning. Do you feel any better?”

“I do, thank you.” She closed her eyes, rocking with his motions. “Your brother is the most Asgardian Asgardian I’ve ever met.”

“I would absolutely agree with that assessment. He is technically King now, so I suppose it fits.” He looked down at her. “Did he do something in particular?”

“He’s determined to go fight Hela. Brun and I had to stop him from jumping out the window and blundering off into the night.”

Loki sighed. “Yep. That’s my brother.”

“After a brief brawl, we convinced him to wait and let us help him plan properly. Maybe arm him so he has a chance.” She sighed and opened her eyes. “Though how we’re going to do that, I don’t know.”

“She destroyed the most powerful weapon in Asgard with her bare hands. I don’t think armaments exist that will make this anything other than a suicide charge.”

“No, you’re right. I personally saw her take almost a dozen arrows without flinching. Countless blows from a sword and staff.” Her eyes were sad and she rubbed her scar. “But he’s determined. He said people are dying. I don’t think any of us can deter him.”

“And he’s somehow going to save them singlehandedly? Even Thor isn’t that much of an idiot to think—” He tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling. “Damn it.”

Syn leaned back to look at him. “What?”
“I’m missing something, and I don’t like that.” He flipped the covers back and climbed out of bed. “I need to talk to him.”

“He’s in the gladiator quarters, under guard. There’s not much privacy.”

“I told the Grandmaster we’re estranged. It’ll be suspicious if I’m down there.”

She tilted her head, considering, then wrinkled her nose. “There’s a way to get him up here. But Brun’s not going to like it.”

*

“You’re on a planet surrounded by doors. Go through one.”

“Which one?”

“The big one.”

The vision Heimdall had shown him faded, and Thor was once again in his brightly colored cage. Behind him Banner was merrily eating the breakfast that had been brought down for them, reading what looked to be some kind of scientific journal.

Thor went over to to pick up a roll, eating it savagely as he turned his options over in his head. Today was already worse than yesterday. “We’re going to have to abandon Asgard.”

Banner looked up, surprised. “What happened to What Heroes Do?”

He shook his head. “Hela is taking her power from Asgard, but she can’t leave it. If I can’t destroy her, I can get everyone away from her.”

“I admit this sounds like a saner plan than yesterday. Though—how do you evacuate a whole world?”

“I’m still working on that part,” he muttered, chewing his roll. “But Asgard isn’t as large as Earth, more like a mid sized city.” And Hela had already killed a large number of them.

Banner studied him a moment. “I wasn’t interested in a testosterone and duty fueled Last Stand. But I’ll help with an evacuation. Well, Hulk with help. Probably.”

“I will take any help I can get.” Once his people were safe, if he felt the need to go try to stop Hela, he could do it alone. Priorities.

The door opened then, and two armed guards came in. “Lord of Thunder?” one of them asked.


“Come with us,” the guard said sternly.

He didn’t move. “Where are we going?”

“Scrapper 142 has requested you be brought up to her suite for her use.”

His mouth went dry but he managed to swallow his last bite of roll and say. “Her use?”

“People who are in the Grandmaster’s favor may take Gladiators for an evening’s entertainment. Or a day’s, as the case may be.” He waved his hand. “Come along, we’ll get you cleaned up.”
Thor gave Banner a look of horror. The other man shrugged. “If Hulk does that, I don’t want to know.”

Neither did he. He turned back to the guards. “I’m capable of ‘cleaning up’ here.”

“Space has been booked at the spa,” the guard replied.

“No spa,” Banner said. Thor looked at him and Banner shook his head vehemently.

Glad there was a reason to refuse other than his own obstinence, Thor said, “I will bathe here. You can come back or you can tell me where to go, but I’m not going to a spa.”

The two guards had a silent discussion, then the other one said, “Fine. We’ll be back in half an hour with more suitable clothes and some perfumed oil. We’ve been asked to make you smell better.”

He frowned at them until they left, then turned to Banner. “What am I going to do?”

“Take a bath and have some sex?”

“With the woman I had a fight with yesterday?” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I didn’t even think she liked me.”

“You don’t have to like someone to be attracted to them. And some people get off on fighting.” He took another bite of his food. “I shared a wall with Tony and Pepper a couple months after the Battle of NY. The louder the fight, the louder the sex.”

He was honest enough to admit he found her attractive. Even when she was beating him up. Possibly especially when she was beating him up. “It does make me feel a little cheap.”

“I’m not saying this isn’t weird—to be honest, I thought she preferred women—but she’s not a monster. And she lives with Syn, who I promise you is not going to be down for non-consensual sex on the other side of her bedroom wall. Go up there and say no. I guarantee you’ll be back here in 10 minutes.”

“But?” He could hear the ‘but’.

“But,” Banner said. “It might be a peace offering.”

He didn’t particularly think he needed any sort of peace offering. They’d said their apologies and she’d agreed to help him how she could. Though, on the other hand, “sorry about that furniture breaking fight what say we have some sex to clear the air?” Was a very Asgardian thing to do.

There was also that quiet little part of him that was overjoyed a Valkyrie wanted to fuck him.

Right, ignoring that part. He should probably bathe before the guards came back.

Banner was blithely eating the last of his breakfast, but politely turned his back. “That’s the only tub.”

“Oh, great. No pressure.” Not that he wasn’t up to the task, of course. He’d never had any complaints in that area. Still, one’s people and homeland on the line didn’t make for the most
arousing of circumstances.

By the realms why was he thinking about this? He dunked his hair under the water and found one of the soaps, lathering himself up. He would go, he would say no as graciously as he could, and then he would come back here.

Alone. With Banner.

“I really shouldn’t be giving any kind of women advice,” Banner was saying. “I had one of the most beautiful women in the world and a professional seductress try and get into my pants and I literally did not notice until it was too late. I’m not competent at this.”

Thor dunked back under the water. It would probably be a hell of a lot of fun. He hadn’t been with a woman since Jane, and with her he had to be very, very careful of his own strength. But an woman who could throw him?

Sex here did seem to be less of a big deal than it was on other realms. She’d been here for ages, maybe it was the same as a sparring match. Maybe it would be horribly rude to say no. And besides, he’d had the shittiest few days in his life recently, what was the harm in trying to find a little good in the middle of it?

The guards came back with an outfit more robe than anything else. It was appallingly, eye-searingly multi-colored, but did at least have pants. Banner chuckled. “Tony would have paid a million dollars to see that.”

“Your alter ego lounges around in a sarong and tribal necklaces, don’t judge.” The oil smelled very pungent, but he’d obligingly rubbed it into his chest, which was now shiny. “Well. Wish me luck, I suppose.”

“Have fun!”

Thor sighed and went with the guards, down the long hallway and through a twisty maze of halls, stairs and an elevator, to a much nicer part of the palace. They stopped at a door that look indistinguishable from all the others and knocked. It slid open and one of the guards waved him in.

Straightening his shoulders he nodded to them and stepped into the room.

Sitting in chairs, both reading books, were Syn and his brother.

“Um,” he said, as the door closed behind him. “I was... summoned.”

“Told you he’d put the oil on,” Loki said, not looking up from his book.

“I never doubted you, darling, I just said it was childish.”

Loki looked up. “Hello, brother. Sorry about the ruse.”

“Ruse?”

“Brun!” Syn called. “Your present is here.”

Now Thor was annoyed. “What the hell is going on?”

Brun came out of a different door, behind him and to the left. She looked him up and down and frowned. “Why are you wearing pajamas and smell like salad dressing?”
“I was told you had requested me for your. . . use.” His ears were growing hot.

“Loki wanted to talk to you,” Syn said. “We didn’t think anyone would believe me sending for you.”

“I made him pose as me and make the request,” Brun said. “Because I was hungover. Clearly a mistake. I apologize.” She tipped her head back and looked up at him, an odd smile on her face. “I prefer my conquests voluntary.” But then her eyes did a slow perusal of him that heated something other than his ears. When she looked back at his face, there was something like regret in expression, and little bit of a charge in the air.

At least until Syn piped up again. “If you two would like some alone time I assure you Loki and I can entertain ourselves. We did request Thor for the whole day.”

She wheeled around and sauntered over to a chair. “The walls are thin.”

“He does look like a bellower.” Syn put her book down. “Have a seat, Thor.” Holding up a fruit plate, she added, “Grape?”

Sitting in the empty chair closest to him, he ignored her and focused on Loki. “You wanted to talk?”

“I was hoping we could discuss the logistics of your foolish plan to fight the Goddess of Death.”

Thor sighed and rested his elbows on his thighs, letting his hands dangle. “At this point, I’m focusing more on getting the people of Asgard safe and out of her reach.”

“Does Hela have control of the bifrost?” Loki leaned back in his chair. “Sorry, how would you know?”

Allowing himself a moment to feel smug, he said, “I contacted Heimdal. And no, she doesn’t, he’s taken the sword and has been smuggling citizens out of the city proper to sanctuary. He thinks if we can get the people off Asgard and abandon her there, she won’t be able to reach other realms.”

“Marooning her somewhere didn’t work last time,” Brun said.

Loki waved a hand. “No, no. One problem at a time.” He looked at Thor. “Marching that many people over the very long and very exposed bridge is going to require a lot of cover. It can probably be blown up once they’re through if needs be.” He grinned. “We’ve done that before, haven’t we? I have a vague memory.”

Thor tried hard not to smile back, he wasn’t sure he succeeded. “I don’t have my hammer anymore. We’ll need to think of something else to do it.”

“That’s a quandary. I was not bestowed any mystical weapons.”

Across from him, Brun huffed and hauled herself out of her chair without a word, and stomped out of the room.

Loki watched her progress, then looked at Syn. “Was it something I said?”

She shrugged, popping a grape in her mouth. “Maybe she has a big bomb in her room.”

Thor felt his brows go up. “Oh, you’re going now?”

“Hypothetically,” he replied. “I’m brainstorming.”

“Mmm. Destroying it might be complicated. As you said, we’re talking about moving a large amount of civilians. I think planning a distraction might be a bigger priority.”

“See, you need me because you don’t think diabolically enough. Everyone goes through, and then someone stays behind to close it. They’ll have to. And then they’ll be there for her to take the sword from. You need the distraction, to get them across. And then you destroy the bifrost so she can’t follow.”

“At his point my team consists of me, Heimdal, Hulk, and, hypothetically, you. That limits my opportunities for complex planning.”

Brun came back, and plunked a carefully wrapped sword with an ornate hilt down on the coffee table between them. “This’ll do it.”

He stared at it a moment before he recognized it—entirely due to his childhood obsession with the Valkyries. “That—is that the Dragonfang?”

“It is,” she replied, sitting back in her chair.

“I didn’t know your sword had a name,” Syn commented.

Thor reached out, almost afraid to touch it. “It was carved from the tooth of a dragon from a different dimension. It is nearly as old and storied as Mjölnir.” He looked up at Brun. “Carried by the leader of the Valkyries.”

She hunched her shoulders. “Yes, well, it’s not going to kill Hela, but it’ll be stronger than the bridge.”

“It certainly will be.” He couldn’t decide whether to look at her or the sword. In the end, it seemed safer to focus back on his brother and their planning. “All right. Now. Distraction.”

“The big green beast? I’d certainly find that distracting,” Loki offered.

“Wait, back up,” Brun said. “How are you getting off Sakaar? Heimdal opens the bifrost and you’re announcing your arrival with fireworks.”

“Heimdall said this place is surrounded by doors.”

“He must mean the worm holes,” Syn said. “Usually they just spit things out, but going through the other side would work. You’ll need a ship.”

Brun tilted her head back. “Best bet would be the one just outside the city. Lands on Xandar. You’d be back on Asgard in . . . 18 months?”

Thor shook his head. “Heimdall said to go through the biggest one.”

Syn and Brun exchanged a look. “The Devil’s Anus?” they said in unison.

“For the record, I didn’t know it was called that.”

“You’ll need a good ship,” Syn told him.

“Mine would get torn to pieces,” Brun said. “Only person on Sakaar with ships that can handle
that is the Grandmaster.”

There was a pause, then Thor noticed Syn poke Loki. He sighed. “I may have stolen a few of his access codes. Including one to his hanger.”

Brun looked at him. “Do you just steal things for sport?”

He shrugged. “I don’t mock your hobbies.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll figure out which is the best one to steal. We’re only going to get one shot.”

Thor looked at her. “We?”

“If you fly out of here in one of the Grandmaster’s ships, anyone left behind associated with you is going to get melt-sticked.”

“There’d be no evidence you were involved.”

Syn munched another grape. “You’re expecting logic from a lunatic.”

“Give me a couple hours to do some recon,” Brun said. “And then we can meet again.” She reached out and touched her sword and then looked up at him. “I don’t know. Maybe I owe Hela a sword in the gut.”

He smiled. “I’ll be sure you get the chance.”
Once a respectable amount of time had passed, they sent Thor back to his room and Brun went to go do her recon. Loki excused himself, claiming he was going to go see if there was anything in the armory he could lift. He was fibbing a bit, but she let it slide. If she didn’t let him get away with a small lie now and then, this was never going to work.

Though given the insane mission they were planning, maybe she didn’t need to worry about that.

Brun came back first. “So they only two ships that have been safely through the Devil’s Anus are big cruise ship and...” she sighed. “The sex boat.”

Syn made a face. “Oh, I wouldn’t want to be the person flying either of those.”

“The sex boat is faster,” Brun said. “Easier to get out of Sakaar.”

“If he’s evacuating a city, the cruise ship holds more.”

“It doesn’t hold a city’s worth. They’ll have to go through the bifrost. Though to what realm, I have no idea.”

Just the idea of Asgard and the bifrost and the realms made Syn’s scar ache. “So,” she said, trying for a calm tone. “You’re going with him.”

“If we help him, I don’t think we can stay. Any of us.”

She was almost certainly correct. Grandmaster was big on guilt by association. That did nothing to stop her strong and instinctive desire to not go. She absolutely did not want to help Thor. Or go to Asgard. Or fight the evil bitch who had stabbed her. She could think of no way to say it without sounding like a petulant child, however.

“Hela is as likely to kill us as staying is,” she said instead.

“If that’s true, then it’s at least a better death.”

Syn crossed her arms. “Your Asgardian is showing, my love.”

She sighed. “Apparently I haven’t forgotten it as much as I thought.”

“I suppose he is very persuasive in his bright eyed earnestness.”

Brun closed her eyes. “You’re making me feel ridiculous.”

“We’re about to go restart a fight I thought we left behind millennia ago. I think making you feel ridiculous is well within my rights.”

Her eyes opened again. “We?”
She threw up her hands. “Well if you’re going I’m going! I just reserve the right to be pissy about it for a while.”

Brun hugged her tightly, then murmured, “Can you pause being pissy for a few to convince Loki to come?”

“Are you sure you don’t want the overly earnest puppy to try first?” she grumbled.

“No, I think that’s stirring up childhood sibling rivalry instincts and making it worse.”

She sighed, but nodded. “I’ll talk to him.”

Brun leaned back and looked at her seriously. “If you really want to stay, I will stay. We’ll face the meltstick together.”

The offer alone smoothed some of her feathers. “I don’t want to go,” she told her. “I don’t want to set foot in Asgard, I don’t want to help Odin’s son, and I sure as shit don’t want to go up against Hela again.” She sighed, feeling heavy and stuck. “But this place was always temporary. Much as I tried to carve a life here it’s not. . . home. Perhaps if we succeed where we failed all those years ago, we’ll get a chance to find that.”

“That sounds like a very appealing goal.”

It sounded like an extremely unrealistic one, but neither of them were going to say it out loud. “I will talk to Loki, but can’t promise anything. We are forming an attachment, but he is what he is. If his brother isn’t enough to convince him, I don’t know that I am.”

“Many men are more easily persuadable naked than dressed.”

She stroked her chin. “I do like being naked with him.”

“At the very least, you could go have some good pre-battle sex. What with the whole ‘probable death’ angle, might as well get a little enjoyment in.”

“I remember that being very fun, as well.” She sighed and sent out a little trickle of magic to find Loki. “He’s in his room. I’ll go talk to him.”

“I will summon my ‘evening entertainment’ and brief him on the rest of the details.” She chuckled. “I tell the guards not to decorate him this time.”

“Oh, but it was fun.”

She grinned. “Maybe I’ll tell them to make him look as gladiatorial as possible. They might dumb enough to give him weapons. At the least they’ll put his full armor on.”

Syn laughed. “That’s probably the most useful.” She glanced around their suite, feeling an odd pang of regret to be leaving it soon. “I’ll go get Loki. We can have food brought in and discuss the finer details of this idiotic idea. And one of us should try to get Banner up here as well.”

“He can come and go freely when Thor’s not down there. I’ll call him before dinner.”

“It’s nice to have some sort of plan.”

Syn went down to Loki’s rooms, trying not to pay to much attention to her roiling emotions. But when she stepped inside, he put his arms around her without a word. They were going to have to talk about this, but she didn’t want to. And then he kissed her so she didn’t have to.
By the time they actually made their way back to her place, Banner was sitting on the sofa, and Thor was standing next to the chaise, divesting himself of what looked like four people’s worth of battle gear.

“The guards were adorably enthusiastic,” Brun called.

“They’re probably scared of disappointing you,” Syn replied.

“Food will be here in 20 minutes,” she said.

They really didn’t have enough seats for this many people. She nudged Bruce to one end of the sofa and patted for Loki to sit on her other side. He smiled pleasantly. “Hello Bruce.”

He gulped a little and looked at him. “Hey. So. Last time I saw you, you were trying to kill everybody. Where you at these days?”

“It varies from moment to moment.”

Brun reached over, grabbed the staff in Thor’s pile of gear, and poked Loki in the leg with it. “Don’t be a jerk.”

He opened his mouth to reply and Syn settled her hand on his leg, digging her nails in sharply. His mouth wisely snapped shut.

“Okay,” Brun said once the food had arrived. “There’s a ship down in the bay called the Commodore. It’s round and bright orange and impossible to miss. Someone goes and steals it—probably you.” She waved at Thor. “Since you’re not supposed to leave. I’ll take Syn and Banner out with me.” She looked at Loki. “If you’re going, go with your brother. If you’re not, I suggest you make yourself scarce tomorrow.”

Loki nodded, apparently not committing to one option or the other.

“Taking the ship out without authorization is going to be noticed,” Syn said. “We’ll need something to draw the guards away and minimize pursuit.”

Thor tipped his head back and smiled. “I have just the thing.”

“You’re going to set the beast loose?” Loki asked, drawing a glare from Bruce.

“No. We’re going to start a revolution.”

Syn found the idea of arming the gladiators and freeing all the slaves absolutely delightful. That their last act out the door would be disrupting the Grandmaster’s unsettling empire. Perhaps some good would be left behind.

The escape and revolution would start early tomorrow morning, and everyone was to get a good night’s sleep.

Banner went back to his room, but Brun suggested Thor stay, to streamline the morning. “He can use my room,” Syn offered, standing with Loki.

Brun hugged her tight. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Sleep well,” she told her. Loki was waiting patiently by the door, uncharacteristically quiet. She tucked her arm into his elbow as they walked down to the hallway to his room.
Once inside, he said, “If the revolution is successful, there will be a power vacuum.”

Ah, there it was. “Almost certainly.”

He turned towards her. “We could make quite a life for ourselves.”

She crossed her arms. “So you’ve decided the answer to your hypothetical?”

“No, I’m contemplating the options.” He sat on the chaise with the broken arm, and looked up at her. “I was hoping you’d contemplate them with me.”

“I’m going to Asgard,” she said quietly. “I had hoped you were coming with me.”

“You hate Asgard,” he said.


He threw up his hands. “Then why are you going?”

“Because I love Brun. I lost two brothers to Hela. I will not send my sister to face her without me.”

He stared at her. Exhaled forcefully. And then he looked away. “Can’t fault you for that.”

She watched him a moment. “You like your brother a great deal more than you let on.”

He shifted uncomfortably and said, “Sentiment.”

Gliding over, she perched carefully next to him. “Come with us. The more of us go the better our odds.”

“Maybe I’ll move the survival odds from negligent to highly unlikely?”

She smiled and shrugged. “It’s something.”

“I’m really not the heroic type. I don’t care about glory I can’t enjoy.”

It didn’t surprise her. And she had told Brun it wouldn’t work. “I understand.”

He turned and looked at her, his eyes studying her face. “Do you? Because sometimes I don’t know if I do.”

She paused, considering how to answer. “My brother, Boe, was quite a lot like yours. Loud, brash. Loved a good fight or a good hunt. Brutal warrior but a very good man. Kind, way down deep in his bones. He would have been a terrible king.” He’d died in battle only a few years after their father. Boe had been a good general, but he’d never had a chance to be king. “I learned to fight from the time I was young. We were at war and Asgard had made no secret of their plans of conquest. I am a good fighter. Fast, clever. Much the way you are, I imagine. But I was in my element off the battlefield. Planning, scheming, seeing all the angles.” She looked at him. “Every so often, you want to be your brother, because you’re not comfortable being you.”

“I’m not even kind to the lower layers of my skin.”

Running her fingers along the back of his hand, she wished she had had the chance to hear how a Jotun had ended up a son of Odin. She wished a lot of things.
“I like you,” she said softly. “I don’t quite understand the pull I feel towards you, but I don’t fight it. I would have liked to know what we could have become.”

“If we stayed. . .” he started, and then he shook his head. He pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t stay here.”

“I know,” he murmured into her shoulder. There was honest grief in his voice.

She stroked his cheek, his hair. “If this is our last night, I don’t want to spend it dreading tomorrow. I want to enjoy every inch of you.”

His arms tightened, and then he said, “We should start early so you can still get enough sleep.”

Twisting in his arms, she curled a hand behind his head and drew him down for a kiss. “Yes. Let’s start right now.”

Syn felt his magic flutter across her skin, and all their clothes were gone. It was a very convenient little trick of his. He pulled her closer, into his lap, and his hands went wandering.

They had been together only a few times, really. But already they seemed to know each other inside and out. He knew exactly where to stroke, how hard to grip and bite. He was rough when she needed him to be, gentle when he wanted to tease. She loved his big hands and his cool, pale skin and the filthy things he whispered in her ear as he slipped two fingers inside her body. Sometimes he made her wait, but this time he let her come when she wanted to, just from how he touched her. He kissed her breast and murmured, “There will be more.”

The promise sent a shiver through her. He tugged her thigh and she shifted, straddling him. He arched up and she pressed down, taking him to the hilt in one motion. She moaned, gripping the back of the chaise, arms caging him. “That’s right, dear heart,” he told her. “Ride me.”

How could she possibly resist? Her mouth found his in a rough kiss and she started to rock, up and down, hips rolling. His hands roamed her skin and his magic danced over her. Nothing had ever felt as good as this, as them. Her magic rose to meet his, bouncing pleasure between them.

Her orgasm built quickly and she let herself go, closing her eyes to focus on the climb. He had promised her more, promised her all night. His fingers stroked her clit and his magic twisted something deeper and suddenly she was coming, shuddering around him. He groaned and she felt his magic flicker, then his body relaxed as she melted into him.

She buried her face into she curve of his shoulder, slowly uncurling her fingers from the back of the chaise. Which she had twisted slightly. They had utterly destroyed this poor thing.

Loki actually turned to look at it. “Mmm. Bed?”

“Seems a good idea. It’s proven itself rather sturdy.”

He stood with her in her arms, carrying her back to his bedroom. “We could probably trash the place for all it matters.”

She ignored the little stab of emotion that caused. “That sounds like a worthy goal.”

They made a mess of the bed, too. Then they curled up for a while, her head on his chest, both lost in their thoughts.
“It’s funny,” he murmured eventually. “My appearance is glamour. You’d think you would see blue when you look at me.”

She trailed her hand along his chest slowly. “Nope. Not even a hint of blue.” She pressed a little kiss over his scar. “You must truly believe you’re Asgardian.”

“I don’t understand. I know that I’m not.”

“Magic isn’t always about logic, mo cuisle. It’s about belief and intent. You know you’re a Jotun, but in your heart you don’t believe you are.”

He was still and quiet for a long moment. “I still call Thor my brother when you are touching me.”

Shifting, she propped up on an elbow to look at him. “Family has nothing to do with blood, Loki. I call Brun my sister and she’s an Asgardian. But she is my sister, as sure as Boe was my brother and Thor is yours.”

He sighed heavily. “I suppose then I must go defend my homeland.”

She froze, staring at him. “What?”

“And anyway, if I don’t go, all I’ll do is worry.”

Relief flooded her, making her bark out a laugh. Then she launched herself at him, raining kisses all over his face. He laughed, trying to catch her to kiss her properly.

“Thank you,” she said softly, resting her forehead on his.

“Can we try to not go out in a blaze of glory? I appreciate the idea of trying to save the populace. I mean, I governed them for two years. They’re good people. Leave, destroy the bifrost, fine. But I don’t care if Asgard itself burns and I’m not dying to save it. And neither are you if I can help it.”

“Alfans are quite against blazes of glory,” she assured him. “I prefer to die old in bed surrounded by grandchildren. Or concubines, depends on my life choices I suppose.”

He laughed. “Your imagination sounds like a fun place.”

“I like to think so.” She stroked his hair back from his face, feeling just and unbearable amount of affection for him just then. “I’ll watch your back and you watch mine. We’re both good at surviving.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he told her.

He laid back and she went with him, settling on his chest. His heartbeat thumped lightly under her cheek. “We should get our rest.”

“Big day tomorrow. Lots of killing.”

“Mmm. Stealing ships. Revolution. Trip through a worm hole. Very exciting.”

She could feel his breathing slow, and he murmured, “Goodnight, love.”

“Sleep well, mo cuisle.”
Syn and Loki and Banner left, and Brun went to get herself a drink. “You want one?” she called to Thor.

“Yes, thank you.” He sighed and tipped his head back. “Seems the time for it.”

She poured two strong ones and brought them over. “Since we’re probably going to die tomorrow?” Sitting on the other end of the sofa, she held one glass out to him.

Taking it, he smiled grimly. “Yes. That.”

She clinked her glass against his. “I hear Valhalla’s nice this time of year.”

“I suppose if I get there I will get the chance to yell at my father for this whole mess.”

Brun chuckled. “Line forms to the left.”

“Yes, I imagine we’ll all have to wait until my mother is done with him first.”

“I, too, would be quite mad if I learned my husband had a surprise oldest child he’d locked in the basement and told no one about.”

“And then saddled his other children with dealing with her after he conveniently died?” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. It was a wound that was still raw.

She touched his arm. “Every family has its squabbles.”

He laughed at that. “I’m not sure all of them risk ending the world as we know it.”

“Well. Royalty. Your family can’t even manage to use unostentatious forks.”

“Our forks were perfectly normal,” he grumbled, taking a swig of his drink. She shook her head and got up to get the bottle for easy refills. In the silence he said, “Thank you for coming.”

She walked back to the sofa, refilling her drink and then his. “I thought Sakaar was a good place to be, to . . . to drink, to forget, to die eventually.” She gestured at him. “To hide, as you said. But I can’t hide anymore.”

“I guess we are going to wreck this place when we leave.” He took a breath. “If we survive you’ll certainly be free to find a new place to hide.”

Brun studied her drink like it held the mysteries of the universe. “Surviving is scarier than dying. Maybe because I know how hard surviving is.”

He nodded. “Even if we succeed, most of my people are dead and my home will be forsaken. It doesn’t feel like much of a victory.”

“Man, that line in Valhalla is just going to be so long.” She’d been on many a battlefield, probably more than him, and black humor was the one absolute constant.

It made him laugh, at least. A real one, that seemed to fill the room. He lifted his glass as if in a toast and knocked his drink back. She imagined for a moment having known him in a different life, when he’d laugh like that often. And she had no idea where the conviction came from, but
she was suddenly certain he was nothing like his father.

She lifted the bottle to refill his drink. “Also. Our people.”

“Apologies. Our people.” He smiled and shook his head. “A Valkyrie. I had to come to the end of
the universe to meet a Valkyrie.”

“And you’ll even get to fight with one. I’m a bit sad I don’t have my armor anymore. It was
worthy of a fight like this.”

“White,” he said. “With a blue cape. At least in all the pictures.”

“More silver than white,” she told him. She looked over at him. “We had kind of a tradition, the
night before the battle. Clear the air and make amends so you can die with clean conscience.”

“I already apologized for the things I said.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Not everything is about you, your majesty.”

He ducked his head. “Forgive my interruption.”

“Well, I guess it also sort of is about you. But I’m. . . sorry I enslaved you and sold you to a crazy
despot.”

He blinked, then laughed again. “Every relationship has its squabbles.”

She took a drink. “And I’m somewhat sorry I let you think I was going to use you as a sex toy.
And let your brother request that ridiculous outfit. I didn’t know about the oil.”

“In retrospect, I should have expected something. You don’t seem the oiled and perfumed type.”

“No, no, no, no. Not even in women.” Brun looked over at him. “You could have refused.”

“I was going to. And then I wasn’t. Then I was.” He shrugged. “I don’t recall where I was when I
walked in the door. The sight of Loki pretty much sent all such thoughts from my mind.”

And that was the thing that got her, and she let out genuine laughter of her own. “You looked so
embarrassed. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s far from the worst trick he’s played on me, I assure you.” He glanced at her. “Did make more
sense in the end, actually, seeing as I didn’t even think you liked me much.”

“I didn’t.” Brun swallowed the last of her drink. “But even when I wanted to kick your teeth in,
I’d have fucked you in a heartbeat.” She blinked down at her drink as soon as she said it. That had
been. . . unnecessarily honest.

It had clearly surprised him, his brows had all but hit his hairline. “I- The feeling is mutual.”

She turned her body so she could see him better, and could feel the air in room change. They
stared at each other, until she said, quietly, “We’re probably going to die tomorrow.”

“So everyone keeps telling me,” he agreed.

“You wanna sleep alone your last night?”

“I do not. Do you?” His voice had gone down half an octave. She was such a sucker for a voice
that rumbled.
In lieu of an answer, she stood up. She scooped the bottle off the coffee table, and turned back towards him. Then she held out her hand to him. He seemed to study her a moment, first her hand, then her face. They he broke out into a truly ridiculous grin and stood, grasping her hand tightly. She loved the speed with which he could go from intent and hot to this kind of adorable. It was enough to motivate her to kiss him.

He made a sound a bit like a growl, wrapping his arm around her waist and hauling her up against his chest. The kiss was surprisingly slow, a gentle but thorough exploration of each other. But it scorched her down to her toes. Curiosity and attraction melted into lust and need over the course of that kiss.

Finally, he lifted his mouth a fraction of an inch and rumbled, “Bed?” In a voice at least two octaves lower than it had previously been. She felt it. She pointed, and then she let him carry her so they could keep kissing.

He kicked her door in and she heard it crack, but it didn’t really matter much now, did it?

When he set her down beside it, she reached up and undid the fastenings at his sides. Asgardian armor had the fiddliest buckles, something she hadn’t remembered until she had to operate them again getting him out of this after the fight with Hulk. Though it was much easier with him now helping her lift the back and chest piece up over his head.

He dropped it to the floor, and she spread her hands on his chest, tracing the contours of his muscles. He really was quite perfect. Not a mark on him, not even a bruise from his fight with Hulk. “You know,” she said. “I’d have won our fight if you’d had a damn shirt on.”

“Someday I hope to test that,” he told her, finding the fastening of her top so he could peel her out of it. It didn’t go up as easy as his had—she had to wiggle a little and then it got caught in her hair.

She laughed when then finally got it off, and then said, “Your optimism astounds me.”

He shrugged easily. “Everything’s worked out so far.”

Brun reach up to take her hair down, feeling his gaze on her as acutely as a touch. “You call being stuck on Sakaar ‘working out’?”

“I’m currently seeing the positive side of it.”

She trailed her fingers down over his abs, to the waistband of his pants. She found the buttons and popped them one at a time. “I’ll give you that.”

He stayed very still as she did the buttons. Before she could shove them down, he hauled her close, kissing her. One big hand flattened on her back, stroking her skin and tangling in her hair. She wrapped her arms around his waist, her breasts pressed up against his chest. Intimate contact. The kiss got hotter and deeper, and she slid her hands down beneath the back of his pants. He had a really nice ass, too.

Another rumbling laugh that shot right though her. He shifted her back so that he could work a hand between them, cupping her breast in his hand. His fingers were rough, hand huge. He shaped and teased her, tugging the nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

She had the space now to slip her hand around and into the front of his pants. He broke the kiss a little to suck in air when she wrapped her hand around his cock. She sucked on his lower lip as she stroked him and he swelled under her touch. You could make a man crumble like this, if you wanted to. Sometimes it was more powerful than wielding a sword.
With a ragged breath, he managed to ask, “So you don’t want it slow?”

She shoved the fabric out of her way so she had the space to touch him freely. There was no part of this man that was small. She rubbed her thumb over the head of his cock, spreading the little bit of moisture there. “I am doing this very slowly,” she told him.

Grinning, he tugged her nipple again, drawing it into a peak. “Are you now?”

“Mmhm. I’m still doing my recon.”

“I see.” He leaned in and kissed her hair. “Very important to know the lay of the land before you storm the castle.”

“May need to go slow,” she murmured, kissing his mouth. “Wind up good if you’re going to fit.”

He sucked lightly on her lip, grazing it with his tongue. “I’ll see to it. Haven’t lost a woman to it yet.”

That made her laugh again. She couldn’t recall the last time she’d laughed this much during sex, and she still had her pants on. She swayed into him, and then she kissed his throat, his shoulder, his chest. “So, question.”

“Mm?”

“How steady is your balance?”

“I would consider my balance well above average.”

“Good. Don’t fall.” She sunk down to her knees, dragging his pants down his legs as she went. He’d tensed when he’d realized what she was doing, and growled when she took him in her mouth. Mostly she just wanted to taste him, but this—this was really how you made a man crumble.

To his credit, he stayed standing, though his hips rocked now and then when she sucked particularly hard or got inventive with her tongue. His fingers threaded through her hair, surprisingly gentle, all things considered. She looked up and met his gaze—there was something unbearably arousing about eye contact at this particular moment, and heat pooled low in her belly. He must have felt it, too, because he finally tugged her hair a little. He was self-contained, and self-controlled and she wanted it all stripped away.

She kept at him and got another tug, this one almost hard enough to dislodge her. When he said her name in warning, it was a rumble so low she almost couldn’t make out the words. She dug her nails into his thighs, trying to encourage him to give in. He shuddered and his grip on her hair was for a moment actually painful. She sucked and swallowed around him as he came.

His legs wobbled dangerously, but he stayed standing, hips arching as he rode out his climax. The next time he tugged her, she let him peel her off his now sensitive cock. “By the Tree,” he gasped, looking down at her with bright eyes.

She grinned, standing slowly and feeling immensely proud of herself. She came close enough to whisper, “Do you need to sit?”

“I think that would be wise.” He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off her feet, backing up two steps to collapse onto her bed, with her still pinned to his chest. She held his face in her hands and they kissed for a while, while he stroked his hands over her back and caught his breath. She’d get up in a minute to take the rest of her clothes off, but right now this was really nice.
She'd get up in a minute to take the rest of her clothes off, but right now this was really nice. She let him roll her onto her back, because he then slid to the end of the bed and undid her boots. One hit the floor, then the next. Then he unbuttoned her pants and slid those down, letting his fingertips drag along the skin of her thighs and calves. She pushed up on her elbows to watch him touch her, anticipation curling tightly inside her.

With the pants off, he retraced his path, cupping her legs in his big palms. He pressed gentle kisses at random intervals. Here her right ankle, there her left calf. His hands slid to the inside of her thighs and pressed, spreading her wide, and the kisses continued, the side of her knee, the top of her quad. Then, finally - finally! - he pressed a wet, open mouthed kiss to her sex, licking long and slow at her folds. When his tongue found her clit, her eyes fluttered closed and she fell back against the bed. It was good, so good, the kind where you were helpless to do anything but feel. She got lost in it—he had his fingers inside her now—but she could hear herself whimpering, "Please, please, please." She wasn’t a woman who begged, but right now she’d give him anything to stop.

"Patience," he murmured, the rumble of it vibrating through her. "You requested proper preparation." He added a third fingers, hooking the tips towards her belly and stroking deep into her.

She felt a stretch—he had big hands—but in the best way, and her body clenched on him. "I... I can’t. . ." "You can." He lapped at her again, slow, then fast. Then he closed his lips around her clit and sucked, fluttering the tip of his tongue against her.

The sound she made was low and desperate and entirely involuntary. She’d been trying to tell him she couldn’t hold on anymore, but then maybe he didn’t want her to. Maybe he was trying to break her, like she had him. Her legs shook and he held them still, but it was too much and she was already gone. The world narrowed to nothing but him and the blood rushing her ears and the pleasure filling every last part of her.

He stroked her through it all, even as she calmed, gently petting her. When she could breathe again she opened her eyes to find him propped up on an elbow, watching her. She felt... shattered. So she said the only thing she could think of, which was, "Thank you for not making me stand."

He grinned and chuckled, bending to kiss her stomach. "Perhaps some other time. You’d look breathtaking writhing against a wall."

It was a crazy idea that they’d do this again. But right then she wanted it to be true so badly. Her voice caught when she said, "It’s a date."

"Good." He kissed her stomach again, then moved up her body until he could kiss her mouth, arms braced on either side of her head, hips tucked between her legs. He was hard again, she could feel him pressed against her.

She arched up a little. Somehow, even after that, she still ached. "For now, how about you fuck me?"

He didn’t answer with words so much as an agreeable growl. Then he rocked his hips forward, the head of his cock breaching her folds. He was ridiculously big and it had been a long time since she’d been with anything with a dick. But he’d gotten her good and wet and soft and so he slid right in. He still paced himself, taking her in several short, gentle thrusts before bottoming out.
He was watching her intently, and grinned at him and whispered, “Good. More.”

Kissing her lightly, he shifted his legs to get more leverage and obeyed, sliding almost entirely out before thrusting back in. Again and again. She lifted up, meeting him each time. It was a different kind of good, but an addictive one. Steady friction and a slow, intense rise.

He pressed light kisses to her cheeks and jaw, keeping the pace. When her hips started to get impatient he obligingly quickened, groaning a bit. One hand reached down and palmed her thigh, tugging it up higher. It made things shift inside, and it felt a little different. A little better. He hit some spot inside her he hadn’t before, and she gasped, it felt so good. “Like that,” she told him. “Don’t stop,” she added, as heat and tension and pleasure began to twist inside her.

She only needed a little more, and somehow he knew. He released her leg and got his hand between them. His fingertips slid over her clit, and like that she was gone. It wasn’t the same dramatic explosion, but a warm pulse of pleasure, slow moving and intense. She bit his shoulder.

It earned her another one of those growls. His motions got quicker and rougher for a few moments and then he shuddered, burying himself deeply as he released. He slumped down on top of her, heavy and hot.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him so he wouldn’t move. She liked his weight on her. For just a few moments, she felt safe. He sighed deeply and held her, kissing her shoulder and neck. Eventually the moved, getting themselves under the covers and tangling their limbs together. “You really think we’ll survive,” she asked him.

“I like to hope,” he said, stroking her back. “It does no good to go into battle assuming you’ll lose.”

“I can’t find fault with that point.” She sighed. “Maybe we will win. Kill Hela. Have some post battle sex in the throne room.”

“Well there’s a pubescent fantasy I’d all but given up on.”

She lifted her head and squinted at him. “The woman in your throne sex fantasy was a Valkyrie, wasn’t she?”

“Are you going to rescind the offer if I say yes?”

“I’m going to go down to the palace armory and see if I can dig up an old uniform.”

He grinned widely, looking very adorably little boy again, and kissed her. “See how nice it is to have plans?”
Chapter 10

Loki and Syn were up early. He dressed for the battle he had for some reason agreed to go to, and then they went to meet the others at her and Brun’s rooms. It was quiet and no one was up yet.

Syn sighed in annoyance. “I hope she’s not too hungover.” She went to Brun’s door and banged on it. “Rise and shine, time to kill Hela.” She turned to Loki. “Go wake your brother up, I need to go in there and dress.”

Obligingly, he went. Perhaps he could dump some water on Thor, that was a fun way to shock someone awake. One last childish prank before the end.

As it turned out, the room was empty and untouched. “Erm. Syn?” he called. She appeared at his side a moment later, and looked at the room in surprise. She didn’t say anything, so Loki added. “I feel like it’s 50/50 whether she killed him or took him to her bed.”

“Shall we lay a wager before I peek into her room?”

Across the suite, Brun’s door rattled and then was finally yanked open. He heard her call, “You’re the one that kicked it,” before she stepped out. She stopped short when she saw Loki. “Uh. What are you doing here?”

“He’s coming with us,” Syn told her. The utter delight in her voice was a reminder as to why he had agreed to do so.

“Ah. Then I need pants.” She was wearing only a robe. She grinned and wiggled her eyebrows at Syn, and then ducked back in. Before the door closed he heard, “You definitely need pants.”

“About that wager,” Loki said.

“It’s too late to be fair,” she told him. Kissing his cheek, she added, “I’m going to change into my armor. Be right back.”

Loki wandered into the sitting room, and a moment later Brun’s door opened, and this time Thor came out. He grinned and said, “Good morning, brother.”

Loki smirked. “So she did make use of you after all.”

“The use was mutual, I assure you.”

“You are grinning like an idiot, you know.”

“I’m sure I am.” He strolled over and took a seat on the couch. “You decided to come.”

Loki shrugged. “Sometimes I surprise myself.”

Syn’s door opened and she stepped out, dressed in armor of midnight blue leather and silver metal with a bluish tinge. Her hair was pulled back in a single, simple braid and she was carefully fidgeting leather pads over her palms. “Are you two playing nice?”

Loki leaned back to look at her and whistled. “I like that outfit.”

She smiled. “It’s almost as complicated to take off as yours.”
“I will take you up on that,” he replied with a grin.

Across the room, Brun came out of her room, also in armor—but the standard kind like she wore to work. She stared at Syn, too. “I didn’t know you’d saved that.”

“I have my moments of sentiment,” she muttered, looking down at her hands again. “This is new.” She tapped the metal breastplate. “Much good it’ll do me.”

“There was no saving mine,” Brun said, sounding a bit sad about that.

“I can make you look like you’re wearing Valkyrie armor. . .” Loki offered.

She seemed to consider it, glancing at Syn, who said, “It won’t show up to me. But it will to everyone else, including you.” She smiled and it was hard to read. “We’ll have come full circle.”

“I don’t need fake armor,” she said finally. “But thank you.”

He inclined his head as graciously as he could, putting a hand on Syn’s hip as she leaned on the couch arm next to him. “Are we ready to proceed?”

“Syn and I will go get Banner,” Brun said. “And we’ll see you boys on the other side. Commodore. Round and red.”

“Understood,” Thor said.

Syn leaned down and kissed Loki lightly. “I will see you in the sky.”

He cupped the back of her neck to hold her and kiss her better. “Be safe.”

She nodded. “Always.” For a heartbeat she looked sad as she touched his jaw. Then it was gone and she straightened, looking at Brun. “Shall we?”

Brun nodded and gave them a little wave, likely directed at his brother, and then the left. When they were gone, Loki said, “So, piracy?”

“Yes.” He hopped up and they strode out of the room. Loki knew where the hanger was, but they took a longer, indirect route to give their women time to start the revolution and draw the guards away. It also included a brief trip to the armory to find them some proper spaceship stealing weaponry.

“I don’t have codes for in here,” Loki commented. “I think Syn took the whole system down.”

“Handy.” Thor reached up and plucked a large gun off the wall. “You two seem quite serious.”

“It’s. . .” he frowned. “It’s complicated.”

“It usually is.” He gestured with the gun, offering it and Loki nodded, catching it when Thor tossed it.

“It hasn’t been going on very long,” he said. But did feel a pull towards her. One he couldn’t explain and didn’t understand—only that she felt it too. It had gotten stronger since they’d shared magic at the gladiator fight. As if their magic had tangled and was now somehow connected. An idea he found utterly terrifying. “Extraordinary circumstances do strange things to relationships.” He paused. “As you clearly know.”

“Finding someone to share a bed with before a battle is a proud, time honored tradition.” He inspected another gun. “You two are something other than that. I know you’re not going to
inspected another gun. “You two are something other than that. I know you’re not going to
Asgard for me.”


Slinging the gun up onto his shoulder, Thor turned back to him. “No one ever accused you of being simple, brother. Shall we?”

“Indeed.”

They fought their way through guards that weren’t hard to kill and through doors that weren’t hard to crack. Why was he doing this? Was it really for Syn? For Thor? For himself? It was on it’s surface the stupidest thing he could possibly do, of all his choices. Maybe it was a mistake.

They were in an elevator going down to the hangar when he said, “The thing is, I’d really be better staying on Sakaar.”

“I agree,” Thor said.

Loki looked over at him in surprise. “You do?”

Thor shrugged. “Come on, this place is perfect for you. It’s savage, lawless, chaotic. Brother, you could do great here.”

It was probably a very honest assessment of him. Thor had known him the longest, perhaps he saw him the clearest. Still, somehow it stung. “Do you really think so little of me?”

Turning, Thor looked at him a moment, as if he was surprised by the question. Or hurt. “Loki, I thought the world of you. I thought we were going to fight side by side forever. But at the end of the day . . . you’re you and I’m me. Our paths diverged a long time ago.”

Loki swallowed and looked away. It was stupid. This whole thing was stupid. There was no reason for him to go on this crazy quest and probably die. “You’re right. It’d probably be best if we never saw each other again.”

“Well, it’s what you’ve always wanted.” He gave him a little pat on the back. “Hey. Let’s do ‘get help.’”

He let Thor use him as a damn projectile—admittedly a successful ploy from their childhood—despite it being humiliating. He was just a useful accessory to his operation, any way. His brother was desperate. Once they’d gotten in the system, all he needed going forward was any warm body with a gun.

“There it is,” Loki said, pointing at the ship. “Red, round.”

“Excellent.” They strode over to it and Thor hit the button to open the cockpit. “Thank you for your help,” he said, turning back to Loki. “And for - so far - not betraying me.”

He held up his hands. “Because you assumed I would.”

“I am capable of learning from prior experience. I trust you, you betray me. Round and round we go.” He sighed and Loki saw a tinge of regret, though not enough to change his mind. “Is there anything you want me to tell your lady?”

He didn’t know why he was angry now. Maybe he did. But Thor was so ready for him to run that he’d already started assuming it had happened. There couldn’t be that much written on Loki’s face just because he’d been thinking about it. “I’ll give you that whole incident in New Mexico was
fairly inexcusable. But it’s not like betrayal has been a regular occurrence.”

“Fine, perhaps betrayal is too strong a word. But trickery? Mischief? You used to shapeshifter into a snake and stab me.”

“That was barely a scratch. And mother tanned my hide for it. And you throw me at people.”

“My point is, I learned my lessons. I tried to grow up. Tried to change. But I don’t think you ever do. You had a chance to be a hero and you’re choosing to stay here.” He shook his head. “You’ll always be the God of Mischief. But you could have been much more.”

It hit a nerve, enough to make him angry. He’d died for Thor once and it hadn’t gotten him any credit. He didn’t need to do it again. “Go be a hero. I’ll be alive.”

Thor inclined his head and climbed into the ship, closing the hatch. The hanger door opened and then he was gone.

*

Flying mystery spaceships was not Thor’s favorite thing. He’d been happy about Loki coming along because Loki was a better pilot.

He probably shouldn’t have been surprised how it turned out.

It didn’t take long at all for the Grandmaster’s guards to start trying to shoot him down. Brun saved his ass before sidling up underneath him and launching Banner through the open doors.

“Where are the guns on this thing?” He yelled over the radio.

“There aren’t any,” Syn said, also appearing through the lower hatch. “It’s a leisure ship, the Grandmaster mostly uses it for orgies.”

Banner had been leaning on Thor’s seat and immediately yanked his hands up. “What?”

“Better not touch anything,” Thor commented.

He noticed Syn look around and could pin point the exact moment she realized Loki wasn’t there. The grief and disappointment was immediately smothered under a mask of cool detachment. “Do you want me to fly?” she asked, as if they were discussing the weather.

“Please, yes,” he said. She had to be better than he was. The bank she did after he slid aside knocked both he and Banner halfway across the ship as she threaded sideways between two buildings.

Brun’s ship pulled ahead of them, drawing fire because she had the guns to fight back. The fighter chasing her fired a shot and one of her engines, and it erupted in fire and smoke. Then another shot hit and the whole thing exploded.

Thor and Banner shouted in unison, but Syn just sighed and bumped the stick up a bit. A moment later Brun appeared on the side of the cockpit window, hanging on to the edge.

“Get inside!” Thor shouted at her, a little whiplashed at what he’d just seen.

“In a minute!” she yelled back, climbing on top of the ship.

“Go help her,” Syn told him, still in that conversational tone. He supposed it was a benefit to have your pilot be unflappable.
He clapped Banner on the shoulder and ran for the back, jumping through the hatch and onto the ship beneath them, ripping off a bit of hull. The was absolutely insane—they were engaging in hand-to-hand combat with fighter planes, and it was working. They leapt from one ship to the other, tearing out things and sending them crashing down. Watching her fight, and wield that sword, was kind of magnificent.

They ended up on the same ship, just as Syn set off some fireworks, causing the last ship chasing her to crash. Thor ejected the pilot of the plane they were riding and Brun grabbed hold of the throttle, aiming to get them back under the Commodore. The smile she gave him sent heat up his spine.

He really hoped he lived long enough to bed her again.

They leapt up into the ship at the same time, nearly colliding when they landed. She grinned up at him. “Hi.”

“That was impressive,” he told her.

She patted his arm. “You’re not half bad yourself.” She lowered her voice. “At any number of things.”

Grinning, he leaned down to whisper something lascivious in her ear when Syn yelled, “We’re coming up on the Anus! Stop flirting and hold onto something.”

Brun sauntered up to the front and stopped. “Where’s—?” She looked at Syn and Syn looked back at her, and then she said, “Wait. Turn this thing around, I have a murder to commit.”

“He is who he is,” Syn said, looking back at the wormhole that was now taking up most of their view screen. “I knew when we parted this morning I might not see him again.” Her jaw clenched and she nodded to the other chair. “Sit, I need a co-pilot.”

She cast a glare at Thor—how Loki being Loki was his fault, he didn’t know—and then sat in the other seat. “Buckle up, both of you,” she barked.

He and Banner obediently dropped into the other seats and fastened the harnesses. They were now pointed vertically, heading up into the vortex. The ship began to shudder and he saw Brun’s hand’s tighten on the wheel and Syn flicked some switches.

There was debris in the hole, bits of other ships and other space detritus. The women did their best to dodge it, but a few pieces hit, rattling the frame. He thought he heard one of them curse, but his ears had popped and everything sounded a little fuzzy.

He must have drifted out, because he opened his eyes and they were approaching Asgard. He stood up to stand behind Brun’s chair. “I never thought I’d be back here,” she said as they cruised up the Bifrost. The city was devastated—all you could see in any direction was destruction, ruined buildings and fire. Heimdal had been brutally honest about the situation, but he still hadn’t been prepared to see it.

Feeling a little sick, he put a hand on Brun’s shoulder, and she reached up and closed hers over his.

After a moment of silence, Syn asked, “Where do you want to land?”

“There’s a heat signature in the mountains,” Brun said. “People clustered together. Probably your refugees.”
“Drop me at the palace,” Thor said. “I’ll draw Hela away.”

Brun turned all the way around in her seat to look at him. “And get yourself killed?”

“The people trapped down there are all that matters.” It was the reason he had come, to stop the slaughter of his people. “While I’m dealing with Hela, you three need to get them safely to the gate.”

He could see her wanting to argue with him, but didn’t. Because he was right. She sighed and turned around. “We should raid the armory while we’re there,” she said finally. “We need guns.”

Squeezing her shoulder, he leaned down and pointed at the palace. “Head for that balcony, right there.”

Syn perched it on the edge, more hover than landing, and Brun and Thor clambered down to go in search of weaponry. She found herself a very large cannon. He made a probably ridiculous but very quick detour. His father never threw anything away.

They hauled the cannon up onto the ship, and Syn used her magic to melt/weld it into place.

“Now the ship has a gun,” Brun said, sounding rather pleased.

Syn had moved back to the pilot’s seat and was showing Banner how to fly it, in case she needed to help with the evacuation. This was the perfect time. Feeling a bit nervous, Thor put the bundle he’d dug up onto the floor by Brun’s feet. “I, uh, found this. In the armory.”

She reached down to touch it, and he could tell by the look on her face it was, in fact, Valkyrie armor. Then she looked back at him, and she smiled. Her, “Thank you,” was very quiet.

“You’re welcome.” Tapping the side of the ship, he stepped away. “Good luck.”

“Hey,” she said said. “Don’t die.”

He grinned, because it was a very her sort of sentiment. “I’ll do my best.” That got him a grin back as the ship lifted off. They did have plans.

Walking through the wrecked throne room was surreal. Particularly the smashed ceiling revealing his father’s murals to his blood-soaked conquests. He recalled after the attack on New York, Loki telling Father he was just doing what Father had done, and how mad that had made him. Now he knew why.

Making his way to the throne, he picked up his father’s scepter, hefting in his hand. Any magic it might have had seemed to be gone, lost when Odin had died. Now it was just another rod of gold. Probably stolen from some other king.

He sighed. That wound was going to need to wait. He had a job to do, a lot of people were counting on him to do it. Steeling himself, he sat in the throne he had once coveted and now hated, and began to bang to scepter on the floor.
Chapter 11

Syn was trying very hard not to think or feel. The second was easy, after realizing Loki hadn’t come, she’d felt grief and fury and then a strange sort of numb. There were here and they had a job to do. If she survived that, she could feel everything she needed to.

The heat signature from the mountains had moved, so they followed it to the long bridge that led to the Bifrost gate. There they came across a rather interesting tableau.

“Right,” Syn said after they’d had a moment to take it all in. “Drop me in front of the zombie army, then go see how the giant wolf fares against your shiny new cannon.”

“You want me to come with you or help her with Fido over there?” Banner asked. “Hulk’ll probably do better with the dog.”

“Get the dog,” she agreed. “I don’t have to defeat the army, just buy enough time to get the civilians to the gate. Fenris is currently between them and it.”

“Got it. Good luck.”

Brun swung down low enough for her to leap out, and strafed the zombie horde on her way out. A moment later Syn heard Hulk roar.

Now she was standing on a bridge, enemy rushing towards her... and a bunch of Asgardians behind her.

The one living person in the enemy’s ranks, a bald man in dark armor, called out, “Who in the bloody realms are you?”

“I am Syn the Truthful,” she replied. “The last queen of Alfheim. This is your one chance to surrender.”

He stared at her a moment, then glanced back at the skeletons behind him. “I don’t think they really do surrender.”

He stared at her a moment, then glanced back at the skeletons behind him. “I don’t think they really do surrender.”

She heard rustling behind her and glanced back to see the men and women closest to her pulling out swords and stepping closer to her. Such is what her life had come to. Fighting with Asgardians instead of against them.

The nearest man caught her eyes and nodded and she nodded in return, looking back to Hela’s men. “So be it.” She slammed the end of her staff on the bridge, sending out a streak of gold light, knocking some of the skeletons off the bridge into the water below. Then she rushed forward, the Asgardians at her back.

It had been a long time since she’d been in a proper battle and not just a bar brawl or junkyard scuffle, but it turned out she had not forgotten how. In the middle of a battle you were only aware of your small corner, of the space around your body and the enemy you were trying to kill. With no idea what was going on elsewhere, you had no idea if the lines were collapsing and you were fighting for nothing. The bridge shuddered and there was an explosion somewhere behind her. She didn’t hear Brun’s guns any more, but she couldn’t look.

She didn’t see the man come up fighting beside her until he called, “Syn the Truthful.” He decapitated the zombie in front of her with an utterly enormous sword. “I am Heimdal the Gatekeeper.”
“Pleasure to meet you,” she replied, ducking a blow before grabbing a warrior by the jaw and tossing him off the bridge. “And your not at all ridiculous sword.”

“Hulk and Fenris broke the bridge, we won’t be able to cross. Some of them are coming out of the water back there, Brunnhilde is holding them off.” He paused to fight another zombie and Syn allowed herself a moment of relief. Then he asked, “How far behind you was the other ship?”

She frowned at him and shook her head. “There was no other ship. It’s just us.”

Heimdal sighed. “I have lived to see Ragnarok but not that boy grow out of his theatrics.”

She’d heard the Gatekeeper spoke in riddles but this was hardly the time. Before she could ask what he was on about, a zombie went flying past, a blaster hole in his back. They both turned to see where it had come from, to find a familiar looking Kronan standing there. “I’m Korg. This is Miek. We’re gonna jump on that space ship and get out of here. Wanna come?”

Syn and Heimdal glanced at each other, then in the direction Korg had pointed, to see the Grandmaster’s cruise ship descending out of the fog. Loki was standing in the open door, wearing a ridiculous horned helmet, arms spread wide. “Your savior is here!”

For a moment, Syn completely forgot about the battle raging around her. “You have got to be kidding.”

Heimdal gave a sigh that sounded like he had been alive and annoyed by Loki since the beginning of time. The ship lowered down so the ramp was level with the bridge. People began streaming on, and she could see the helmet moving through the crowd. He seemed to be shaking hands. Then he strode through the crowd towards them. “Welcome home!” Heimdal called. “Saw you coming.”

“Of course you did,” Loki replied, but he hadn’t taken his eyes off Syn.

She was furious. And hurt. And deathly happy to see him. But she wasn’t ready to let him see any of those. So she crossed her arms and nodded at his head. “With a helmet like that I’m surprised you ever doubted you were Asgardian.”

He grinned at her. “I grabbed it when I popped inside for something else.” He moved his hands back and forth and what looked to be the Jotun Cask of Winter appeared in his hands. “I may get a little blue.”

“I’ll warm you back up again,” she promised.

The zombies seemed to be multiplying—there looked to be as many on the bridge as they’d started with. Loki give her a small, genuine smile, and then turned to blast them with ice.

“Save your magic,” Heimdal told her, squinting up at the tower. “We may need it to keep Thor alive.”

She followed his gaze, but could see nothing. “Not going well, is it?”

He shook his head, and swung at some more zombies. But no sooner had he done it than the sky swiftly darkened, and an enormous storm of lightning bolts struck the tower. There had to be hundreds of them, the light becoming so bright you couldn’t look at it. She turned away, in time to see Loki smile.

When she looked back, lightning was arcing from the palace towards the bridge. It got closer, she
saw it was Thor, bloody and battered, trailing electricity behind him. He struck the bridge in the middle of a pack of zombies, sending them flying.

“Well then.” Syn twirled her staff and send a blast of magic, shattering the frozen enemies in front of her. She tossed a grin at Loki. “Now it’s a party.”

* There was clearly a lot of magical fighting going on on the other side of the crowd—Brun could see the lighting and the ice and the flashes in different colors. She didn’t have magic, so she was killing her foe one at a time, with a sword.

She was very grateful for the armor Thor had found, from a morale perspective, but most for protection. It was ancient but still as good as she remembered.

When the last of them was down, and no more crawled over the edge, she turned to see the last of the Asgardians climbing up the ramp. Beyond them, she could see the others fighting the last of the zombies on the other side. She started towards them, and got as far as where Loki was standing, catching his breath and holding his helmet in his hand. Brun grabbed the helmet and whacked him with it.

“Ow!” He snatched the helmet back, looking wounded. “You’re welcome for the rescue party.”

She pointed her sword at him, and he actually stepped back. She appreciated Dragonfang’s legend right then. “If you hurt her, I will disembowel you.”

He spread his arms. “I came back.”

“Don’t fight children,” Syn said, walking past them. “We’re not done.”

Thor was coming their way, still crackling a bit with electricity, breathing hard. His right eye was missing and he was bleeding from a few wounds. Nodding to Loki, he said, “You’re late.”

“You’re missing an eye.”

Following Syn’s gaze, Brun let out a breath. “Hela’s coming.”

The four of them lined up, facing the lone figure strolling down the bridge. “Hit her with a lightning blast,” Loki told Thor.

Exasperated, he replied, “I just hit her with the biggest lightning blast in the history of lightning. It did nothing.”

Brun glanced over shoulder at the ship. “We just need to hold her off until the ship is clear.”

Thor shook his head. “It won’t end there. The longer Hela’s on Asgard the more powerful she grows. She’ll find a way to get off. Hunt us down. We need to stop her here and now.”

There was a moment of silence while they watched her come. She was like a monster in a nightmare. Not hurrying, not running. Just slowly approaching, knowing there was nowhere they could go.

“I’m not doing get help,” Loki said finally.

“What about your ice?” Thor asked.
“If your lightning didn’t kill her I don’t see what my ice would do.”

Syn sucked in a sharp breath. “Ragnarok.”

“Yeah apparently,” Loki said. “Along with everything else.”

Thor turned. “No, no, that’s it. We’re trying to prevent it, we need to cause it.” Brun looked at him, a little concerned the eye injury had come with a head injury, but he kept talking. “Asgard is a people, not a place.” He looked at Loki. “Surtur’s crown is in the vault.”

“Huh,” Loki said. “You know that’s nuts, right?”

Brun side-eyed Syn, who looked like she was struggling with her truth sense trying to get her to say something. It was probably a bad time to express joy about blowing up Asgard.

Finally, she got out, “The prophecy of Ragnarok does say Odin’s children cause it. Not stop it.” The solemnity of the moment was a little undermined by her shit-eating grin.

Thor seemed content to ignore it, gesturing at her. “See, your woman agrees with me.”

“I will go put the crown in the flame,” he said. He held out a hand to Syn. “Come with me.”

She hesitated, glancing at Thor and Brun. “You’ll be all right?”

“I don’t trust sticky fingers there alone in the vault,” Brun said.

“You know I was down there earlier and I didn’t—”

“Go!” Thor barked. Hela was getting closer.

Syn grabbed Loki’s hand. “Stab her once for me,” she told Brun before they turned and ran back down the bridge to where she had landed the Commodore.

Thor flexed his hands and glanced at her. “Shall we?”

She looked up at him, wanting to say something before the got impaled—she had no illusions about how this was likely yo go. Like how last night she’d fallen asleep genuinely, honestly happy for the first time in more years than she could even remember. “Hey, listen...” she started.

One of Hela’s swords came flying at them. Thor caught it, electricity crackling out of his skin. He gave Brun a fast smile, then took two steps and went flying at Hela, shocking her as he landed.

She really hated that woman.

It was a fast, brutal fight. Brun did manage to stab her a time or two, little good it did. She and Thor got flung around like rag dolls, but between the two of them, they held Hela’s attention. It was a relief when she heard Thor yell for Heimdall to take off.

She was crawling towards her sword, Hela at her heels when Thor yelled. “Enough!”

Hela paused and turned, giving Brun the chance to curl her fingers around the hilt of Dragonfang.

“If you want Asgard it’s yours,” Thor said, sounding exhausted.

“Whatever game you’re playing, it won’t work.” She started sauntering back to him. “You can’t defeat me.”
He nodded, panting a little. “No. I know.” He hooked a thumb back towards Asgard. “But he can.”

The roof of the palace exploded, a fiery giant bursting forth. For the first time, Hela faltered. Never one to pass up an opportunity, Brun took two running steps and leapt, thrusting her sword through the woman, pinning her to the bridge. For Eir. And for Syn. And for every other life she had taken or ruined.

When Brun was clear of her, Thor lifted a crackling hand and slammed it into the bridge, cracking it and sending Hela shrieking into the sea.

He offered her a hand to help her up, and she took it because she was pretty beat up and definitely bleeding somewhere. “You know how many years I hung on to that sword?”

Rubbing her arm, he seemed to be checking her for wounds. “It served you well.”

“And I put it exactly where it belonged.” She performed a similar visual inspection. He looked about as great as she felt. But nothing looked mortal. She lifted a hand on instinct to touch his ruined eye and thought better of it. “Nice lightning.”

“Thanks.” He glanced back at the now burning city. “We should probably go.”

She looked up at the sky, seeing no sign of the Commodore. “I’m not leaving without Syn.”

He nodded, as if he expected nothing less. There was a roar and Hulk leapt out of the water and onto the bridge next to them. He huffed and nodded at them, then spotted Surtur and hunched, clearly getting ready to leap again.

“Hulk, no!” Thor shouted. “For once in your life don’t smash.”

He turned back and looked at them incredulously. “But... big monster!”

Brun pointed up to the cruise ship. “Space ship, up there. Go get on.”

He squinted, then nodded and took a running leap, jumping for it.

Thor watched him go. “If Syn and Loki don’t come out, that was our last chance at a ride.”

“You can ride your lightning,” she told him.

“Don’t know if you can.” He grinned suddenly. “Might be fun to find out.”

She thought there was a good chance it would end with her electrocuted or at least singed, but it became a moot point. The Commodore came screaming out of the wreck of the palace and hurtled right for him.

Thor made a face. “He cannot fly at a normal speed.”

Brun watched it do a barrel role. “That’s her,” she replied. It swung down and opened one of the doors, just as Hela rose from the sea on some kind of pointed rock fragment. She ignored them, though, heading for the giant orange monster ravaging the city. Brun leapt for the ship and caught the edge of the open doorway. She pulled herself up and yelled, “Come on!” down at Thor.

He waited a moment, looking out at the city. She imagined it was hard to turn away from your home burning. Then he seemed to shake himself and ran to the edge of the bridge, throwing himself at the ship. She helped him haul himself in as Syn—who was in fact flying—closed the
doors and took off. They sat on the floor of the bay, catching their breath.

Thor reached over, wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and hauled her against his chest, kissing her hair. His heart was pounding and he was bloody and sweaty. But he was still oddly comforting.

She found herself laughing. “I can’t believe we’re still alive.”

“See? Things just have a way of working out.”

Brun leaned back so she could see the cockpit, and called out, “I ran the bitch through.”

“I shall kiss you when I get a chance,” Syn called back.

Hopefully heal her, too. Things were starting to hurt. She felt like an old woman standing up. The she held a hand down to Thor. “Your majesty.”

He grasped her hands and she pulled him up. It was a testament to how much pain he must be in that she actually has to put some effort into it. They walked up to the cock pit to see the cruise ship beneath them as Syn docked with it.

Standing behind the pilot’s seat, she felt his hand curl around hers, and she squeezed his fingers. “Now starts the hard part.”

The ship shuddered as they locked on and Syn eased her hands away from the throttle. They were all silent a moment, lost in whatever their own thoughts were. Then Thor straightened and squeezed her hand. “Come on. Let’s go figure out what’s next.”

* * *

Loki had not actually intended to steal a gigantic cruise ship. But it was the only other one he’d been told could get through the portal—he was not referring to it by its ridiculous name—and so that was the one he took.

But he had no problem taking credit for the coincidence that did in fact save the day. If he’d gotten on the Commodore instead of having that stupid fight with Thor, they’d all be dead.

All of that was something to bask in later. One thing ruling Asgard had taught him was that there was that each tiny bit of glory was surrounded by an enormous pile of administrative hassle.

His brother and and Brun went down to the cargo bay where the people were, to watch Surtur destroy Asgard. They looked really beat up, so that was probably for the best.

“The Grandmaster kept this ship stocked and ready to launch,” Loki said to Syn as they walked off. “I looked at the schematics and there is an infirmary.”

She nodded. “We’ll need a supply list, figure how much rations we have. Then we’ll need to get a head count from Heimdal and start assigning living quarters. It looked like it was mostly families, that may help us.”

“I don’t know how well provisioned they were in that cave. I expect they’re all hungry. And can be fed in the cargo bay. You see to the wounded, I’ll see to the food?”

“That sounds like the best use of our skills.” She looked up at him and for a moment he thought she might say something. There were probably a great many things she wanted to yell at him for. This was not the ideal time for it, but he probably owed it to her to listen. But instead she just
sighed and shook her head before heading towards the cargo bay.

He realized pretty quickly he needed help, and went down to the cargo bay to find Heimdal and collect a group of volunteers to carry and distribute the food. After everyone was eating, he sat Heimdal down to make a ship’s manifest, and then managed to herd his brother upstairs to the Grandmaster’s fancy suite to at least clean up if he wouldn’t let Syn heal him “until everyone else is healed”, which could be days given how much of her magic she’d used during the battle.

But first, he needed to bring her a large meal.

He found her in the infirmary, setting a broken bone on one of the men who had helped them fight. Every cupboard was open, so she seemed to be using mundane supplies as well as her own power. Still, she looked exhausted, with purple half circles under her eyes.

He made his way to her side. “I brought you supper.”

She nodded and finished fastening the sling on the man’s arm. “Can you tell anyone waiting that I need ten minutes?” she asked as he hopped off the table.

“Of course,” he said. He looked like he might hug her, but a glance at Loki made him change his mind to a gentle squeeze of her arm, before letting himself out.

Syn sank down into a chair and Loki put the tray of food next to her. It took a moment of him glaring at her for her to lift a hand and take a bite.

“I know you’re mad at me,” he said. “And I’m sorry.”

She took another bite, watching him as she chewed aggressively. Swallowing, she said, “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

He sighed. “Thor and I got into it while we were stealing the ship. And I just... did what I do.”

That didn’t seem to surprise her at all. She ate a bit more. “I am very upset with you,” she told him. “But I’m also very glad you’re here.”

“Even though you wouldn’t let me take the Tesseract.”

“I am capable of keeping you from being stupid, even when angry with you.”

“All I’m saying is, you stole something from down there. How is that different?”

Her fingers curled around the heavy gold amulet hanging around her neck. It was in the shape of a nine pointed scar, with a big blue stone in the center. “I didn’t steal it. Odin stole it from me. I was taking back my rightful property.”

“The Tesseract was mine. At one point.”

She sighed deeply. “Because that’s exactly the same thing?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have brought it up. I just came to get you to eat something.”

“I appreciate the food,” she told him, in her stiffly polite courtier tone.

After a moment of silence, he said. “I meant it. When I said I was going to come along. I know you know that.”

“I do. I was very happy that you were going to come. I was looking forward to fighting at your
side.” She met his eyes. “And then you weren’t there, and I hadn’t been able to say goodbye. And for some reason, the very worst part was, I wasn’t surprised.”

That hit him as hard as it had when Thor had said nearly the same thing. “Could be I’m just a duplicitous bastard that nobody should trust.”

She tilted her head, brow furrowing a little. Then her mouth twisted into that smile that drove him mad. “Lying,” she said softly.

He looked away. This woman made him feel utterly naked sometimes. “I am technically a bastard,” he said. “My biological parents weren’t married.”

There was the creak of leather and when he glanced back he found her standing in front of him. “I’m still mad at you,” she told him solemnly. “But I’m going to hug you now.”

He stood up, because he’d never wanted anything in his life as much as he wanted to hold her right then. She reached up, curling her arms around his neck and pressing against him. She’d removed the metal breastplate and pauldrons, but was still in her leather armor, from throat to wrist. But she was warm and supple in his arms, as she always was. Under the scent of blood and sweat and antiseptic he could smell her scent.

He pressed his face into her hair and whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

Her arms tightened. “I know you are. It will be all right. We’ll talk more. I won’t be mad forever.”

“We are probably going to be stuck together on this boat for a while.”

“I imagine so.” She leaned back and he was pleased to see she looked a bit better. Tracing the line of his jaw with her fingertips, she said, “I have to get back to work. But when you find yourself somewhere to sleep, make sure there’s room for me.”

“I was really hoping you’d say that,” he replied, feeling something settle inside him. “And not only because we’re really short on space.”

“If I’d decided to make you suffer a bit more I was going to just sleep in here.”

“We can just sleep,” he said. “But I’d like it if you were next to me.”

“Tonight, at least, all I can promise is sleep.” She pressed a hand to his chest. “But it is not in my nature to pretend. It’s quite close to lying. And I prefer sleeping beside you.”

He put his hand over hers. “I got us the second nicest room on the ship.”

“Why Loki. You’ll spoil me.” She stretched up and kissed his cheek. “Now shoo. I have more patients lining up and I’m sure you’ve got a to do list.”

“I’ll be back with dinner,” he told her. Her magic used a lot of energy.

“I’m certain I’ll be here.”
Chapter 12

Once everyone got quarters—somehow they managed to not have anyone sleeping in the cargo bay, Loki sat down to crunch some numbers about their journey and their supplies. He almost forgot about dinner.

When he finally got back to the infirmary he found the long line gone, the door cracked. Syn was sitting at the desk in the corner, slumped over, sleeping with her head pillowed on her crossed arms. From what he could see, she had been doing her own inventory of the medical supplies, as well as notes on some of the refugees who had seen her.

Loki crept into the room to touch her shoulder gently, hoping she wasn’t going to startle and hit him. She jumped a little, jerking upright, but didn’t strike out at him. She blinked up at him owlishly, then sighed, sagging back into the chair and rubbing her eyes. “Dinner?”

He set the box down in front of her. “And then I think it’s time for bed.”

She nodded, and picked up the mug of soup he’d brought her. “Yes. I’ve seen the worst of them - save your brother, Heimdal said Brun was going to help him - everyone else can wait.”

“I sent her with one of the medical kits. I figure she’ll call if she can’t handle it.”

“There’s nothing I can do about the eye.” She rubbed her face, drinking more soup. “The rest of it can be handled with a kit.” She tore off bits of the bread roll on the tray and dropped it in the soup before finishing it off. “I think I’d like to prioritize sleep now.”

He held his arms out. “Come on, I’ll even give you the better pillow.”

She stood and stepped into his arms, letting him tuck her against his chest. When she swayed as if she might fall asleep standing up, he lifted her, carrying her out of the infirmary.

“You’re my favorite pillow,” she murmured.

“Well, then, you can have me all you want.”

She made a sleepy, content noise, resting her head on his shoulder. He carried her all the way up to their room, which kind of looked like a Midgardian bordello from the era when he and Thor thought going down and visiting them was entertaining. There was lace and tassels and acres of scarlet velvet in every direction.

Syn roused a bit when he put her on the bed, enough to look around and laugh uproariously. “One of us should be charging the other.”

“I think this belonged to Vedi, the Grandmaster’s favorite mistress.”

Smiling fondly, she started to unbuckle her armor. “I liked Vedi. She’s the reason I joined the court. She burned her face and I healed it.” The top of the armor gaped and she tugged it off, over her head. Bruises dotted her torso and back, but he didn’t see any wounds. He found himself distracted by the way her breasts swayed when she leaned down to undo her boots.

“Let me do that,” he said, crouching down in front of her. He’d never get enough of how gorgeous she was.

He got her boots off, taking a moment to rub her feet. Then he let him unfasten her leggings and
slide them down, leaving her naked. She leaned back on the pillows and he fussed the garish red and black bedclothes to cover her.

“Are you injured?” she asked, catching his wrist.

“Not in the slightest. I had the ice, none of them got near me. My worst injury was Brun beating me with my own helmet.”

Her brow furrowed again, fingers sliding along the back of his hand before letting him go. “Why did she do that?”

“Because I hurt you.” He had. He knew he had.

“You might want to avoid her until I can talk to her.” Stretching, she closed her eyes and patted the pillow. “Come to bed.”

“I probably deserve her ire,” he said, standing next to the bed to strip down to his underthings. His leathers had a lot of laces and pieces. “What I don't deserve is you.”

“Probably not,” she murmured, rolling onto her side and cuddling her pillow. “But you’re stuck with me.”

She couldn't say it if she didn't believe it, and somehow so did he. He didn't understand whatever connected them, but he could feel it’s pull. It’s strength. He climbed into bed with her and reached to rub her back. “Thank you.”

She sighed deeply, melting under his hand. “Thank you for coming back,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry I was late.”

Whatever she said next was an incoherent mumble, followed by a snore.

*  

Thor thought the quarters Loki had given him were ridiculous. You could fit an entire extended family in there, not to mention he had no idea what kind of depraved things the Grandmaster did in there.

“What's the point?” he asked. “Welcome to being King of Asgard,” Loki told him. “This is your room. You look half dead. If you won’t take healing, at least take a bath. I have things to do.”

He wanted to ask what he was going to do, but he was already gone. It seemed like he should be helping with things. But he was exhausted and hurting. And while he was a good general and tactician, the logistics of housing and feeding this many people was not in his repertoire. So he shuffled gingerly to the wash room and started his bath.

He peeled off his armor, which was a mess, and turned to look at his back... which contained more stab marks than he expected. Asgardians healed very quickly from nearly any wound, but Hela’s blades were special. They might even need stitching.

Which he couldn’t really do. He couldn’t even see all of them, though he turned in a circle twice trying to figure out how to get a good look at his right side without his right eye. Which also looked terrible.

In the mirror, he saw Brun appear in the doorway, still in her armor.
“I’m starting to regret sending Syn away,” he admitted.

“I don’t have any magic, but I’ve patched my share of battle wounds. You want help?”

“Yes, please. I don’t think my back should stay like that.”

She held up a box. “Loki sent me in here with a first aid kit.” She held up a bottle. “Got this from the bar out there.”

“He’s being very helpful,” Thor said, sitting gingerly on the edge of the tub for her to look at his back. “I’m too tired to be suspicious of it.”

“Syn’s really pissed at him and he’s trying to curry favor,” she replied, and he actually felt better knowing there was an ulterior motive. “Hold on, it’s hot in here.” She began peeling off her armor and putting it on the counter. He watched her a little forlornly. He’d really, really been looking forward to taking her out of it himself.

“I was looking forward to our irreverent throne room sex,” he admitted as she set the breast plate on the floor near the sink.

She turned towards him, now wearing nothing on top but a skin-tight somewhat translucent undershirt. The left side was stained with blood, but not an alarming amount. “I’ve still got the armor,” she said, rifling in the first aid box. “I’m sure I could think of something fun to do to you while wearing it.”

“Mmm, my wounds feel better already.” Running the tap, he used a ridiculously plush washcloth to start wiping down his arms. He could see her hesitate just to watch, and then brought some things over and nudged him to turn so she could work on his back.

“The Valkyrie didn’t have independent healers travel with us. Every woman had to carry her weight in battle. But there was always one or two trained to act as healer after battles.”

“I’ve made my share of field dressings. Though Volstagg was best at it. I hadn’t the patience for the fiddly stuff.” Thinking of his big, boisterous friend cause pain to tighten his heart. He’d been so distracted by the loss of Asgard, he hadn’t had time to think of the individuals.

She was cleaning the cuts and it stung, but that fit his mood. “I didn’t do it much. We had a good designated healer. . . who I happened to be sleeping with. So a lot of it ended up happening in my tent.”

He found himself smiling. “You’re drawn to healers.”

“I am.” She opened a package that made a hissing noise, and then spread something cool and sticky on one of his wounds, and it seemed to ease the pain. “In the interest of full disclosure, I have never slept with Syn.”

“Her decision or yours?” he asked out of curiosity. He didn’t care if they’d been lovers, given that they now called each other sister he’d assumed anything like that was long over.

“I never said anything, and if she noticed neither did she. She’s pretty straight, it was better undiscussed.” She coated another wound with the numbing substance.

He sighed, relaxing a little bit. “That feels good.”

“It’s medicinal glue,” she told him. She kissed his shoulder, then added, “That was me.”
“I can tell the difference,” he told her, smiling a bit. “Would you like me to return the favor when you’re done?”

“The medicinal glue or the kiss?”

“Either. Both.”

She chuckled. “Sounds like a plan.” She was working on the worst wound now, the one just below his ribs that he was lucky didn’t kill him. He hissed as she cleaned it. She kept talking, probably to distract him. “You know, you may not even be the tenth man I’ve been with.”

Distraction was good. He was willing to be distracted. “Banner was a little baffled when you, ah, sent for me. He was unaware you liked men at all.”

“I’m very picky. I like my women varied and my men perfect.”

It took a moment for him to catch up with the implications. “I’m flattered.”

“You own a mirror,” she replied with a chuckle. Almost reflexively he actually looked up at the one across from the tub—they were everywhere—and all he could look at was the bloody mess where his right eye had been.

“I’ll understand if you downgrade me.” He attempted to keep his tone light, but was pretty sure he’d failed.

She looked up, and followed his gaze. “Hey,” she said quietly. She put the tube of glue down and got up, coming around to sit in front of him. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

He tried for a smile, but failed that, too. “None of my battle scars have been permanent before.”

She leaned close and kissed him, more tender than anything else. “I want you just as much as I did yesterday,” she whispered.

Cupping her hips, he tugged her into his lap. “Likewise.”

“You want me more because I had my armor on.”

“It doesn’t hurt.” He pressed a kiss to her breast through the thin shirt.

“Mmm, don’t start that yet. You probably should look at my side and I really need to deal with your eye.”

He sighed, because she was right and he was a little concerned they were both going to pass out before anything fun could happen. He indulged in one more kiss on her throat before letting her up to finish her ministrations. There was only one more wound on his back, and then she came around to hand him the cleanser and glue before turning and lifting up her shirt so he could see the slice in her skin.

It was nasty, but not swollen and had scabbed up. Cleaning it caused it to bleed sluggishly, but it glued together well and a quick check proved it was the only major wound she had. “The armor did its job.”

“I didn’t fight her as much as you.” She looked a him a moment, then pulled her shirt up over her head. He raised his eyebrows and she said, “This is going to hurt and I need you to be still. Might as well give you something to look at.”
He chuckled and braced himself. “I appreciate your sacrifice.”

She worked as efficiently as she could, collecting a pile of bloody gauze on the edge of the tub. It didn’t hurt as much as he’d expected, but it wasn’t comfortable. “I think the eyeball is pretty much gone,” she said gently. “Syn can’t fix that.” He’d suspected as much, that it would be permanent. It got some of the numbing glue, which helped. When Brun was done, she carefully taped a bandage over it. “We’ll find you a nice eye patch.”

“Somewhere in Valhalla my father is laughing uproariously, I’m sure.”

“Oh, he’s way too busy with the Complaint Line to care about this.”

If he could still laugh, then the world wasn’t that bad. “I saw him. When I was fighting her. Right when I thought she was going to kill me.”

“What did he tell you?” She asked, leaning over to turn the taps of the bathtub on.

“That I was not the god of hammers. Mjolnir had only focused my power. And that Asgard was her people, not a place.”

She got up to clean up the gauze and first aid supplies. “Did you know Hela carried Mjolnir once?”

“Not until I saw the mural she uncovered in the throne room.”

“My point is, I think he was right. It’s just a tool, just a channel. In her if magnified evil, in you it magnified good. “

“It was a useful weapon, though. Nice to have something you can use to pin your enemy to the ground with.”

“It was nice having an unbreakable sword.” She felt the water, and then straightened to take off the rest of her clothes. Thor slowly did the same. Boots, then breeches, and underthings. He felt like one enormous bruise, but when he eased his feet into the tub it felt amazing.

He settled against one side. The tub was big enough to have a party in—a thought he didn’t allow his imagination to expand on—and when she climbed in she could fit next to him. The groan she made when she sank down under the water was the same sound she’s made last night when he slid inside her.

They rested in silence a while, letting the hot water do its job. Then he reached over and touched her shoulder, sliding his fingers along her arm. “Want me to wash your hair?”

She gave a little happy sigh. “Sounds nice. Though I’m scared to start opening bottles.”

“Perhaps we should just accept we’re going to stumble on something horrible and get it over with.”

She leaned over to kiss him. “I’m less injured, I’ll go look.” And then, in return for his offer, he got to watch her walk around the bathroom, naked and dripping, bending occasionally to open drawers.

“He called, folding his arms on the edge of the tub as he enjoyed the view.

“I think so.” She brought two bottles over. “This one first.” Watching her climb back into the tub was also enjoyable. He really did want her more than he had yesterday, and not because of the...
“Do I dare ask what it is?” He asked, popping the top and sniffing at it.

She laughed. “Shampoo.”

“All right.” He dumped a handful into his palm and tugged her close, lathering it all over her scalp and down her hair.

She made a happy humming noise, leaning back against him. “I love your hands.”

He kissed her shoulder, running his fingers through the long strands. “I have a great deal of experience with hair care.”

“It was tragic they cut yours,” she told him. “Though I like this look.” She let him dunk her to rinse it, and he thought it was an act of trust for someone like her to allow him to hold her under water. Asgardians were immune to many, many injuries—but they drowned just as easily as the much more fragile humans.

It took a few dunks to get the last of the suds out. “What’s the second bottle?” He asked.

“I think it’s conditioner. Though the label is really hard to read, so it’s possible it’s body lotion. Or lube. But I think it’s conditioner.”

“We’ll cross our fingers.” He dumped some out and it seemed to be the right consistency for conditioner, so he slicked it through her hair as well. “You have lovely hair.”

She sighed contentedly. “Thank you.”

Leaving the conditioner to sit, he slid his hands down her back and around to cup her breasts gently. She shifted to lean back against his chest; she was nearly in his lap. Not that he was complaining. “You got the energy for that?” she asked, dropping her head back against his shoulder and turning to kiss his jaw.

He teased her nipples into peaks before sliding a hand down her belly. “I’m finding this bath very invigorating.”

She wiggled back against him. Now she was in his lap. “Yeah, I can feel that.”

His fingers found her cleft, stroking down between her legs. “Are you too sore?”

She sucked in a breath. “The end will be worth it.”

Her clit was already swollen and ready for his touch. He stroked it in tight circles. “Are you certain?”

“Mmm.” She shuddered, her hip rocking up to his hand. Then she moved, turning around and straddling his lap. She rested her forehead on his and said, “I want to feel good. I want to feel alive.”

Cupping her ass in his hands he pilled her close, the head of his cock grazing her folds. “So do I,” he rumbled, rocking his hips. She kissed him, deep and explicit. He’d wanted to kiss her on the bridge before they almost died, or in the ship after they didn’t. But it was better now, her, alone in the warm water. In the midst of it, she rolled her hips, taking him inside her one inch at a time. She was slick and hot and tighter than last night, likely why she was moving so torturously slow.
Thor kissed her mouth, her jaw, stroked her breasts with a hand, trying to relax her. She set the pace and he was perfectly content to let her. She felt incredible, especially after the day they had had. She finally sank all the way down, and rocked on him. “You do still owe me up against the wall,” she murmured.

“I intend to,” he assured her, pressing an open mouthed kiss to her throat. “I intend to have you in every way you’ll let me.”

“That will make our time on this ship fun,” she said, moving faster, making little gasping sounds every time he bottomed out. He could feel and hear the desperation in her, and he slid a hand between them to touch her. She dug her nails into his arms and begged him for incoherent things.

Pressing a hand to her back, he lifted his hips up to her, changing the angle even as her rhythm started to falter. “That’s it,” he told her. “Come for me, sweet.”

Almost as he said it, maybe because he had, she whimpered, and then her body clenched around him in long, slow pulses. He held her still, thrusting into her hard and fast a few times before his own release poured through him. He shuddered with it, pressing his face into her shoulder.

Brun wrapped her arms around him, holding them together. He held her as tight as he could, the two of them just breathing in sequence. The last couple of days had been the worst emotional rollercoaster of his life.

The water started to cool around them and he gave her shoulder a kiss, getting his feet under him to stand, taking her with him. She made an adorable little squeaking noise as he stepped out of the tub and snagged a towel to cover them. Brun put her legs down, but let him wrap them in the enormous towel. He reached for another to dry her hair. She rested her forehead against his collarbone and let him do it. “This kind of thing doest usually come with casual sex,” she murmured.

“I like to take care of my woman,” he told her. That was probably him admitting this wasn’t casual. But he didn’t think she believed it was, either. Fighting together, facing death together, anything that intense and traumatic, forged stronger bonds than the time involved ought to. Bracket that with some truly extraordinary sex, and they had become. . . something.

Funny that a couple of days ago they’d had a fist fight.

She was using the ends of the big bath towel to pat his back, very carefully drying the wounds without disturbing the glue. She took care of him, too.

With a little maneuvering, they both got dry, or at least dry enough to head back into the main room and collapse into bed. Thor tucked her close, kissing the top of her head as the settled the covers around them. They rearranged themselves a couple of times thanks to their various injuries before finding a comfortable spot. “Thank you for not dying,” she said.

He chuckled. “Well, you did ask me nicely.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little on the short side, but I'm behind in editing and wanted to get it out for you all. Monday's should be better.

Syn slept a deep, exhausted sleep, and woke up alone. She rolled over to look at the empty half of the bed, and could see Loki’s clothes flung over the red velvet divan at the foot of the bed. Wherever he was, he hadn’t gone far.

She stretched and nuzzled his pillow to get a whiff of his scent. Her limbs ached and she was riddled with healing bruises. But it had been so nice to curl up with him, sleep with his arms around her.

She wasn’t sure if she was still mad or not. He was truly sorry for what he’d done, she could tell that. He had surely been expecting her to punish him in some way. Send him away, refuse to share his bed. Perhaps she should have. But those hours when she thought he was gone forever had been terrible. The empty feeling in her chest, the ache around her heart. She’d missed him, far too much for the new, casual relationship they had.

It would worry her, but he seemed to clearly feel it too.

The bed was big enough for four people to sleep in, so it took far too long to get out of it and make her way to the attached bath. She found him in there, with wet hair and wearing an astonishingly ruffled yellow bathrobe.

Choking down a laugh, she covered her mouth. “Oh, my.”

“It’s more comfortable than it looks,” he replied without looking up from the mirror, and she realized he was shaving. Where he’d found the equipment, she had no idea. Oddly, it hadn’t occurred to her he needed to shave. He didn’t have a lot of body hair in general, other than the top of his head and the thatch at his sex. What she remembered of Jotuns, they were similar. Not that she’d seen any naked, but they tended to fight shirtless.

That was probably more thought about the body hair of frost giants than she needed to have first thing in the morning. Giving his arm a companionable stroke, she walked to the tub and reached out to run the water, then went hunting for soaps.

“It’s all very flowery,” Loki commented. “Just warning you.”

“I happen to like floral scents.” She sniffed a few, until finding one that smelled almost like Aflan golden flower, which caused a little pang of homesickness. Still, she poured some into the filling tub and watched it foam up. “What’s on your agenda today?”

“I take it hiding in here with you isn’t an option?”

“It may do for a while.” She turned the water off and slid into the bubbles with a low groan. “But I think they’ll find us.”
“I’ll hide the door.”

She actually didn’t have an argument for that. And the bath was very nice on her sore muscles and bruises. She tipped her head back to soak her hair, running her fingers through it. “I suppose there’s not a lot of urgency, given we’re just sort of drifting in space.”

“There’s still plenty to figure out. We have about ten days of supplies with all these people. We’ll need to figure out where to get more, and how to pay for them, fairly soon. And then where we go from there.”

The tub was large enough to swim a lap in, so she let herself float on her back, watching him shave. “There must be something close by. One of the other realms?”

“Months away, at the closest. And I’ve never been to anywhere outside the 9 realms, aside from Sakaar. Well, and. . .” he drifted off, staring at his own reflection a moment, then he shuddered and shook himself. “Doesn’t matter, we’re not going there.”

That almost certainly had to do with the torture he’d mentioned to Thor and quickly brushed off her questions. Now was not the time to poke, but perhaps at some point while trapped on the ship, she could. He was going to need to learn to share his secrets with her. Even the unpleasant ones.

She sat up to rinse her hair out, combing it with her fingers. “Many different races came to Sakaar. Brun and I have met most of them. It may help when we find somewhere to trade.”

“If we had the tesseract, we could get just about anywhere.”

She stifled a sigh. This again. “That thing was dangerous.” Twisting her hair, she scanned the room for a clip - Vedi had long hair there was sure to be a dozen of them in here - until she spotted one and waded over to snag it. “I don’t know how much you know about the Infinity Stones, but I know enough. You don’t mess with them. Not if you don’t want a target on your back.”

He held up his hands. “I’m just saying.”

“Yes, yes. Just saying.” She pinned her hair up and stepped out of the tub, wrapping herself in a thick, red towel. He had finished shaving and was now just watching her in the mirror as she dried off. The gaze was as heavy as a touch and she felt the pull towards him particularly strongly.

The bath had made her feel warm and languid and washed away most of the stress of the day before. She was no longer on Sakaar. Hela was dead. And while their future was uncertain, in some ways it was the first time she’d had a future in a very long time.

Walking over to him, she slipped between him and the sink, towel loosely tucked above her breasts. “Maybe we’ll find another worm hole.”

He traced the top edge of the towel. “Maybe.”

His touch was almost hesitant, very unlike him. Probably concerned he wasn’t yet welcome. It would kind to reassure him. She pressed a hand to the very obvious bulge in the front of his robe and stroked him through the fine fabric, feeling a flush of pleasure at the way his lids fluttered. “It occurred to me, we didn’t have a chance to properly celebrate our continued survival.”

He kept his eyes on hers, and lifted one of his hands. A little bit of green flared, and then drifted away. She raised her eyebrows in question and he said, “I hid the door.”

She grinned. “Very clever.” With her free hand, she tugged her towel, letting it pool on the floor. It cushioned her knees as she kneeled and parted his robe. He started to say something -perhaps a
protest that she didn’t have to - but she leaned in and ran her tongue down his length and it turned into a growl. She enjoyed the moments he got a little feral.

“You . . . you don’t . . .” Whatever he was trying to say dissolved into a groan.

Their couplings were often rough and frantic, which she enjoyed. It was a product of their odd chemistry. But right now she wanted to tease and pamper him. So she curled her tongue around his head, tasting salt, before wrapping her lips around him and sliding down his length. He was too long to take entirely, but she did her level best, before rocking back and repeating it. She swore he got harder as she worked him.

He had his hands braced on the counter, probably to hold himself upright. But he had magic to use, and so she could feel his hands on her just the same. “Enough,” he growled.

She looked up at him, leaning back slowly, hand wrapped around him. “Did you have requests?” She asked innocently, stroking him.

“Stand up,” he said, an edge to his voice.

She’d intended to suck him to completion, but the look in his eyes all but scalded her. She had a feeling she was going to enjoy obeying him much more. Curling her hands on his hips, she used them as leverage to pull herself up to her feet. “Yes, sir,” she murmured, only a little teasing.

The robe vanished in a shimmer of green, and he was as naked as her. He had her caged in, and when he kissed her he wasn’t gentle about it. She swayed into him, opening her mouth at the first sweep of his tongue. He was very good at this, knowing just how to make her shiver and melt for him. He sucked her lower lip, letting her feel his teeth, and her toes curled on the tile floor.

He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, tugging a little so she’d look up at him. “You are mine,” he told her.

“Yes.” That pull in her chest wouldn’t let her answer anything else, even if she hadn’t had a truth curse. “But you’re also mine.”

His breathing sped up a little bit, and she could see different emotions shift in his eyes. Then he finally said, “I am.”

She smiled and pressed closer to him. “Good.” Biting gently at his collar bone, she added, “Are you going to prove it by fucking me on this counter?”

He lifted her up on the counter in response. “Today I’d give you anything you asked.”

“Oh, the mind reels with possibilities.” Bending her knees, she braced her heels on the edge of the counter, opening herself wide for him. “Come inside, mo cuisle.”

He cupped her thighs in his hands, lifting her a little. He pushed all the way inside her in one smooth motion, filling her up. “What,” he whispered between kisses, “Does that mean?”

She moaned, unable to answer right away. He felt so good moving inside her, stretching her. His strokes were slow and deep, rocking her on the counter. For a few moments she got lost in it, then he nipped at her lip to bring her back to his question. “My heartbeat,” she told him, looking in his eyes.

He reached between them to touch her, fingers sliding over her clit. “I like it.”

The new sensation drew a whimper from her, a shudder of pleasure going through her. She didn’t
have enough leverage to lift up to him, could only lean back and let him do as he liked. The steady pace was driving her higher and higher. She could feel his magic threading through her, teasing parts of her he couldn’t reach.

She had never used magic in sex before him. But it was now instinctive, letting hers rise and flow into him, lighting up nerve endings. She could feel them mixing, blurring, wrapping around them, until she couldn’t really tell his from hers anymore. She was hovering at her peak, just at the edge of tipping over. The things this man did to her.

“Loki,” she whimpered. “Please. Want- I want-“

“I know what you want,” he said, his voice managing to sound strained and haughty at the same time. As if he wasn’t the one doing this to her. As if he wasn’t inside her, wasn’t holding her on the edge like that.

“Then let me -“ She tried to lift into him and felt his magic tighten on her, holding her in place. She let out a cry at the surge of pleasure that caused, body shuddering around him. “Please,” she moaned. He liked when she begged and by the spirits she loved begging him. “Please let me come for you. Just for you. I’m yours. Only you. Only-“

His eyes closed and she felt his body shudder. He never let go until she broke him. The magic holding her let go and the orgasm crashed into her, hard and fast. She screamed as it hit her, drowning her in sensation. Releasing the counter, she wrapped her arms around his neck, trusting him to keep her from falling. He felt like the only real thing in the universe, everything else faded in the waves of pleasure that gripped her. Tight inner muscles spasming around his cock, buried fully inside her, and their magic swirled and danced, drawing it all out, so that she thought it might never end.

She honestly had no idea how they ended up on the floor. As they caught their breath, the ridiculous robe returned, draping over her shoulders.

Stroking his jaw, she dropped soft, clumsy kisses on his face, his mouth. “Good,” she mumbled. “So good.”

“I am very happy to be alive right now,” he told her. She could hear the smile in his voice.

“Oh, so am I.” He tucked the robe around her and wrapped her in his arms, making her feel quite warm and protected.

He sighed a little. “Thor was gone before I really thought about the implications of what I’d done. Including that I’d never see you again.”

Pressing a kiss to his chest, she asked, “How long until you followed?”

“Before I decided to follow? About twenty minutes. Took a lot longer to get this enormous thing going, though. Don’t know if I would have if Korg and his men hadn’t showed up. This engine room requires a crew.”

It made her feel a bit better, knowing he’d come to his senses so quickly. A hasty decision made in anger was a different animal than a plotted betrayal. She tightened her arms and legs around him, pleased to notice he was still buried inside her. “Much as I’d like to, we probably shouldn’t hide in here all day.”

“I’m really poor at ‘should’,“ Loki tried.

“How about Brun will almost certainly come looking for me and finding out you hid the door will
only increase her desire to kill you?”

“Fair point.” He still didn’t move, though.

She pressed a kiss to his throat, trying to decide how much she cared about being responsible. There were almost certainly more injured to deal with, plus finishing inventory in the infirmary. Thor would want to talk to Loki and they’d need to figure out where they were and if there was an inhabited planet of station nearby. There were hundreds of people counting on them and Thor had no experience as a king, whereas she and Loki had both run thriving realms. They’d be useful.

Then he shifted his hips, pressing deeper into her and she shuddered, body clenching. He made a little sound of triumph, repeating the motion and she sighed, resting her head on his shoulder. “All right. Once more, then we get up.”

*

When Brun woke up in the morning, Thor was still out cold. He’d heal better the more he slept, so she left him be. She went rifling through all of the weird outfits in the closets—the Grandmaster liked costumes—to find something to wear. She decimated half a dozen outfits to cobble together something for each of them to wear. Thor was probably going to be showing more skin than he wanted, but it was the best she could do given how big he was.

She draped them on a chair for him, put her chair up, and went out in search of food.

The ration packs had been carefully organized, with a few of the Asgardians in charge of distribution. They happily handed her shares for both her and Thor without comment. “Let us know if you need anything else, my lady.”

She chuckled. “I’m not a Lady. Just a soldier. But thank you.”

“I know a Valkyrie when I see one, ma’am.”

Brun grinned. She’d honestly assumed that the woman had called her that because she was kind of, currently, the King’s Mistress. A description in and of itself that unsettled her, but not enough to stop. “Ah. Well. Thank you.”

He nodded, and it might have been sort of a bow, but she decided to ignore that, taking her food back to the room.

Thor was still asleep, now fully sprawled across the bed, face buried in the pillow. He needed to eat as much as sleep, so she perched on the side of the bed and reached out to rub his shoulder.

He rumbled, sounding amusingly like thunder, and shifted to crack an eye open and look at her. “Mornin’.”

That voice of his. “Hey. I got breakfast.”

“Mmm.” He propped up on an elbow and rolled onto his back. “Thank you.”

“You back is looking better.” She got up and went to eat her meal at the little table. While she did so, she got to watch him get out of bed and stretch, delightfully naked.

“It feels better,” he told her, eyeing the motley collection of clothes she’d put together. “My eye itches like mad, though. I may break down and see Syn.”
“That I don’t think she can fix.”

“She may be able to speed the healing up. I think that’s why it’s itchy.” He fastened something the resembled a kilt and came to join her at the table.

“Oh, I found something attached to one of the costumes.” She dug in her pocket, pulling out the eye patch and holding it out to him.

He took it, turning it over in his fingers, then chuckled. Wryly amused was probably the best reaction to this situation. “Thank you.”

“I want to go see Syn and check on her anyway, so I can send her up to see to you.”

“Thank you,” he said again, picking up a handful of dried fruit. “I should find Heimdall, see what needs doing.”

“I imagine a lot of decision making.” She was eating an indistinct protein bar of some sort. But it was food. “I’m going to see if I can figure out the comm system on this boat, and talk to whomever is flying it. A ship this size takes a good dozen crew just to get out of the hangar, so I’m. . .curious.”

“Curious?” He munched his food. “As to who’s running the crew?”

“Yes. Are there enough of them? Who are they? Is your brother doing some of it with his magic? Is someone just mashing buttons and we’re five minutes from being a giant fireball?” She looked at him a moment. “You’ve traveled by Bifrost all your life, and so have no idea how space ships operate.”

He looked like he was going to argue, then sighed and slumped. “You’re right. Nor do most of the people on board. Feel free to start recruiting anyone you think will be useful. I’m sure there’s an engineer or two in the crowd somewhere.”

“It’s a bizarre position to be in,” she said. “You are suddenly a King, and the Captain of a space ship, when you’ve never been either before. Let the rest of us help where we can.”

“I know. I know. I think I’ll be leaning on my Royal Council quite a lot.”

Brun smiled. “I don’t care what my official title becomes, as long as it doesn’t include the word Concubine.”

He leaned over and kissed her. “I will keep that in mind.”

She patted his cheek affectionately, and left him to finish his breakfast. The computer system was nearly identical to the systems running the Grandmaster’s tower, so it was pretty straightforward to navigate. She located the engine room and went to take a look. She found it manned by a cranky Xandarian named Id who looked about as old as the universe and a crew of gladiators from Sakaar. They had it well under control, but had been working since yesterday morning and she spent 20 minutes arguing with Id about getting them quarters and a relief shift.

“They’ll keep working until the Master allows us to stop.”

Brun rubbed her forehead. “You don’t belong to the Grandmaster anymore. He’s not here, and we’re not on Sakaar.”

“The Master said we were to run the ship until he told us we were finished.” He huffed. “The new Master. We belong to him now.”
Thor wouldn’t tell people they were his slaves even if he did have any idea where the engine room—

Oh. Of course. She sighed. “Dark hair, green cape?”

He nodded. “He didn’t know how the engine worked, but we did. So we work.”

She sighed again, trying to think how to unravel this. Likely they’d been enslaved so long they didn’t know how to be any different and had simply accepted what Loki told them. It might even be that freedom itself was scary. “Did he tell you where the ship was going?”

“To Asgard to rescue his brother.”

“Yes. His brother is Thor, who is the King of Asgard. Now that he is on board, the ship is his.”

Id seemed to process that a moment, then nodded slowly. “He hasn’t given us orders.”

“Not yet. That’s what I’m here to do.”

He squinted at her. “You don’t look much like a King.”

“I’m not. I’m...one of his advisors.”

He seemed to accept that, thank the Tree. “We can’t leave the engine without people to watch it. You find me a second crew and we’ll rest.”

“I will. You may have to train them a little.”

“We can do that.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

My kids are taking turns being on spring break for the next two weeks so I'm not ENTIRELY sure what day of the week it is. I'll do my best to get chapters out in a reasonable manner.

Brun went to the infirmary next, expecting that she’d find Syn there. Because she was apparently lucky, Loki was there too. He actually smiled at her. “Good morning, Brun.”

She pointed at him. “You. Rustle up every Asgardian with engineering or technical experience and send them down to the engine room. Find quarters for the people already down there who have been working for about 30 hours straight and while you’re at it, try to get them to understand they are not your slaves.”

Syn looked over. “Loki.”

He held up his hands. “I forgot!”

“Bad,” she informed him, pointing at the door. “Go.”

He opened and closed his mouth, and then grinned like he was going to try and charm them. Whatever was on their faces changed his mind, because he turned without a word and left.

“At least he’s learning,” Syn said, looked back at the data terminal she was scrolling through. “How are you this fine morning, Brunnhilde?”

“Amused at how cheerful you are,” she said, because she was.

“I had an excellent night’s sleep.”

Brun sat in the chair across from her. “I take it you’ve forgiven him?”

“More or less.” She gave her a significant look. “He’s been very apologetic. It was done in haste after a fight with Thor, and within twenty minutes he was trying to get this thing airborne. We need to talk about his bad decision making. But I’m content he won’t leave me again.”

“Doesn’t mean he won’t hurt you.”

“Of course not. He will almost certainly hurt me again. It’s entirely possible I’ll hurt him as well. But he will also make me feel happy. And safe. And worshipped. And in time, I hope the hurt will happen less.”

Brun nodded and sighed. Whatever was between them was clearly serious and Syn thought it had some legs to it. Even less remained of her old life than she’d thought. “All right. You don’t need me to fight your battles for you.”

“No, but you continue to be a convenient threat when I need to keep him in line.” She smiled. “So. You and Thor?”
Her mouth opened and closed, because honestly she had no idea. “We had a couple of drinks and we were going into battle the next day... It’s a time honored tradition. And I know he’s a man, but he’s gorgeous.”

“He is gorgeous,” Syn agreed. “And adorable in a lost puppy sort of way.”

That made Brun smile. “And really good in bed.”

Syn grinned at her. “They teach them something worthwhile is Asgard, apparently.”

Brun laughed. “Yeah. Apparently. And, well, we’re going to be stuck on this ship a bit. Might as well get what entertainment I can.”

The look Syn gave her then was hard to read, but it changed quickly into her “I know a secret” smile. “The King’s Mistress is a time honored position.”

Brun bristled a little. “I am not his mistress.”

“I apologize. It was not meant as an insult.”

She shook herself. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snarl. The last couple of days are just getting to me. That is, likely, how everyone will see it.”

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing. You’re clearly also a warrior and leader in your own right.” She fiddled with the necklace she wore. “On Alfheim the Royal Consort was an official position, with honor and prestige and responsibilities.”

“On Asgard it was a woman other women didn’t talk to.”

“Further proof that Asgard is terrible.” She paused and her mouth twisted. “Am I still allowed to say that? Is there a don’t speak ill of the dead period I should be respecting?”

“You can say what you want in front of me. Loki’s feelings are your problem. I’d be careful around the rest of them. I don’t know what most of the populace knows, or how much Thor is going to tell them.” She looked up. “I know he woke up like 5 days ago thinking his father was a benevolent king ruling an empire at peace. Now everything he thought he knew, and his home and history, and most of his people and all of his friends, have been obliterated. At the moment he doesn’t seem to be so much as touching any of that, but I’ve been there and it’ll be ugly eventually. You remember what I was like.”

“I do. Thought I’m not sure there’s enough alcohol on this ship to get him drunk.” She paused, growing serious. “He will need you to help him. And he will need things to do. You were much better once you had something to occupy your days. And there will be no lack of things to do on this ship.”

She winched a little. “Am I really the best person for that?”

“Yes. No one better to get someone out of a hole then the one who’s dug their way out already.”

“I meant... it’s just sex. We don’t exactly have deep conversations about our feelings.”

Syn shrugged. “You still seem to care about him. How he’s handling this. I suppose there are people in the world who can ignore emotional turmoil of the man they’re sleeping with, but I don’t think you’re one of them. If he tried to have a conversation about what he was feeling would you listen?”
“Of course,” she said. “I just. . .” She didn’t even know why she was arguing. Last night when he’d worried about his eye, all she’d wanted was to make him feel better. But on another level it scared her. He stirred up the ghosts of things she was certain had died with Eir.

“Brun, darling,” Syn said gently. “It is not a crime to have feelings for the extremely likable man you are sleeping with.” She always could see right through her. “I promise not to tell anyone, if that helps. But you will make both of you miserable if you don’t admit it to yourself.”

“It’s lust,” she said firmly, but probably not convincingly. “It will fade.”

That twisted smile came back. “If you say so.”

That was her most polite way of telling you she knew you were lying. “I’m taking it for what it is, as it happens. But I will. . . keep an eye on him. I likely see him at his weakest, I may see cracks first.”

“I think, at this point, that’s all you can do.”

“Speaking of, he wants you to look at his eye. I’m pretty certain you can’t do much but. . . be nice about, I think it bothers him.”

“Oh, good. I can’t grow the eye back, but I was worried it could get infected if he didn’t let me work on it. It was open a long time.”

“He let me clean it and bandage it up last night.”

Syn gave her a significant look, but didn’t comment. “That makes me feel better. I’ll still try to track him down and speed up the healing. It may bother him less if it’s not pulling and itching.”

She supposed there was a point there about how there was nothing romantic or sexy about cleaning up serious battle wounds. She thought about him washing and drying her hair. Even if the wound clean up was something comrades in arms did after a battle, there was no explanation for the hair. But all she said was, “He complained about the itching.”

“Wound like that will heal from the inside out and take a long time.” She glanced at the work she’d been doing and nodded. “I’ll go find him. Then I can stop worrying about it.”

Brun, too. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Syn paused and looked at her a moment. “I’ve never been in love. I imagine it’s very scary, in its way. If you want to talk, I’m always here for you.”

She was going to protest. Even if they were something, it was nowhere near that. But then, not everything was about her. “I have,” she replied, studying Syn. “It’s terrifying, but worth it. Despite how shattered I was in the aftermath. If you ever want to talk.”

Syn nodded. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

“It does make your life immeasurably better.”

That made her smile. “I know you don’t like him. I know why. But he truly does make me happy.”

“I know,” she said. “I can see it. It just. . . makes me sad to lose you to someone I’d like to punch in the face.”
“You haven’t lost me,” she said softly. “Before he decided to come with us - the first time - Loki asked me to stay on Sakaar. I told him no.”

“Because of me?”

She nodded. “Hela took my brothers. I was not letting her have you. Not without a fight.”

Brun came around the table to hug her. “I wouldn’t leave the bridge without you.”

Her arms were very tight. “You are my sister. No matter who shares my bed. Or yours.”

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Loki set up a group of Asgardians to take shifts in the engine room, and then spent a couple of hours re-arranging the quarters to find space for the ones he’d forgotten—and he genuinely had forgotten. It had been a busy day. The ship had a lot of different recreational facilities and he had to turn one of the gyms into a dormitory of sorts.

Afterwards, he went up to the very top of the ship, where there were offices and a meeting room clearly reserved for the ships crew. There was also a bridge of sorts, with a fancy chair meant for the captain. In a moment of whimsy, Loki made it look like a royal throne, and sat in it for a moment, looking out at space. Then he got up and went back to the office he’d claimed for himself—it was the nicest—and that’s where he was when his brother found him.

“I need a council meeting,” Thor said. He’d acquired a dark metallic eye patch and a change of clothes that was heavy on the red and gold and very much not his style.

“I didn’t know you had a council,” Loki replied. “Nice outfit.”

“It was the best I could do from the Grandmaster’s closet. And Brun has made it clear I need one. I figure you, her, Heimdal, Syn, and Bruce.”

“You know, sleeping with one of your official advisors is not wise.”

“I am not known for my wisdom,” Thor replied without missing a beat.

Loki laughed. “Fair enough. When is this meeting?”

“As soon as I can find everyone. So far I have you. Does this ship have a means of locating individuals?”

“Not that I can tell. It does have a ship wide comms system. You could make an announcement.”

“Probably my best option.”

It took them some poking, but they made the comms work and Thor requested the others come up to the meeting room. It had a view of the stars they were passing, which was oddly mesmerizing.

“Where are we going, anyway?” he asked Thor. He hadn’t thought they’d picked a direction.

“Just getting away from the debris field,” he replied. “People were distressed they could see it.”

He sat at the head of the table. “I saw the ‘throne’.”

“I made that just for you,” Loki told him.

“As Syn might say, lying. But I admire your restraint at not adding a statue of yourself.”
“All decor is improved by a statue of me,” he replied.

“It’ll be our first act of business when we find somewhere to stay.”

Heimdal was the first to arrive, followed by Syn and Brun. Syn came and sat next to Loki. She looked tired again, but smiled when he arched a brow at her. “More patients. Nothing terrible, but I had a busy hour.”

“Don’t over tax yourself,” he said as gently as he could.

“I know. I have to save some strength for you.”

“Oh, God, please keep that to yourself.” Banner had shown up finally.

Syn rolled her eyes, but didn’t comment, as Thor had stood to start the meeting.

“Thank you for coming.” He looked vaguely awkward, as if he’d realized that was a cliched thing to say. Still, he pressed on. “We have some decisions to make,” he continued. “And as the people closest to me, and the reason we actually succeeded in rescuing these people, I wanted your opinions.”

“We need to point this ship towards wherever we can get in ten days,” Loki said. “We need supplies.”

“We will also need to pay for those supplies,” Banner added.

Thor looked to Heimdal. “Can you see somewhere we can reach that would have what we need?”

His eyes unfocused for a moment. “I believe so, yes.”

“Somewhere with space travel?” Syn asked. “Like an established port?” He paused another moment, then nodded. She turned to look at Brun. “Our accounts will still be open.”

Brun smiled. “Well, then. Problem solved.”

Thor looked from one to the other. “Are you saying you have enough money in your personal accounts to supply over a thousand people?”

The girls exchanged a look, then Syn reached over and tapped on the computer terminal nearest her a moment. She flicked her fingers and the screen at the end of the table filled with bank account information.

Every single one of them stared. “That’s a lot of zeros,” Loki commented.

Brun crossed her arms. “Mine’s bigger.”

“It’s not a competition, darling.” Syn flicked the image off. “But, yes, between the two of us and a little creative haggling, we should be able to resupply the ship for a long trip.”

Brun leaned forward to look at Thor. “I got a lot of money for you. Seems fair this is where it goes.”

“Thank you,” Thor said in the utterly sincere way he had. “That will give us time to decide where to go long term. I believe that Earth might welcome us, but from what little I’ve been able to glean from the space faring on board, that’s a trip of almost two years.”

“Midgard is quite remote,” Heimdal confirmed. “Vanahiem is closer.”
“I don’t want to live in a hut,” Loki said. Vanahiem was very, very rural. “Nor will I be welcome on Earth.”

He considered that a moment. “Alfheim is advanced, and only six weeks past Vanahheim.”

Loki looked at Syn in time to see grief and longing cross her features. “When I was in Alfheim Odin was younger than Thor,” she said quietly. “I doubt I would recognize it, nor would they know me. We’ll have no better reception than any of a dozen outposts between here and there.”

Loki reached out and squeezed her hand, and sighed. “We could go recolonize Svartalheim. I hear that’s pretty empty.”

Thor made a face. “I’m not sure how that would fly with the people. Plus colonizing the land of a people our grandfather obliterated seems a bit... grim?”

“That was sarcasm, brother. They don’t have a real sun.”

“I didn’t know you could do sarcasm holding her hand.”

“The truth respects sarcasm,” Syn confirmed.

“Good to know.” Thor sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his head. “I suppose just having a short term goal and money is a victory.”

“It is a start.” Heimdal said. “Every journey has to start somewhere.”

“There is one more thing you should keep in mind,” Syn said hesitantly. Thor looked at her and she gave him a sympathetic smile before telling him, “Three of the women have come to tell me they’re pregnant.”

“There are four,” Heimdal said. He looked into the middle distance. “Five? No. Four women, five babies.”

“I suspected that second one had twins. The fourth either doesn’t know or didn’t feel comfortable telling me.”

Thor nodded. “Can you handle birthing them on the ship?”

Syn blinked a moment and Loki could almost feel the twinge of panic. “Probably? I handled labors on Sakaar with less supplies. Do any of you know of any common complications in Asgardian births?”

Banner leaned forward. “How similar is the anatomy? I’ve delivered dozens of babies.”

“Could you two work together to treat the pregnant women?” Thor asked. “Births at home were usually long and rare but I don’t recall any common problems. If there’s anything you need that we can find when we stop for supplies, feel free to get it.”

“They may balk at a man being involved,” Brun said. “It’s a woman-only thing, and there’s a lot of magic used. It tends to take days. But I’ve never heard of a woman having complications or problems. We are an extremely durable people.”

“We can figure it out,” Syn assured Thor. “But I wanted you aware of it. It’s possible, if we’re on this ship as long as it sounds like we will be, that there will be more pregnancies to come.”

“Babies are rare, so they are always welcome. Even in adverse circumstances.”
“But we should have some space set aside,” Brun said. “For women who don’t want to have a baby on a space ship and need to sequester themselves during their fertile time.” What amounted to birth control on Asgard was a locked door. Loki had always thought it strange, for all their sophisticated advancements, they were still doing that.

Banner raised his hand. “Um, sorry, I think I’m lost. You sequester yourselves during ovulation?”

“It’s the only way to keep us away from the men,” Brun explained.

“I think when Midgardians are fertile it’s a little more subtle,” Syn told her. “They have more opportunities.” She looked at Banner. “The longer lived races can’t have babies with there frequency than your people do. Fertile times come perhaps a dozen times in their life and the urge to have sex is... overwhelming.”

Loki wanted to ask Syn if that happened to Alfans, but this did not seem like the time and place.

“We’ll find some space,” Thor said.

“We did a rough supply inventory,” Loki said. “It would be good to put together a crew and do a very thorough one. Everything on and in this ship. Then we’ll get to work on calculating what we need to buy and how much.”

“Recruit some of the citizens to help,” Thor told him. “People will want something to occupy themselves with.”

“I’ve started inventorying the medical room,” Syn said. “And I asked the women who saw me to send me anyone with healer training. It’s not sustainable for me to be the only one.”

Thor looked at Brun. “Did you find out the situation in the engine room?”

She turned and looked at Loki, giving him a hard enough stare he began to sweat. And then grind his teeth. He’d ordered the gladiators into the engine room in urgency and desperation, and had then genuinely forgot. Now he was going to have Thor make that disappointed face and tell him how he never changed.

Having an openly hostile relationship with his brother’s bedmate was not going to be enjoyable.

Brun’s eyes shifted to Syn, and then she turned and looked at Thor. “There were a bunch of guys from Sakaar. We’ve rounded up some qualified Asgardians and there’s a shift rotation now.”

Thor had clearly noticed the glare, based on the suspicious look he gave first Brun, then Loki. But he seemed willing to take her at her word. “All right, good. Any other business to discuss?” Heads shook around the table. “All right. At least for now, lets meet here every morning so we can all coordinate.”

People started to get up, and Banner came down to their end of the table to talk to Syn. “I don’t have any of your magic, but I was a medical doctor on Earth, among other things. Can I help?”

She smiled widely. “Absolutely. Why don’t we meet tomorrow and I can give you a crash course in Asgardian physiology? With any luck I’ll have a few new recruits by then as well.”

“Sounds good, thanks.”

He went on his way and she turned to Loki. “I want to avoid my infirmary. Anything I can help you with?”
“Does inventory logistics sound exciting to you?”

“Not even a little bit,” she said with a smile.
The outpost that Heimdal saw was about a week out at their current speed. Thor had no desire to run out of rations, but he feared pushing the engines would be a mistake as well. So they trundled forward, trying to cobble together some sort of order from the chaos of their escape.

His brother seemed to be handling a great deal of administrative tasks, including organizing a massive ship inspection and inventory that had a fleet of people working on it. Brun was managing the physical operation of the ship—the engines and various other ship-wide systems that needed people to look after them. She and Loki clearly didn’t like each other, but were at least managing to work together.

Thor’s job seemed to be making decisions.

“We either pull it into the cargo bay, or we can detach it and leave it in space, but we can’t land with it docked out there. I’ve been told the couplings won’t hold.” Brun was trying to figure out what to do with the Commodore when they arrived at their port of call.

Thor found himself looking up at the roof as if he could see the Commodore through it. “If we have space I think the cargo bay is the best bet. It seems useful to have it.”

“We definitely should keep it. I am just not 100% sure we can get it inside without suffocating everyone. It’s possible someone might have to spend our stop at port stuck in space babysitting it. Though I’m tempted to spend the second docking fee to bring it in with us and arm it up.” She sat up and turned so she could see him. “Just in case.”

When his brother or Syn or Heimdal briefed him and asked him questions, they did it up in his office or the meeting room. He and Brun had their meeting in the bathtub.

“It does make me nervous that we’re not combat ready.” He was not a man who liked to be unarmed. And he had a lot of innocent people to protect. “This might be a conversation for the whole group.”

She settled back against his chest. The water was starting to cool. “Arming a fighter craft is something I know well. I can see to it. I certainly have the cash.”

“Indeed you do. I never imagined I’d be a kept man.”

“Most people think it’s the other way around.”

He couldn’t quite read her tone, so he stroked a hand down her arm. “Are people giving you a hard time?”

“No one would dare,” she said.

“Good.” He kissed he hair, then her shoulder. “I don’t want anyone thinking you slept your way to the top.”

“I fought my way there. The sex is just a bonus.”

“Damn right.” He held her until she shivered. “We should get to bed.”

“Yes, indeed. Big day tomorrow.” They were expected to reach their destination by mid afternoon. She gave his arm a pat and then climbed out of the tub. He enjoyed the view, not
getting up himself until she’d wrapped up in a towel.

He hit the button to make the water drain as he climbed out, taking the towel she handed him. “Anything you want me to pick up for you? If you’re busy with setting up the Commodore?”

“Different clothes, but that’s probably best left to Syn.”

“Agreed.” Everyone was a little sick of wearing the random assortment of clothes and costumes they’d found on the ship. He imagined the clothing stores at the outpost were going to be picked clean.

She sat on the end of the bed to dry her hair. “Of course, if I’m going to be the King’s Mistress, you really should buy me some baubles. Big, shiny ones I can hock when you grow bored with me.”

He grinned at her. “I think you’d prefer a new sword.”

She laughed. “So I can stab you when you grow bored with me? That does sound more me.” She looked up at him. “When I was young, your father had a Valkyrie as his mistress. The story was when it went sideways she did actually stab him.”

“He didn’t mention that in any of his brusque discussions on sex and relationships.” Possibly because there were no Valkyries left to stab him. Thor shook that thought off, pulling the blankets back to climb into bed.

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Sounds like he hit the reset button when he married your mother. Nothing before that existed anymore.” She climbed in on the other side.

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Almost literally. When I went into the palace Hela had torn off the murals that were on the ceiling. Paintings of their exploits were underneath. He’d literally painted over them.”

“I remember the murals.” She turned on her side, reaching out to touch his arm. “It was a very different time.”

He tried not to think about it, everything he’d learned about his father. He knew that probably wasn’t healthy, but it was the only thing he had right now. “Sometimes I wonder why you and Syn don’t hate me.”

“I can’t speak for Syn. Other than she’s very good at seeing through people.” She rubbed his shoulder. “Should be obvious why I don’t hate you.”

“Hoping for baubles?” he teased, leaning into her touch.

She lifted his arm, ducking under it so she could could curl against his side and rest her head on his chest. She pressed a kiss into his skin. “You know I did, at first. All I could see was Odin.”

“I am told I look like him.” And that was before the eye. He inhaled the scent of her hair, holding her close. “I assume that changed at some point?”

“Didn’t take too long to see you.”

“I spent most of my life trying to be as good as him. It’s very hard to realize how wrong my impression of him was.”

“I only knew him young. It’s possible, maybe even likely, that he changed as he aged. You seem to be a man fond of second chances.”
He sighed. “I think I’m most angry that he never told us. He sold us the fairy tale version of Asgard and when the truth came out it was our job the clean up his mess.” He played with the damp ends of her hair. “Though I suppose I wouldn’t want to tell my children the worst of my sins.”

“I don’t imagine you have many.”

“You didn’t know me when I was young,” he told her with a laugh. “Loki would happily tell you stories. Once I dragged him and our friends to Jotunheim to try to restart a war.”

“Isn’t that what Asgardians do?”

“I thought so at the time. That it was the sort of thing that my father would do. But we were at peace and I was needlessly poking a hornet’s nest. My father stripped me of my powers and banished me to Midgard.”

She lifted her head. “That’s appalling.”

“In retrospect, yes.” The hypocrisy of that decision was on the long list of things he was trying not to think too hard about. “But I suppose it did teach me a lesson.”

“And what was that?”

“That my actions had long standing consequences. And that I preferred to be a a protector rather than a warrior.”

She was quiet a moment, then she said, “You did the best you could, given what you had, to protect Asgard. I feel like you might not believe that, but it’s true.”

He rubbed her back in slow circles, staring at the ceiling a moment. “I think someday I’ll believe it. It’s too new.”

“You got all of us to come along by . . . sheer stubbornness. It’s impressive.”

“Perhaps that’s my true superpower.”

She looked up again, and reached up and ruffled his hair, in the way that would be patronizing were it coming from anyone other than the naked woman draped over him. “You have many superpowers.”

He kissed her. “Someone them I save just for you.”

Her leg slid up to wrap over him. “Good,” she replied, kissing him back. “Some things I don’t want to share.”

“I am all yours,” he assured her. Her hands were wandering now. They’d had plenty of sex before the bath—otherwise trying to talk would be pointless, and they tended to get water all over the floor. But there was no such thing as too much. Or even enough, really. Their chemistry remained rather . . . intense.

The kiss grew more intense, and he slid his hands down, tugging her leg farther over his hips so he could stroke her. He’d quickly learned her preferences, all the ways to build her pleasure up. Now he stroked two fingers around her clit, tugging just at the edge of rough. She gasped, “Like that, like that,” not much more than a whisper. It didn’t take much to make her come if he managed to touch her just the right way. It was a magnificent thing to watch.
He caught her mouth in a kiss, swirling his fingers in a tight circle. She whimpered into his mouth and he rumbled his approval. She seemed to like that. Her breathing got harsher and faster, and her whole body tensed. He moved his fingers faster and he felt her shudder, their kiss swallowing the sounds she made. She melted against him, and mumbled, “You are magic.”

“Only for you,” he promised, kissing her temple. Gently moving his hand aside, he rubbed her back. “Sleep well.”

“You don’t... I can...” That was just a mumble, too.

“Shh.” He rubbed her back until she went lax against him, then closed his eyes to sleep as well.

In the morning she returned the favor—she quite literally woke him up like that. It was quite an enjoyable way to start the day. Afterwards he went down to the galley to get their breakfast. She usually did it, but it occurred to him that that habit wasn’t doing any good for her desire to not have people see her as his mistress.

It was, however, probably much less disruptive. There was a long line of people waiting for food, and they all began bowing and backing to the walls. The entire line dissolved in moments, clearing the way for him.

“You don’t- you really don’t have to do that, I can wait my turn.”

One of the ladies handing out the ration boxes called, “You’re the King. You get served first.”

He stifled a sigh and accepted two boxes with a smile. “Thank you. I hope you all enjoy our stop this afternoon.”

“Everyone is very excited to get out and walk some new hallways,” the woman replied.

Smiling to himself, he headed back to his rooms to feed Brun.

She was still in the middle of getting dressed. “That was fast.”

“The insisted I skip the line,” he told her, still feeling a little bashful about it. “Everyone’s excited about the impending shore leave.”

“I’m excited about buying lots of guns.” He noticed she was putting on her armor.

“Expecting trouble?” He asked.

Brun shrugged. “You never know with arms dealers.” She smirked at him. “Don’t look at me like that.”

He spread his hands innocently. “Like what?”

“Like you’re trying to figure out how to get it back off.”

“I’d wait until tonight.”

She laughed and went to sit at the table. “Give me my food.”

He slid the tray over to her and sat to eat with her. Then she went off to check various things she had to check, and he finished getting dressed.

A few hours later they were in sight of the outpost. It was a large, sprawling space station made from a bunch of old ships and debris welded together. Thor stood on the deck with some of the
others as they responded to the hail. “This is Maidenhead station, what is your account code?”

Syn rattled off a number sequence and they were given a docking location. Brun was right behind them in the Commodore. As the pilot - one of the Sakaar gladiators that seemed to know what she was doing - eased them into the clamps, Thor and Syn made their way down to the loading deck where Loki and Heimdal were already organizing the Asgardians into groups who would look for different supplies.

“Good afternoon, Brother,” Loki said without looking up from his list. “Apparently the name of this station means something sex-related on Midgard.”

“Does it?”

“Yes, Banner explained it to Syn and some of the other healers and they’ve been giggling about it.” Now he glanced over to where Syn was speaking with her little group of midwives and apothecaries. “She won’t tell me what it is.”

“Maybe she’ll surprise you with it later.”

“This place seems like it’s got a shady underbelly. Also, we may be stuck here for a few days if we need to wait for supply shipment.”

He nodded. “I figured as much. Let’s make sure everyone goes out in groups and make sure we get a good headcount before we do leave.”

“A lot of cruise ships dock here, so there would be plenty of trinkets for them to waste Brun and Syn’s money on.”

“It’ll do them good. And maybe we can find some toys and books for the children.”

Loki looked up and smiled. “On my list.”

Thor found himself returning the smile. “Thank you for handling all of this, Brother. Will you be buy any trinkets or baubles yourself?”

“Well. Perhaps not for myself.”

“I was thinking of finding Brun a new sword,” he admitted.

“And you would like some of Syn’s money to buy it with?”

“It seems rude to use Brun’s.”

He nodded. “You’re not going to find anything that will hold a candle to Dragonfang, but I wish you luck.”

“Thank you. It’s really more the symbolism. She’s not exactly a shiny baubles woman.” He paused, watching the crowd shift as they waited for the doors to open. “I may get a bauble too.”

Loki studied him. “So not just recreation, then?”

“No. It may have started as such but. . . Not anymore.”

“Then you should. She is still Asgardian. We like shiny things.”

He wondered if Loki knew how happy that “we” made him. “Shiny things and weapons, that’s Asgardian to me.”
The bay doors opened onto the station, and people began pouring out. Loki clapped him on the arm. “Buy both.”

Thor gave him a grin and headed out, letting himself get swept away in the crowd. People seemed too excited or distracted by disembarking to do the bowing thing, though if they noticed him, they ducked out of his way. It was nice just to walk in a different space. One with a less garish color scheme.

One he got to the main part of the station, it reminded him of Asgard on market day. All manner of stores lined the streets, selling everything from clothes and books to medicines and a few adult-only stores he hoped none of the children noticed. Aliens of all different planets roamed the stalls and shops, none so much as glanced at him, or the shipmates he saw wandering through.

He had no official mission on the station, so he gave himself permission to wander a bit, keeping an eye out for swords and shiny things.

The baubles were more abundant—a tourist place like this sold lots and lots of jewelry. Swords took a lot of searching, but this was the sort of place that had everything. He found it eventually. It was the swordsman who told him that one of ‘his people’ was in one of the stations many bars, having a drinking contest with a group of criminals.

He strongly suspected that had something to do with her quest for ship guns, but probably best to check. After getting a promise from the smith to send the sword to the ship, he made his way down to the area that seemed to house the restaurants and pubs.

It wasn’t hard to find her—she’d gathered quite a crowd. The table was covered with dozens and dozens of shot glasses. Her opponent, an enormous bald man of indeterminate origin, looked like he was about to keel over.

Thor found himself a spot in the crowd, somewhere she could spot him so she knew she had back up, and crossed his arms, content to watch the show.

“You really want to go for another?” Brun asked, voice steady. “I can do this all day.”

Scowling, the bald man gripped the next glass, bringing it up to his mouth.

And promptly fell out of his chair. The crowd roared and applauded. Brun wore the satisfied smile she’d worn when they were punching space ships out of the sky. She stood slowly, directing her attention to what were obviously the man’s associates. “My goods will be delivered by morning?”

A round of nodding. They didn’t look displeased, at least. Maybe this was a legitimate business tactic here. She turned, just as slowly, and this time she found Thor in the crowd and started towards him. He could see just the faintest wobble in her steps.

He caught her around the waist when she reached him. “I see you’ve been busy.”

“I won,” she said, kissing him in a way that was not quite appropriate for public.

“I saw,” he murmured on her mouth. “I’m very proud of you.”

“I, uh. . . I am kind of dizzy.”

“Do you want to go back to the ship?”

She grinned, and he realized she really was extremely drunk and hiding it well. “And have my
way with you.”

“I suddenly find myself entirely done with my shopping and ready to return.”

“Excellent.” She was reasonably steady on the walk back to the ship, though once on board he practically had to carry her.

“When you’re sober, you’re going to tell me all about your adventures with the shady arms dealers,” he told her, kicking open the door to their room.

“It was amazing,” she told him. “I’m awesome. I got so much good shit for us.”

“You are awesome.” He set her down on the bed. “And amazing.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. He started to take her out of her armor so she could pass out. It wasn’t exactly how he’d pictured doing so. “You make me happy,” she told him.

He paused in his unbuckling to look at her face. Her eyes were still closed and she was smiling. “You make me happy, too,” he told her quietly.

“Good. You’re having a shitty time lately. Someone should.”

Thor chuckled, easing her armor over her head and setting it on the floor. Good to know her sentiment only lasted a sentence or two. “You are a bright spot in a very dark time in my life.”

Her eyes were open again, and she looked at him. “I’ve been there, you know? Lost everything. Nobody should have to carry that alone.” She touched the back of his hand where it rested on his knee. “We wear our strength like armor. They tell us from childhood. You are Asgardian. You are invincible. But once that armor cracks…” She shook her head. “Nobody taught us how to deal with bleeding out.”

He really didn’t want to talk about this. Not here, not now. Ignoring it was the only thing that let him keep going. But he still found himself saying, “You give me hope. You lost everything and survived. Sakaar wasn’t perfect but you made it your home. It helps on the days when all I feel is the loss.”

She sat up, and swayed a little. “Those were the days I drank too much and did stupid and reckless things. So I think you’re already doing better than I was.”

“Well, there’s a limited amount of alcohol on the ship.” He was only half kidding. Their limited supplies were part of the reason he wasn’t just drowning his sorrows. The fact he had to keep making vital decisions was another large part.

“You’re self-medicating with natural endorphins.”

“Is that your way of telling me we have too much sex?”

Brun laughed. “Not at all. Though… that’s probably part of why. I’m drunk enough to be honest here—that first night it could have been any warm and reasonably attractive body. For either of us. Well, I think you have a gender preference.” She waved her hands. “But something… happened. For a moment there, the bleeding stopped. And so we keep reaching for it.”

He rubbed her leg, still in her leggings. “I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing.”

“It’s not.” She leaned forward to kiss him. “It’s good. It’s surviving.”
Cupping her face, he drew out the kiss. “Thank you for surviving with me.”

She gave him a little tug. “Come to bed,” she whispered.

Kissing her again, he let her pull him down, sinking into the bed with her.
They stayed at Maidenhead for five days, buying and ordering their supplies and waiting for shipments and special orders to arrive. It was good for morale, getting fresh supplies and having somewhere to be other than the ship.

Syn spent her first day buying every medical supply she could think of, including scanners and an incubator to make her feel a bit better about the multiple births she was going to have to oversee. A good chunk of her second day was spent explaining what they all did to Bruce and watching him marvel.

She also spent the afternoon in the semi-shady area of the station, selling off the hefty amount of recreational drugs and aphrodisiacs that had been on the ship. She kept a small number for personal use, but sold everything else that didn’t have medical applications. They had almost paid for her other purchases on their own.

After that she was quite done with the station. There were too many people and it was very crowded and unorganized. She was glad they’d stopped, if only because it was nice to wear actual clothes and not the cast-offs of a slightly tacky mistress, but she was quite content to stay on board and accept deliveries and do inventory.

Currently, she was setting aside the various boxes of supplies to use for the Asgardian sequester room. When she had mentioned it to some of women she’d come to know, to get an idea of what sort of things they’d like in their confinement, she’d been met by shock and horror that she was bringing it up. And was sternly informed it was not something that was discussed in polite company.

Syn wondered if she’d ever been that prudish.

Loki had been hard to find since they’d made port. Most of the time that didn’t worry her. He was in charge of the expedition in a lot of ways, and had to manage a lot of people and tasks. They might not have made any promises, in so many words, but she trusted he wouldn’t leave without a word again.

“I’ve been busy but I didn’t think I was so absent that you’d replace me with that.” She turned to see Loki in the doorway. Of course he’d show up while she was unpacking the sex toys.

She held up the rather improbably sized phallus she was holding and flipped the switch on the bottom that made it gently undulate. “They say variety is the spice of life, my darling.”

“That just seems. . . excessive.”

“I thought variety would be appreciated.” She turned it off and put it back in the box. “It’s not for me, this is going to be the confinement room for any women who go through their Time on the ship.”

“Ah, well. Then maybe it is appropriate. Assuming you believe what is said about Asgardian men.”

“I’m starting to regret the destruction of Asgard if only because I never got sample any of their porn.” She set the box of toys next to the nest of pillows of blankets she’d made in one corner, then went to open the next box she’d brought in.

“Would have been hard to find. It’s very deep underground and kind of taboo, aside from the
occasional nude art.” He smirked. “You’d probably have to ask my brother.”

“Oh, I bet Brun would share details if I asked. She’s the only one who was willing to give suggestions on supplies for this room.” This box, amusingly, was porn. Well, erotica. She picked up a book and sauntered over to him. “You come from a realm of prudes, my darling.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Some of us simply don’t have the need.”

“For porn? I don’t know that need is the right word. But a good explicit book or piece of art can be fun.”

Loki laughed. “No, I mean. . .” He lifted his hand and waved it, and suddenly there was a pair of barely dressed women making out on the other side of the room. It amused her one was green. They vanished with another hand wave. “I can make anything I’d like to see.”

“Ooooh. That is handy.” She rifled through the book she was holding, before tossing it back into the box. “It’s a pity your illusions aren’t solid. And, you know, that I make them disappear when I touch them.”

“Maybe you could convince your truth sense that it’s art. Or memory.” He moved his hand again and for a moment there was an illusion of the two of them, from the mostly-dressed sex against the wall they’d had the other day.

She had not thought porn starring herself would be particularly enticing. But herself through Loki’s eyes was rather nice. She found herself leaning into him a little, fingers tangling with his, and felt his magic call to hers. They swirled together, the way they did during sex. Syn sucked in a sharp breath at the intimacy of it and noticed the illusion had shifted, becoming more solid.

Suddenly he hissed and pulled his hand away, the image vanishing. He turned over his palm and his fingers were red.

“Oh, let me see.” She reached for his hand and he flinched, but let her examine it. It was a very mild burn, like he’d spent too long in the sun. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean-”

“Don’t apologize, I burned you far worse.”

“Do you want me to try to heal it?” she asked, stroking a light finger over it.

“Will that work? Or make it worse?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know why this happens to us.” For a moment, she really missed her mother. She’d forgotten more about magic than Syn would ever know.

“My mother would have known,” he said quietly, familiar grief in his voice.

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“My mother would have known,” he said quietly, familiar grief in his voice.

“I was thinking the same thing.” Studying his hand a moment, she released it and edged away to make sure they weren’t touching. “Don’t move,” she told him. Usually she needed to be in contact with someone to heal them. But thinking of her mother had reminded her of a little trick she used to do when Syn or her brothers had scraped a knee or gotten a splinter. Taking a deep breath, she gathered her magic in her chest as well and blew lightly on his burnt hand. Her magic went with the breath, shimmering over the red skin, healing it.

Loki grinned. “That is amazing.”

She’d already felt rather proud of herself. Knowing she’d impressed him had her all but preening. Stretching up on her toes she kissed him gently, apologizing again without words. He pulled her
close, hands sliding up her back.

The kiss got deeper and she let him take over, mouth opening for him. His hand curled around the back of her neck in that possessive way he had and she shivered, melting into him. She wondered if he had any idea what that did to her, how long she’d waited for a man she could trust the way she trusted him.

He lifted his head. “If we’re going to follow this train of thought, it feels inconsiderate to do so in this room.”

“Mmm, you have a point.” Still, she tried to kiss him again and he held her off with the hold on her neck. Heat poured through her veins. “Can you take us to our room?”

“Yes, dear heart,” he told her, and the world dissolved in a shimmer of green. She felt the swell of her own magic and then they were standing beside their bed.

Loki leaned in to kiss her again and she stopped him with a hand on his chest. “You didn’t burn your hand that time, did you?”

He held up his hands. “I am unharmed.”

She grinned, feeling quite proud of herself again. “Magic is intent. If we have the same intent, then we don’t hurt ourselves.” She caught the hand that had been burnt and kissed his palm, then the fingertips. “I wanted to go to the room, so when I used my magic with yours we were sharing it, two powers with the same intent. The other times it was one of us performing a spell and draining power from the other.”

“So we can deliberately do things together, then?”

“I think so. We do it all the time when we have sex. Blend our magics.” She tilted her head. “You feel that, too, right?”

He nodded. “I didn’t know if it was just me.”

“I think it’s just . . . us.” She kissed him, curling her arms around him. “We’ll have to experiment a bit, but I think as long as we’re both focusing on the same outcome, we can blend our magic without burning each other.”

“I can think of all manner of use for that.”

“Me too.” They were both powerful - though she thought he had a bit more raw energy then she did - together they’d dwarf any magic wielder she’d ever met. “The shop keepers on Maidenhead said it’s a long slog to the next port. We’ll have lots of free time.”

“I’ll take a few days off, and we can lock ourselves in here.”

She grinned, tangling her hands in his hair. “I can think of all manner of things to do then.”

Fully stocked, they left Maidenhead the next afternoon. It took the entire day for Heimdal to round everyone up and get them back on board. There was some grumbling among the crowds, but they got everyone and all their purchases on board. Syn was mildly concerned by the fact that someone had bought a ton of alcohol with the intent of setting up a ship’s bar. When the man had originally asked her for the funding for it, she’d said no. Apparently he’d turned around and asked Brun.

Syn went up to talk to her when she docked the Commodore—which was now armed to the teeth. “Sorry. I didn’t know you’d told him no.”
“I feel like having a bar on a ship of depressed Asgardians is a recipe for disaster.”

“I’m not going to begrudge people who have lost everything what little escape they can find.”

Rubbing her forehead, Syn sighed. It was already done, and she really didn’t think there was any way she could stop them. “Just . . . keep an eye on things, all right? Some of the stuff he brought on is really potent.”

“I will. I know we have a long trip ahead of us. It’ll need to be rationed.”

That was also a good point. Maybe the fear of running out would stop anyone from over indulging. “Did you get everything you wanted?” she asked, gesturing vaguely upwards where the Commodore was.

“I did. Thor made me promise I’d take him out in it and show him how to shoot everything. Probably should do the same with you.” She grinned. “And I think she needs a new name.”

“The more people who can shoot the better,” she agreed as they headed for the stairs to take them down to the main levels of the ship. “Any ideas on the rechristening?”

“Many. Though mostly vulgar and/or sarcastic.” She grinned. “Though in a sentimental mood, I may see how Thor feels about calling it Moljnir.”

“Naming it after his hammer seems like it could still be vulgar.” She gave Brun a sly look and they both broke into giggles.

Brun linked her arm through hers. “Come on, we have to go to another meeting where Thor and Loki bicker about whether or not we should go to earth.” They still had no official destination.

“What if we . . . left?”

That had also occurred to her. The two of them going out on their own. “I think if we left now the whole operation would crumble. Thor depends on your logistics and guidance and I am the main healer.”

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“What about after? I wouldn’t mind staying for the journey. Surprisingly. We could take the Commodore, have our own ship. Go where we want. But Brun and Thor wouldn’t let us have it until this thing is safely landed somewhere.”

“Not after she put every gun in the universe on it.” She squeezed his arm. “We have two years to come up with another solution. Who knows what will happen in that time? Especially with us
learning how to combine our magics. Perhaps we’ll find a way to mask your presence from the
Midgardians.” She looked up at him. “But if we truly can’t find a solution in that time, I’ll go with
you.”

He looked surprised, in a lost and hopeful sort of way. “Truly?”

Her heart ached for him, as it always did when she got glimpses of the uncertainty that lay under
his smug bravado. She reached up and stroked his cheek. “Truly.”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. “Thank you.”

She let herself get lost in the kisses a moment before adding, “But let’s really try to find another
option, all right?”

“We do have plenty of time.” He wrapped an arm around her. “Come on, I have something for
you.”

“You do?” He gave her an unreadable smile as they walked to their rooms. “It’s not even my
birthday.”

“I bought you a present while we were at Maidenhead. Was just waiting until we were
underway.”

She was all but speechless. She’d seen Thor poking around, looking something to give Brun, but
Loki didn’t seem the type. “I didn’t get you anything,” she protested.

“It’s not a gift if I’m expecting something in return. That is a barter. Or a bribe, depending on
context.”

They reached their room and he held the door for her. Syn sat on the bed, tucking her legs up and
looked at him expectantly. He held out his hands and a small box appeared, wrapped in paper and
a ribbon.

By the spirits, he’d even wrapped it. She took the box from him carefully. It was on the tip of her
tongue to ask if a snake was going to jump out, but he looked so earnest and oddly nervous she
just didn’t have the heart. Untying the ribbon, she peeled the paper off to find a simple wood box.
She opened it to reveal a necklace nested on a bed of dark velvet.

It was exquisite, formed by dozens of thin gold wires intricately woven together to make a plait as
thick as her pinkie. Interspersed were tiny green gems, hung on the wires like beads. Syn lifted it
out of the box and let it drip off her fingers.

To her surprise, she felt tears burn the back of her eyes. Courting gifts had been de rigeur on
Alfheim when she was young. As a princess she’d received countless trinkets and baubles from
hopeful suitors. Then had come Odin and Hela and the war and there was no time for such
frivolity. No one but Brun had thought to give her a gift in years and she wasn’t really the fancy
jewelry type.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, voice choked. She tried to clear her throat. “Put it on me?”

He grinned at her, a genuine and unguarded smile that had no artifice in it. That no one ever saw
but her. He sat next to her. “You like it?”

“I love it,” she told him, with as much sincerity as she had. “It’s the nicest thing I’ve been given in
centuries.”
He took it from her, and fastened it around her neck. “I thought it worthy of a Queen,” he told her.

She ran her fingers along it, where it lay against her collarbone. It had a bit of weight to it, which she liked. Made her conscious of its presence. She swiped at her eyes, then turned to wrap her arms around him, kissing him. “Thank you,” she whispered against his lips.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry,” he told her.

“I know. I know. It’s happy tears, mostly.” He curled an arm around her and she leaned on him. “It reminds me of a life I didn’t get to lead.”

Loki sighed a little. “Yeah. Me too.”

They sat in silence a moment. Syn tangled her hand with his, letting her fingers trace the lines of his palm. She loved his hands, big and long fingered. “If I had lived that life, I would not have known you like this.” She’d been older than Odin when she’d gone to Sakaar. Had it all gone differently Loki would have been a child she’d watched grow from a distance. “The thought makes me sad.”

“So live this life,” he said. “It can be whatever we make of it.”

Her chest ached, right where her scar was. She supposed it always would no matter where or how long she lived. Perhaps she should stop hoping to forget the scars and find her joy in a man with matching ones. She wove her fingers with his and squeezed his hand. “Yes,” she said softly, and it felt oddly like a promise.

*  

Despite Syn’s concerns, the Tavern (as people were calling it) was a big hit. Asgardians liked to drink, and they processed it pretty fast, so nobody ever got too bad off. The limited supplies kept it rationed, and it seemed to make people happy.

“There have been a couple of fights,” Brun told the morning council meeting. “But nothing rowdy, just the usual stuff.”

“And you think the supply will last?” Thor asked her.

“I think six months at least. Harald is doing a good job rationing it.”

He nodded. “Good.” He had been entirely in favor of the bar, though she rarely saw him there. He was afraid his presence would make people unable to relax.

Thor scanned the table. “Anything else?”

“We should go to Midgard,” Loki said.

Everyone swiveled to turn and look at him. “Syn,” Thor said. “Poke him. The illusion is glitching.”

“I’m serious,” he said before Syn could reply. “We have time to figure out what to do about me. We can’t keep a thousand people in space while we dither. And if I’m honest, I’d rather live somewhere interesting in disguise, than somewhere boring like Vanaheim.”

Brun saw Thor glance at Syn, who smiled and shrugged. The motion shifted her shirt and Brun caught a glimpse of gold and green around her throat. Thor broke out in a wide smile and nodded. “Well. Earth it is.” He turned to Heimdal. “You’ll talk to the pilots and navigator?”
“I will. It’s a bit hard to see that far without the Observatory, but when we get closer I can get an idea of where best to go once we arrive.”

“Thank you.” He looked visibly relaxed, with that long standing worry settled. “If there’s nothing else, we’re done. Thank you all.”

After the meeting she tagged along with Heimdal to talk about flight routes with the pilots—she occasionally took a relief shift, and then she made her way down to the infirmary to see Syn.

She was alone, reading a book she’d picked up on Maidenhead. She spent her days in the infirmary, especially when Loki was busy with his duties, but now that everyone had healed up from the battle on Asgard, her patients were rare. She looked up when Brun came in, putting a marker on the page she was on. “Hello.”

“Good afternoon.” She sat in one of the chairs. “I am curious and a little concerned.”

A line appeared between her brows as she frowned. “About what?”

“Loki’s change of heart about our destination. My gut says there’s an angle, but I’m not sure what it is.”

Syn sighed. “Oh. We talked about it. He doesn’t seem to think that there’s a way for him to stay on Midgard. But we’ve been playing a bit with blending our powers, so it’s possible we may be able to manage an illusion I won’t shatter. And if not...” She chewed her lip. “If we can’t think of something then I promised to leave with him once we got to Earth.”

Brun sighed, because she’d known for a while—protestation aside—that this was where this was going. The necklace, then, was probably exactly what it looked like. She didn’t even blame Syn for not mentioning it. She’d probably been expecting Brun to make whatever face she was making right now. And it wasn’t fair. She wanted Syn to be happy. She deserved to be happy. “That’s the angle, then. I’m glad it’s not a sinister one.”

“No. Not sinister. Though I made him swear we’d do everything we could to find a different answer. But the people need a destination. They need to know there’s an end to all this. He hated being what stood in the way of that.”

“It’s good,” Brun said. “It’s good for everyone.”

Syn nodded, but looked sad. Her fingers went to her necklace, toying with it idly. “I’m sorry. I’ve upset you.”

“I’m not upset,” she protested, causing Syn to make a face. “I’m not angry at you. I want you to be happy. And clearly he makes you happy. I don’t have to like him to see that.”

“He does. Did I show you what he gave me?” She held the necklace up. “He got it on Maidenhead.”


“Oh, really. Why does everyone keep saying that? I know random presents are a little out of character for him, but it’s just a necklace.”

Brun blinked at her, surprised. There’s no way a man raised at Asgard’s court would buy a necklace like that by accident. “It bears a striking resemblance to a traditional betrothal gift.”

Syn went very, very still in a way Brun had only seen a couple of times. “What.”
At the beginning of the betrothal process, the bride is given a gold choker with stones of her intended’s family’s colors. It’s hers to keep if the whole thing goes sideways. Most women in that situation sell or melt them, but I’ve seen a couple dramatically flung off the Bifrost bridge.”

Taking a long, slow breath, Syn pinched the bridge of her nose. “Are you telling me I got betrothed to Loki without knowing it?”

“You’re not actually betrothed unless you agreed to it. It could be just a . . . exceptionally coincidental necklace purchase.”

“You don’t really believe that. I don’t even have to look at you to know that.” She sighed. “Have any of the people you loved been utterly impossible?”

“No, I am the impossible one in all my relationships.” She smiled. “Including ours.”

“True. Clearly I have a type.” She sighed and stroked the necklace again. “It does explain why we so happy I liked it.”

“No matter what he meant, that is absolutely what people are seeing. At this point likely the whole ship thinks you’re betrothed.”

“I suppose the good news is they’re all happy for us.”

“While he was ‘Odin’ he apparently convinced the entire realm to forgive Tragic Dead Loki. No one who made it to the ship seems to have heard the truth, because everything happened so fast. Thor doesn’t think there’s any point in stirring up trouble.” That annoyed Brun a little, but she understood the logic.

“He also made a rather dramatic entrance as their savior.” She sighed and shook her head. “He is impossible.”

“But you do love him? Don’t you?”

Her mouth twisted. “I don’t know. Maybe. If I admit it then I’ll want to say it to him and I don’t know . . . how he’ll react.”

“He gave you a betrothal necklace.”

“And didn’t tell me he was doing so. He doesn’t . . . there is a great deal of fear and uncertainty under his bluster. I don’t think he feels worthy of me. Possibly of anyone. If I tell him I love him and he’s not ready to hear it, he may sabotage our relationship.”

“I’ve removed his operational access to my ship.” She hadn’t decided what to re-name it, but the Commodore was hers. “He can’t take it. So he’s stuck on this ship.”

Syn chuckled. “I suppose that does limit the places he can hide.”

“The necklace may be his way of publicly claiming you. Letting all the men on the ship—who are Asgardian and know what it means—know that you are taken. Without having to actually tell you.”

She didn’t know why that caused pink to rise in Syn’s cheeks and decided she probably didn’t want to. “That would be in character for him,” Syn said carefully.

“I suppose it’s up to you whether you want to let it stay unspoken.” Something occurred to her. “In the mean time I will make sure Thor doesn’t deliver a congratulatory announcement over the
Her eyes widened. “Yes, thank you. I want Loki to be surprised when I ask him what he was thinking.”

“Try not to have a fight with magic and blow a hole in the ship, eh?”

“I will attempt to control myself,” she promised primly.

Brun watched her a moment. “Don’t beat him up too bad. Love is hard for us impossibles.”

Syn’s eyes softened. “I know. I’m not angry. I just... need him to trust me. Us.”

“I think that’s the part that’s hard.”

They were only partially talking about Loki now, and Syn seemed to sense that. “It doesn’t have to be big, sweeping gestures, you know. It can be in little ways. Showing he’s trying.”

“Sticking a pinky out instead of a neck?”

“It’s a start.”

Everything had to start somewhere, she supposed. Though, really, she was well past that. “If there is one thing we all have plenty of, it’s time to sort things out.”

“That is perhaps the one upside of our long trek to Earth. And our long lives.” She paused and made a face. “Does it ever occur to you we’re much older than our men?”

“I think we’re older than their parents.”

“I was certainly older than Odin when I fought Hela.” She paused. “It occurred to me the other night that had things been different I would have watched Thor and Loki grow up as children. A distant, uninterested aunt of some sort. You have always been the only good thing to come out of going to Sakaar. Not perhaps there’s two.”

What was good and what wasn’t in all this... Brun was still working on that. Sometimes she thought she was still in the same place, just in a different location. But then she sometimes had moments where she was happier than she’d been in longer than she remembered. She’d told Thor it was endorphins, but that was at least 50% bullshit.

“That probably says a lot about how happy he makes you,” she said to Syn.

“Probably.” She studied Brun a moment and she braced herself for a prying question. “How are things with you and Thor?”

“Keeping each other sane,” she said with a smile.

“That’s a worthy relationship goal.” She tilted her head. “Does he make you happy?”

“When I let him.” She shrugged. “We’ve carved out space where the rest of the world doesn’t exist, and in there, yes, I am happy.”

“That’s something,” Syn said. “Especially for impossible people.”

That evening at dinner, Brun had to explain Syn’s necklace to Thor. He’d noticed it and was curious, and found the explanation uproariously funny.
“That is a very Loki thing to do,” he said, still chuckling. “Tricking a perfectly willing woman into a betrothal.”

“I just wanted to tell you so you didn’t comment. She says she’ll handle it.”

“I have every faith in her ability to handle my brother.” He sipped his ale, then held up a finger. “Though that does remind me. I never gave you your present.”

She stared at him in surprise. “You bought me a present?”

“I did.” He got up and turned back, holding up a finger again. “It’s not a betrothal necklace.”

“Good, because that would have been an extremely awkward conversation.”

He laughed, then went over to the closet, digging in the back a bit before pulling out a long object wrapped in cloth. He returned to their little table, then set it on her lap. She gave him a curious look, and lifted it to unwrap it and could tell by feel it was a sword. The cloth unwound to reveal an ornate handle with intricate metal work and a polished blue stone in the pommel.

“It’s some kind of enchantment,” he said, tracing the pattern of the metal work with a fingertip. “Keeps it permanently sharp and never rusts. And the stone keeps it balanced. I know it’s no dragon’s fang, but. . . It seemed worthy of you.”

There was a lump in her throat, and a sudden messy tangle of emotions filled her. This wasn’t some shiny piece of jewelry, or some other sort of fleeting lovers’ gift. It was something she longed for, but hadn’t even known she wanted. And a reminder of how he saw her. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’m glad you like it.”

Like was not an adequate word for this. “It’s just. . .”

Stroking her cheek, he kneeled down in front of her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing in the entire universe,” she replied, and then she kissed him, because was terrible and explaining what she felt, but she was good at this. He wrapped his arms around her, sighing softly against her mouth as the kiss deepened. “It’s perfect,” she murmured between kisses. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He stood, lifting her. “If this is going to be the reaction, I intend to but you many more weapons.”
Chapter 17

Loki was starting to wonder if the universe was conspiring against him. He had promised Syn he would take a few days off to spend time with her and work on their magic. She’d rearranged the schedule at the infirmary to accommodate it, leaving Banner and the Asgardian apprentices in charge. He’d been looking forward to three uninterrupted days locked in their quarters.

But one emergency after another had come up. First a few misplaced crates had caused a panic. Then a mix up in the engine room schedule had almost caused it to overheat, which would have stranded them. Then a handful of other fiddly confusions and delays meant his “day off” didn’t start until after supper - which he had eaten at his desk hoping to finish the last of his work so he could try to salvage the evening.

When he finally got down to his rooms he was relieved to find Syn there, a little afraid she’d have decided to go drink with Brun or talk science with Banner. Instead she was there, in their bed, wearing a thin shift she occasionally slept in, his necklace glimmering in the light. She was bent over some embroidery and didn’t notice him immediately.

“I am so sorry,” he said with a sigh.

“It’s all right,” she said, frowning at the stitch she was doing. “I found ways to occupy myself.” She poked the needle into the fabric and looked up at him. “We both have busy jobs, we can’t afford to get prickly when things come up.”

He sat on the end of the bed. Something felt... off, but he couldn’t say what. “How was your day?”

“Good,” she said brightly. “Though, the oddest thing has been happening. Everyone has been congratulating me and calling me Princess.” She pinned him with a look. “I’ve been demoted, Loki, and I have reason to believe you’re to blame.”

He smiled uncomfortably. “I can’t exactly control what people call you.”

“Brun told me what the necklace means.”

He huffed. “Of course she did.”

She reached out and stroked a hand down his arm. “Why didn’t you tell me?” When he didn’t respond immediately, she pressed, “Did you think I wouldn’t accept?”

“It would have been a big, messy conversation. And I just wanted to give you a gift.”

“A gift that, on Asgard, would mean I was promised to you.”

“We’re not on Asgard. And you’re not Asgardian. It’s a symbol, not a contract.”

She sighed a little. “Loki.” It was said with such a blend of affection and exasperation he found himself reminded of his mother. She moved, untucking herself so she could kneel behind him. “I like it better knowing it marks me as yours,” she told him, wrapping her arms around him. “I like being yours. I like that you want other people to know it. But sometimes it feels... like there’s a wall between us. Like you think you have to trick me into staying.”

He hugged her arms to his chest. “I take the easiest route to achieving my goals. I don’t intend to trample others while doing so, but I nearly always do.”
He felt her sigh again and she pressed a kiss to his neck. “I know it’s hard to change the habit of a lifetime. But I want to be your partner in reaching your goals. I want to help you. But you keep so much in your head.” Another kiss to his temple.

“My goal in this case was to mark you as mine. It’s primitive and ridiculous, but I can’t seem to help the urge.”

Her breath was warm on his throat as she dropped another, thoughtful kiss. He braced himself for her to agree. “I like being yours,” she repeated instead, voice a little huskier than it had been. “My whole life I had to be contained and strong and in control. As a princess and a queen and on Sakaar. I could never let go and relax, even with a lover. And then I met you. And somehow you strip that all away until I’m begging you for things I wouldn’t let other men even dream of. It is primitive and primal and goes against everything I was raised to be and I love it. I am yours and I love it.” She kissed his ear and he felt teeth. “Knowing what the necklace means, that it announces that to the whole ship? Is one of the most arousing things I’ve ever experienced. Sometimes the easiest route to your goal isn’t the obvious one.”

He groaned. “So you’ll keep wearing it?”

“Yes. Of course. So everyone knows you’ve claimed me.”

“We’re a very patriarchal society,” he said. “There isn’t really much in return you can mark me with.”

Her fingers went to the fastenings of his clothes, easing the top part of his leathers off. He could probably stop wearing them. The odds of a battle were pretty low. But he liked them, and they gave him a sense of familiarity.

When he was bare to the waist he felt her magic flare and something on her vanity rattled. A moment later warm oil dribbled over his shoulders and she began to massage the tight muscles there. “But you are mine?” she asked him softly.

“I have been yours since the day you rescued me from the drugged candy.”

Her hands paused, then her thumbs slid along the sides of his spine. He could feel tension easing under her strokes. “I don’t need you to change completely. I know it’s hard to trust someone when you’ve felt alone. I just ask that sometimes, when your instincts tell you to hide, you talk to me instead.”

“You know I was going to suggest that I leave. Alone. But I was touching you, and ‘we’ was all I could say. Because I know I couldn’t leave without you.”

Her arms slid around him, hands folding over the scar on the center of his chest. She was leaning on his back and had apparently taken her shift off, as they were skin-to-skin. “Is there some ceremonial words the woman is supposed to say when accepting a betrothal? Or is it just a matter of saying yet and wearing the necklace?”

“There’s a long negotiating process between the families. And then a big party is thrown.” He turned his head so he could see her a little. “I suppose Thor and Brun would work out the terms for us.”

Syn smiled, chuckling a little. “I feel like Brun would perhaps be slightly too aggressive in her negotiations.”

“I suspect she could get him to agree to literally any conditions you wanted.” He paused, and
added thoughtfully, “There’s got to be some way to take advantage of that.”

The chuckle turned into a laugh and she leaned over his shoulder to kiss him. “I love how your mind works.”

He turned enough to pull her into his lap. “You may be the only one.”

“Maybe,” she agreed, grinning up at him. She stroked his hair back from his face and kissed him again. She was wearing little else but the necklace, something that made him immensely happy. He leaned backwards, pulling her onto the bed with him.

She shifted to lay next to him tangling her hands in his hair as they kissed, pressing her body along the length of his. Curling a hand around her neck, he traced the lines of the necklace and she hummed in pleasure. “I’m yours,” she murmured on his mouth. “You could command me.”

“Keep the necklace on,” he told her. “I want to watch you ride me wearing only that.”

“Yes.” She shivered, kissing him again. Her hands moved to his breeches, carefully unbuttoning the fall. “Such complicated clothes,” she chided him.

“I’d use magic, but I’m enjoying this,” he told her.

She smirked and sat up, going on her knees to finish undoing his breeches and peeling them down, pausing to slide his boots off, before fully freeing him. She stroked his hands back up his legs, kneeling at his hips. “Have you noticed,” she said conversationally, stroking his growing erection. “That this bed has manacles attached to it?”

Surprised, he craned his head to look. “I did not.”

Syn pressed a kiss to his stomach. “We have a lot of weeks in space to entertain ourselves.” Another kiss, just above the thatch of hair surrounding his sex. “Might be fun.” Before he could answer, she curled her tongue around the head of his cock, licking his length.

He groaned, reaching down to touch her hair. “This is fun, too.” She hummed her agreement and he momentarily forgot what they were discussing.

Gathering her hair up, he watched her taste him, the gold choker glinting in the lamp light as she moved. Her eyes were closed and stroked his skin idly with one hand, petting and exploring, as if she couldn’t resist touching him as much as possible.

She would do this as long as he let her, so he let her as long as he could take. Even then she seemed reluctant to let him go, whimpering a little as he used the grip on her hair to pull her up. He kissed her, feeling all those primitive, uncivilized urges, and she shuddered against him. “Tell me what you want.”

He moved his hands over her body, touching anything and everything he could reach. “I want you in every way possible.” He found her small clothes, the last bit of clothing she was wearing, and tore them off, seams popping, so he could cup her sex. She was slick and swollen, moaning his name as he slid his fingers against her. He knew just how to touch her now, and he pressed her clit in a way that always made her gasp. “What do you want?”

She rocked her hips, grinding onto his fingers. “I want to come. I want to make you happy.” She kissed him and he tasted desperation. “I want - I want you. In every way possible.”

One of his hands was on her back, and he moved it up her back to her neck, catching the back of the necklace chain and pulling it tighter. “Then come here.”
She obeyed, letting him pull her astride him. He let her sit up a bit so she could settle her knees and get the proper angle, then he was sliding inside her, body hot and tight on him. A sharp tug on the necklace got her moving, hips rolling as she rocked up and down. Her eyes drifted shut and she tipped her head back, getting lost in it. Why the necklace made hotter than usual he didn’t know—and he wasn’t delving into his psyche now—but it did. She was his.

She kept the pace slower than he might have liked. But she was clearly enjoying it, so he relaxed into it, watching the pleasure play across her features, the ripple of muscle under her skin as she moved. Her magic danced along his skin, stroking him like hands, and he returned the favor, feeling her clench around him in response.

“Close,” she mumbled, thrusts getting rougher and less coordinated. “I’m close. Can I-?”

“It’s as if you’re trying to get me to say no.” He pushed her higher with his magic, but wouldn’t quite let her over the edge.

She cried out, legs tightening on his hips. Bracing her hands on the headboard, she changed the angle, taking him harder, as if that would help. “Please,” she whispered. “Please, please.”

Maybe it did help. It felt so good like this his grip on his magic thinned. It mixed with hers, surrounding them in different colors and temperature. “Like that, dear heart,” he growled at her. “Like that.”

“Yes. Yes.” The bed rattled and he felt her clench again, shuddering on the edge. “Yours,” she whimpered. “I’m yours. Yours.” Their magic surged, controlled by neither of them, or both, and let out a cry that was almost a sob, driving down hard, so he was as deep as possible. Her body rippled and shuddered around him. Her arms shook as she held the bed frame, whimpering at the strength of her climax.

He wanted to watch her as long as he could, but the way she clamped around him in rhythmic little pulses was more than he could take. He let go, letting his own pleasure come. Dimly, he heard her moan again, and wondered if she could feel him filling her.

His climax was fading when she finally uncurled her hands from the headboard. He had enough sense to catch her when she toppled down onto him, holding her tightly to his chest.

“The things you do to me,” she murmured, sounding utterly blissful.

“I do those things to make you happy,” he said.

“You do. Like I’ve never felt before.”

He ran his finger along the necklace. “Good.”

Thor let Brun convince him to come down to the Tavern now and again. It was popular, the guys running it had made an effort to make it as Asgardian-looking as possible. They were traveling through weeks of empty space, and people were digging up all sorts of recreational activities.

He wore the most unobtrusive thing he had, and they found a dim corner in the back. He didn’t want to make people uncomfortable—or set off more bowing. Though Brun insisted that tavern regulars and the reflexive bowers didn’t have a whole lot of overlap. And also that people would be more comfortable the more they were used to him.
And anyway, it made her happy.

The liquor was as good as promised, though. He took a drink, scanning the room. “It’s nice to see people relaxed,” he admitted.

“I’ve heard people say they feel the least homesick in here. I actually hear a lot of things in here.”

He couldn’t help himself, settling a hand on her thigh. “Anything good?”

“Many are sad about the lack of funerals for their loved ones. Some are very lonely. There are two different sets of married people having affairs. We’re probably going to have to figure out how to deal with divorce. And marriage, though that’s less drama.”

Thor wondered a bit if Loki and Syn would be the test case for that last one, though he didn’t say it. He got the distinct impression Brun wasn’t entirely thrilled with his brother’s relationship with her friend. “Might be easier, considering most people don’t have much by way of property to split.”

“There was also a woman who was here last night who may have been having her Time. She took three men back to her room. At the same time.” She swallowed her drink and grinned. “Fatherhood roulette?”

He blew out a breath. “I suppose I can’t force them to segregate themselves during it. Though Syn might wish we could.”

“It’s a very primal urge. Not just the actual hormones, but the desire start anew—New life is a great way to do it.” She waved for the bartender for more drinks. “Also, we need to reproduce or we’re going to die out. Women having children with multiple men is probably a healthy thing. Everyone who can is going to have to eventually.”

“I just know dealing with labor and delivery on the ship makes her nervous.” And having infants on the ship made him nervous.

“Getting them out is her problem to worry about. Yours is the long-term health of us as a people.”

“I know.” He rubbed her thigh a little, tempted to ask what they’d do if she had her Time. They were having a good evening, though, so he didn’t risk it. “This place is a good start.”

She put her hand over his. “Seems to be.”

Leaning over, he kissed her gently. “Thank you for making me come.”

“You know, sometimes there’s even dancing.” Whatever was on his face then made her laugh. “Kidding.”

They were brought more drinks and the party raged on around them. A few people seemed to notice him, but no one made a fuss, just smiled and nodded, or raised a drink. It was nice, for a few hours, to feel normal again.

There was a disturbance across the room. A woman yelled, “I said stop!”, followed by the sound of glass breaking.

Brun was watching it, and when Thor moved to get up, she put her hand on his arm. “Stay, I’ll handle it.”

Thor frowned, wanting to follow, but forced himself to do as she’d said. Brun and whatever
woman had yelled could certainly handle it. He kept a close eye on her as she headed over to the trouble, though.

There was a large and visibly drunk man. Thor was pretty sure his name was Knut. The woman had broken a bottle over his head. When Brun reached them, she said, “He put his hands up my shirt.”

“You were flirting with me!” Knut said belligerently.

“I don’t care if she was in the middle of a blow job,” Brun said. “She said stop, you stop.”

“Mind your own fucking business,” he told her. “We all know why you think you can order us around.”

“I can kick your ass into next Tuesday is why.” Despite Knut being as big has he was, Thor absolutely believed that. There weren’t a lot of people Brun couldn’t kick into next week if she wanted to.

“Before or after you suck the king’s cock?”

Thor was up and halfway across the room before he could even think about it. People leapt out of his way, so it wasn’t exactly subtle. He could see from his face when Knut noticed him.

And then, because she was magnificent, Brun didn’t even miss a beat, or take her eyes off her target. “Hey, why don’t you ask him which he’d prefer. I just can’t decide.”

Thor wrapped a hand around the back of the man’s neck, hard enough to make him wince. “Did you have a question for me?”

Knut was white as a sheet, and frantically shook his head.

Brun sighed, sounding exasperated and irritated. “Just throw him out before he wets himself.”

They were roughly the same height, but Thor managed to lift him by the neck, at least enough to drag him to the door and toss him in the hall. “I wouldn’t come back for at least a night or three.”

When he came back in, the entire bar erupted in applause. He felt his ears heat, but gave the crowd a brief bow, before heading back to Brun’s side. “So much for staying hidden.”

“Your Majesty,” the bartender called. “Drinks on the house.”

Brun exhaled forcefully through her nose, then turned towards the woman. “You okay?”

“Yes. Thank you. And the King, obviously. Maybe that guy will stop being such an asshole now.”

“Is this a common occurrence?” Thor asked her.

“He’s done this a couple of times,” Brun replied. She looked like she wanted to elaborate, but other men in the bar kept coming up to him to congratulate him on his apparent heroics. Finally she sighed and patted his arm. “We can discuss it tomorrow. That killed my buzz and think I’m done for the night.”

He now had four different offers to buy him drinks and one to play darts. He looked at them, then back to Brun. “I’ll be right behind you,” he promised.

“It’s fine. Have fun.” She gave him a little nod, then turned and walked out of the tavern.
Oh, it was absolutely not fine and he was not looking forward to getting back to their room. But he let the med tug him away, accepting their drinks and smiling when appropriate. He sat through almost a full hour of bar brawl stories before he could manage to make an escape.

When he got to their room, it was dark, but there was light coming from under the bathroom door, and he could hear splashing coming from within. He knocked lightly on the door to give her a chance to tell him to bugger off, before letting himself into the room. “Brun?”

She was in the tub and it was filled with bubbles up to her chin. She looked at him, and said, “We need a security staff.”

“I agree.” If she wanted to talk business, they could do that. “We can’t be everywhere a problem might occur.”

“Knut has done that several times. He needs some sort of punishment. We need some sort of justice system.”

He sighed. “I can’t be the judge. I know it was tradition on Asgard, but I have to look these people in the eye everyday and they’re already intimidated by me.” He paused. “What about Heimdal?”

“If he’ll do it, he’s probably the best. Or Syn, but she’d kill me for suggesting that.” She stuck her toes up out of the water. “She told me the tavern was my problem because I said yes to it, but you really should have someone else handling that. Not Heimdal, though, that will make people uncomfortable.”

“Are you saying that because you don’t want to do it anymore? Or because of what he said?”

“Oh, that’s a favorite insult of the drunk and stupid. Though usually it’s more along the lines of ‘I’m not taking orders from the King’s whore’. Which is actually funny because I’m the one with the money. I give Knut credit for creativity.”

“We’ll be sure to mention that in his trial.” He came over to sit on the edge of the tub. “I’m sorry.”

“At least it’s honest, you know. It is something I do on the regular.”

“For the record, my preference would have been you kicking his ass and then the other thing.”

That got a laugh. “Yeah, I know. I know what turns you on.”

He grinned and dipped a hand in the water to touch her leg. “I was talking to Bruce the other day and I was thinking, maybe it’s time for me to stop appointing people into positions.”

“You’re the King. That’s what you do.”

“I don’t want to be a king like my father was. You said it yourself, the crown and the secrets are what was wrong with Asgard. There’s too few of us now, and I’ve been gone a long time. Picking everyone in authority from my little group of friends is causing mistrust.”

“We can’t just have a free-for-all. We need less anarchy, not more.”

“I know. I know. I’m just thinking. . .maybe some sort of election process. Or at least a nomination. Let the people have some sort of input. Whoever runs a police force is going to need to have their trust. More than I do, in some ways.”
“You really did spend a lot of time on Midgard, didn’t you?”

“Some of my best friends are Midgardians,” he told her with a smile before realizing she probably wouldn’t get the joke. “They don’t have it perfect, either. But repeating my father and grandfather’s mistakes doesn’t appeal to me. Maybe it will fail horribly, but at least I’ll have tried.”

She sank a little further into the water. “It’s good. You’re figuring out what kind of King you want to be.”

He still wasn’t sure he wanted to be any kind of king. But he hadn’t been given that choice, so he was doing his best. “I’m trying.”

She reached up to squeeze his knee. “That’s the best anybody can do.”

He nodded and watched her a moment. “Do you want company in there?”

The answer was on her face before she spoke. “I think I’m tired and just want to go to bed. I’ve been in here a while.”

He tried hard not to let that hurt. Instead he leaned over and kissed her forehead. “All right. I’ll leave you be.”

“Can you grab me a towel?” she asked, sounding hesitant about it.

“Of course.” He went to the cupboard and dug out a big, thick one, walking back to the edge of the tub and held it between his arms for her to step into. She let him wrap it around her, and she leaned into him and sighed.

He held her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head and rocking her a little. She sighed again, and said, “I suppose it’s not so bad.”

“What isn’t?”

“Being the Royal Mistress.”

“You are so much more than that.”

She rested her head against his shoulder. “You made the point yourself. If people don’t like you appointing your friends, that goes twice as much for your lover. I’ve known it and I’ve just been ignoring it.”

As much as it irritated him, there were times that Thor wished he had Loki’s charm and clever tongue. He bet his brother never put his foot in it with his woman. “I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he said. “We wouldn’t have gotten this far without you. I trust and depend on you because you’re smart and thoughtful and good at what you do. Not because you share my bed.”

“I know you do. And I’m impervious most times and I don’t give a shit what people think.”

“But sometimes it hurts?” he filled in.

“Sometimes.” She turned her head to press her face into his shirt. “I’ve thrown problem customers out of that bar a dozen times—twice it’s been Knut, for the same shit. Let’s just say I never got a standing ovation.”

He sighed and held her a little tighter. “I’m sorry, Brun.” He rocked her a little. “I wish you could have met my friend Sif. She could have happily told you the patriarchal mess that Asgard became
after we lost the Valkyries.”

“Been a little out of sorts lately, I think.” She moved out of his arms, and back into the bedroom to find her robe. “Stuff that isn’t your fault.”

“Anything I could help with?” he asked, following her. He liked solving problems with actual solutions. There were so few of them lately.

“Likely not. Syn and Loki are very serious, clearly. If he has to leave when we get to Midgard, she will go with him. She’s in love and I am happy for her. But she also isn’t mine any more, not the way she was. I guess maybe I’m jealous. Which I then feel bad about.” Wrapped in her robe, she sat on the end of the bed. “For a long time she was all I had.”

Feeling oddly hesitant, he joined her, sitting close enough to touch. “I’m sorry,” he told her. “I can’t fix that.” Curling a hand around hers, he brought it to his mouth to kiss her knuckles. “Other than to remind you she is no longer all you have.”

Her eyes searched his face, and then she nodded. “I didn’t want to whine to you about this,” she said. “You have enough to deal with, and on so many more levels.”

“I want you to talk to me,” he protested. “I want to know what’s worrying you. I want to help you when I can.”

“I was just trying not to add to your burden.” She looked down at their joined hands. “Maybe that was a mistake.”

“The burdens of leadership are very different from . . . you. Being with you, knowing I’m part of your life. . . that helps me. It reminds me who I really am.”

She looked up at him. “I think I envy you that, you know. I haven’t known in a thousand years.”

Kissing her hand again, he asked, “Who do you want to be?”

“Haven’t known that in a thousand years, either. I don’t want to define myself by this. Us. But then it is, right now, the only thing that makes me happy.”

“Ah.” He understood that. He was fairly certain he loved her - probably far more that she did him - but he saw too much in her to want to simply be his mistress or consort or anything else. She was Brunhilde the Valkyrie, wielder of Dragonfang. He wished she could see herself the way he saw her.

“I expect this sort of thing will go on for as long as I share your bed. But the alternative is leaving and that’s not even on the table.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he admitted. “I’d probably do something stupid and macho in an attempt to keep you.”

She grinned at him. “Bang on my door at 2 am and shout about how you can’t live without me?”

“Something like that. Probably with a terribly metered poem about your eyes and hair.”

“Maybe about how they’re the same color? Perhaps you could compare them to some sort of food.”

“Loki once wrote a poem for a girl he fancied comparing her hair color to the fur of a murmin.” Which were small forest rodents with pale brown pelts.
Brun laughed. “You should know, my heart can’t be won with pretty words or grand gestures.”

“I never thought it could. I’d probably go with copious weapons and candy.”

“The sword was actually pretty perfect.” He could hear her trying to keep her voice light, but she
didn’t quite make it. The night he’d given it to her, he’d seen a flash of emotion in her eyes, the
same as he saw now. It didn’t last long, but it ran deep.

“Convenient, then, that I have good taste in weapons.” He leaned over and kissed her. “Maybe I’ll
piss you off now and then, give myself an excuse to shop.”

She cleared her throat. “I’m not good at talking about this kind of thing, but I. . . it really meant a
lot to me.”

“I’m glad,” he said softly. “I want to make you happy.”

“You do. Even if I don’t always show it well.”

She was rather terrible at showing it, actually. But he was learning her language, slowly but
surely. Most of the time, he was pretty sure he was doing a good job. “Mostly I’m sure you’ll let
me know if I make you unhappy. Which is useful.”

“Well, that is likely true.”

He stroked his fingers through her damp hair, picking out knots. “We should sleep. Busy day
tomorrow. Creating a criminal justice system from scratch.”

She leaned into him. “That’s probably a good idea.”

He stood and undressed as she shed her robe and curled up under the covers. He joined her a
moment later, tucking himself around her. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

Kissing her shoulder, he asked, “For anything in particular?”

“For putting up with me.”

“That’s my sincere pleasure.”

She snuggled against him and made a contented noise. “You know what? I believe you.”
Syn had had this dream before. She was in the courtyard outside her palace, though it was scarcely recognizable. The trees in her garden were aflame and the air stunk of burning green wood and blood and death. There was screaming, and crying and the howling of wolves. Hela and her men were coming and the war was lost but a Queen did not surrender.

The arrows pierced the skin of the goddess of Death but she only laughed, throwing those swords at Syn. She dodged the first few, knocking them away with her staff, fighting panic on the edge of madness. She was going to die, she knew how this ended. Hela would knock her staff away and a sword would pierce her thigh. Then the bitch would be standing above her and a long blade would drive through her chest into the courtyard stone.

But before it could happen, the scene warped and changed. Alfheim became somewhere grey and lifeless, with a gloomy sky and washed out light. The air stunk of ozone and dust. The was no wind, no sounds of animals. As if she stood on a dead world.

A monster stood before her, the blade of a sword thrust through its chest. She felt pride about that, but it was short lived, as the creature grabbed her arms and yanked her close, so the blade impaled her chest.

Fingers scrabbled at its waist and when it released her she knew she’d had revenge, detonating one of the grenades on its belt. It had killed her mother and now her, she had killed it.

(But that wasn’t right, her mother had died alone in her room, overcome with grief. Her mother had been strong, except when it counted.)

Her body was shuddering, a piercing cold taking over her limbs. She was dying, this was death and she was a fool a fool-

Syn jerked awake, sitting up and kicking the covers away, gasping for air. Her hands went to her chest to heal, to get the sword out, something, but there was nothing there.

Loki sat up beside her, hands touching her gently. “It’s a dream, it’s a dream.”

She shook her head, whole body trembling. “Real. It felt real.” It was the third night in a row she’d woken with nightmares. They were getting worse, more violent.

He pulled her into his lap. “It’s over, it was just a dream.”

“It feels real. The smells, the sounds.” She curled her arms around him, pressing into his embrace. “I’ve dreamt of Hela stabbing me for years but it’s different now. It changes. But it feels just as real as the memory.”

Loki rubbed her back. “Changes? How?”

“I’m somewhere else. Some planet I’ve never been on. It’s grey and washed out and there’s no animals or life. This creature is there, it has a sword sticking out of its chest, as is someone had driven it through from behind. And then it grabs my shoulders and yanks me close, so the sword stabs me.”

He sucked in a shaky breath and whispered, “What?”

The details were getting muddled but she tried to sort them out. “There’s something about a
grenade, that kills it and then I’m on the ground and it’s so cold, I can’t—“ He’d gone utterly still and she leaned back, frightened at his expression. “Loki?”

“I think... I think that’s *my* memory.”

She stared at him a moment. “That’s how you died?” she said softly.

“I was one Svartalhiem. There was this Dark Elf turned monster. He was about to kill Thor, he’d started the attack that killed my mother. I stabbed him in the back. I went to help Thor up, and the monster pulled me onto the sword.”

“Oh, Loki.” It was impossible, but it had to be what she’d seen. The details were too exact. She slid her arms around him, resting her chin on his shoulder. To her relief, his arms closed around her, crushing her tight. “I’m so sorry, my darling. It was awful.”

“It was. I did kill him, though. Imploded him, actually. And told him I’d see him in hell.”

He was fiercely proud of that, so she gave him a squeeze. “Good for you.”

“Then I died,” he said. “That was pretty awful.”

It had been so cold. Burning cold, that sunk down into her bones. It still ached. “Your skin turned. Back to Jotun. Does it feel that cold to you? When it happens?”

“Yes, but it was much worst that day.”

So it had been a true memory, the way he had experienced it. Syn pressed close to him, stroking her hair. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

“That my memories are getting into your head? No it doesn’t.”

He rubbed her back and they held each other. Eventually, she was settled enough they laid back down, but she didn’t want to let him go. “You haven’t been having any strange dreams about being a queen have you?”

“No. Not that I know of. I don’t remember my dreams as well as you do.”

Most people didn’t. “Anything else out of the ordinary?”

“You make me feel a stronger urge to be honest than I’m used to.”

She couldn’t help a little chuckle. “That’s probably just an effect of my curse, but I feel I should apologize.”

“It’s a highly disconcerting sensation, I assure you.”

“My poor darling.” She kissed his shoulder. “We should... keep an eye out for anything else. Though spirits know what we’ll do about it.”

Loki sighed. “I hope it doesn’t get worse. There are some very dark things in my head.”

Not quite sure what to say to that - as he had not shared those things with her - she gave him another kiss and settled her head on his chest. “Don’t let me go,” she whispered.

“I won’t,” he said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Whatever was happening, she was quite confident he wasn’t consciously
causing it. He wouldn’t hurt her, especially not with his own memories.

“Perhaps not, but I am hurting you nonetheless, and I don’t like that.”

She closed her eyes, inhaling his scent. “You also bring me comfort.”

His hand rubbed her back in slow, gently circles. “I don’t know how good I am at that, but I’m trying.”

Focusing on his hand, she willed herself to relax. “That’s all I ask. That you try.”

“You’ll probably be stuck with me a long time. I’ll learn.”

That thought, at least, made her smile as she drifted off.

The dreams came sporadically, sometimes none, sometimes all night, for several nights in a row. When she couldn’t take it any more, she’d mix up a sedative and get a reprieve. She knew she looked awful and Loki was worried about her, but neither of them knew why it was happening, much less how to stop it.

“This ship needs a spa,” she complained to Brun one afternoon.

“We could build one. I could use a project.”

They were in Brun’s office. Syn had kept drifting off to sleep in the infirmary and had come for distraction. “Come to think of it, there must be something like it. The Grandmaster did love his public baths.”

“All the time we’ve been on this ship, I can’t imagine there is an unexplored corner.”

That was a very good point. She sighed and tipped her head back, glaring at the ceiling. “I need to relax.”

“Sex is pretty good for that.”

She sighed again and closed her eyes. It might have been a coincidence, but she swore sometimes the better sex they had the worse the dreams were. It wasn’t something she’d shared with Loki, fearing he’d stop touching her entirely. “Is there anyone on the ship besides me and Loki that knows anything about magic?”

“Heimdal knows something about everything.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.” Hell, he probably already knew what was going on. He was like that.

“On the spa think. . .do you not have a tub in your room? Thor and I have one that’s practically a pool.”

“We do. It’s big enough for me to float in.” It took an impractical amount of time to fill, though. She usually just sponge bathed or used the hand sprayer.

“We have a steam room, too, though we don’t use it. There probably would be a market for a public spa. Asgaurdians love their saunas.”

“Maybe in the next port we can get supplies.” She forced her eyes open so she didn’t drift off in Brun’s guest chair. “I don’t suppose you’d let me borrow your steam room?”

“I don’t mind at all. . .but I’m a little worried about you right now, you look half dead. Are you
“sleeping?”

Oh for the ability to lie. “Rarely and not well.” Brun frowned and Syn sighed, shoulders slumping. “I’m having bad dreams.”

“Reliving your death again?”

“Sometimes. But it’s also other things.” She could leave it like that if Brun didn’t press but of course she was now giving her that very Brun look and she found herself saying, “I’m dreaming memories of Loki’s. Of when he was stabbed, mostly. But there’s other things. New dreams I can’t really remember, only that they’re dark and awful and I’m afraid. I’ve been taking sedatives sometimes and they help. But we don’t know why it’s happening so we can’t stop it and . . . I’m afraid,” she finished in a small voice, trying to remember the last time she admitted fear.

“Oh, Syn.” Brun reached out and took her hand. “And I’m going on about bathtubs.”

“It was a nice distraction,” she said, sniffing. “We don’t know what to do. There’s no magic users on the ship but us and Heimdall, as you said. Both of our mothers are gone, as is the library of Asgard. There’s some magic on Midgard, but it’s rare and primitive and two years away.” By the spirits, two years of this would drive her mad.

“Have you tried sleeping apart?”

The thought of that made her heart clench and she shook her head. “No.”

“It might help. If your dreams are merging.”

A peaceful sleep in exchange for an empty bed. She had no doubt he’d agree to it. He still blamed himself for her misery. But the idea of being unable to curl against him and fall asleep to the sound of his heartbeat made her feel tense and panicked. “I’ll think about it,” was all she said.

“Why don’t you come on over, have a steam bath and take a nap?”

She had to stifle a groan. “That sounds incredibly appealing.”

Brun stood. “Come on. Don’t make me carry you.”

Part of her wanted to make her, just because she knew she would, but she got to her feet and headed for the door. Brun did let her wind her arms through hers and lean on her as they walked. When they reached her room, she left Syn to sit on the bed and turn on the steam bath.

It occurred to her she had never been in their rooms. There wasn’t much personal in it. A hair brush, some lotion on top of a dresser. Someone had torn down the tackiest of the decorations, but it still reeked of the Grandmaster’s tastes. There was a very pretty sword in one corner that thrummed lightly with enchantments.

She could hear the steam going and went to stand in the door of the bathroom. “He got you a sword?”

Brun grinned at her, looking as happy as Syn had ever seen her. “Yes, he did. Because I lost Dragonfang in the fight against Hela.”

“It’s lovely. I can feel it humming from here.”

“Enchantments keep it sharp and balanced.”
“That man knows you well.”

“I guess he does, doesn’t he? The steam is ready.”

Syn shed her top and trousers, long used to being naked in front of Brun. “You’re joining me, I hope?”

“Only for you,” she said, pulling her own shirt off. “Please ignore the bite mark on my shoulder.”

“Only if you ignore any I might have.” She stepped into the steam room and settled on the bench, taking a deep breath. Her body already felt more relaxed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Brun asked after a moment. “Or talk about something else?”

“There’s not much more to say,” Syn admitted. “I now know what it feels like to die in a slightly different way. Jotun’s are very, very cold when they’re dying. I’m happy to talk about the happier aspects of our relationship, but I doubt you’re interested.”

Brun poked her with her foot. “Hearing about how he makes you happy does more good for my feelings about him than hearing about how you’re tormented by his dreams.”

She smiled at that. “He’s been bringing me breakfast in bed to make up for it.”

“That does sound very nice of him.”

Most of her other happy thoughts involved being naked, so she decided a change of topic might be in order. “Did I tell you I’m embroidering a blanket for Muriel’s impending baby?”

Brun grinned. “You and your embroidery. That’s very nice of you, I’m sure she’ll love something that personal. I think major life events like that are going to be hard on the ship, away from expected traditional and rituals.”

“On Alfheim it was a tradition for the eldest woman of a family or village to make the first blanket a baby would be wrapped in. Most of the older population didn’t make it off of Asgard. I thought. … someone should do something.” She tossed Brun a grin. “I’m just trying to worm my Alfan ways into your society.”

“Births are pretty rare, so it’s a huge deal for a family. Lots of festivities.”

“We should make sure it’s the same here. People should celebrate.”

“I expect eventually we’ll have to figure out how to throw a proper Asgardian wedding.”

Syn wondered briefly if that was directed at her personally. “Is it elaborate?”

“Very elaborate, and very, very long. Featuring lots of ceremonial helmets and weaponry. Though I doubt anyone’s ceremonial helmets made it off of Asgard.” She smirked. “Except Loki’s.”

“It sits on a table on his side of the room,” Syn confirmed. “Sometimes I hang things off the horns and he huffs at me.”

“Maybe he’ll lend it out.”

“I don’t know, he’s awfully attached to that thing.”

She tilted her head. “Are you going to make use of it?”
“We haven’t discussed it.” Syn took a deep breath of the steamy air. “We are betrothed, for whatever that’s worth. He didn’t exactly apologize for giving me the necklace without an explanation, but at least I understand why he did it. I’m told that our families would need to negotiate marriage terms, which would mean you and Thor, which we agreed would be somewhat unfair.”

“Are you implying I would do something untoward like conduct my dowry negotiations naked?”

“I know you hate him but you and Loki do think rather similarly sometimes.”

Brun sighed. “I don’t hate him.”

She was a little surprised to see that wasn’t a lie. Syn had spent the weeks on the ship carefully arranging her days to have “Brun time” and “Loki time” and never the two shall meet. “Dislike him, then.”

“I don’t know that it’s possible to discuss this without hurting your feelings. I actually wish I could lie to you, because I would. I can tell he makes you happy.”

Their conversations did seem to turn the same circle when it came to Loki. “It’s . . . well, it’s not fine, because I’d prefer you got along. But I understand. He’s a difficult person and he hurt you deeply. I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“I think it bothers Thor, too. If that makes you feel better. Though I think his feelings on Loki are pretty complicated in their own right.”

Syn blew out a breath. “Yes, Loki’s as well. Once in a great while he’ll mention something, but always in passing and never in detail.” She smiled. “Maybe we should lock them in the sequester room and force them to sort it out.”

“They might just punch each other for a while.”

“I had two brothers, that’s pretty much how all emotional conversations start or end.”

Brun laughed. “Well, I’ll keep it in mind.”

*

Getting people to staff the security team wasn’t particularly hard. Thor put out a call for applications, and they got a healthy number of replies. Brun sorted through them and tried to identify all of those who she thought could handle themselves in a fight. There were a couple of men who’d been palace guards that had helped Heimdall with the evacuation, and had survived the fight on the bridge. They were obvious choices.

Otherwise, she tried to include as many women as possible.

Once they had a short list, Thor called them in for a meeting to talk about what their duties would be and to get input on what was needed. He also asked that they each submit a nomination for the head of the security team. “You will be reporting to this person and will take orders from them. I want it to be someone you have respect for. Both in and out of a brawl.”

Every last one of them looked surprised. “You’re asking us?” one asked.

“I want your opinion,” he told them, in that calm, reasonable voice he was occasionally capable of. “I’ll make the final decision, but I’ll take your suggestions into account.”
“It’s novel,” another of them women said. “Not something you’d have seen at home.”

“I know,” Thor conceded. “But much as we might have pretended, home was not perfect. And it was the imperfections that caused it to rot. I’m trying not to make the same mistakes.”

“ Seems worth a shot.”

He smiled at that. “Please have your nominations to me by tomorrow’s supper.”

There was a chorus of “Yes, Your Majesty.”

They filed out and Thor turned to Brun where she’d been observing. “That went better than expected.”

“Democracy isn’t going to come easily to a bunch of Asgardians. But I think you did good.”

“Thank you.” He kissed her temple, tugging her close a moment. “They’re a good group. I knew some of them by sight if not name.”

“And now evicting drunk assholes will be someone else’s problem.”

He grinned. “Does that please you?”

She honestly did not know the answer to that. “It’ll certainly make my evenings calmer.”

The grin widened a little. “I’ll have to think of ways to liven them up.”

“On that count I have every faith in you.” She tucked her arm in his. “Come on, let’s go find lunch.”

That was the last she expected the hear about the security team. They seemed to have it well under control and Thor seemed happy with the selection.

Then he appeared in her doorway the next afternoon. “I got in all the nominations for the security team leader.”

She was immersed in working on the new ship’s Spa & Sauna she was trying to get built, and only glanced up briefly. “Don’t tell me someone nominated Knut.”

“No, I don’t think any of them have that sense of humor.” He paused. “Most of them nominated you.”

She looked at him more slowly, and seriously this time. “What?”

“Out of fourteen nominations, nine were you.”

All Brun could do was stare at him. “You’re kidding me.”

He lifted a hand. “I swear. Get Syn in here. Or I’ll show you the papers.”

She shook her head. “Do you think they’re serious or just trying to win your favor?”

“I asked a couple, they said they knew you were an Valkyrie and that you wouldn’t take any shit. They seemed sincere. They were also both women.”

She was more touched than she could effectively articulate. “Do you think I should do it?”
“I think you would be fantastic at it, and it would give you a firm and clear place here outside of me. But if you don’t want it I won’t force you.”

“Well, then. . . I accept.”

Thor grinned and held out a hand as if to shake hers. “Congratulations.”

She stood up and shook his hand, because sometimes he was too adorable for words. He then lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles, like she knew he wouldn’t. “You do that to all you recruits?” she teased.

“Only the first part,” he assured her. “Some things I save just for you.”
Chapter 19

After he left, she found Loki and saw about obtaining some training space. He was already annoyed she’d needed space for the spa, but he’d grudgingly assigned her some gym space. Syn talked about her not liking him, but it was clearly mutual. It was probably a miracle they could work together.

In the morning, she called her new team to the training gym for a meeting. Several of them looked very pleased to see her and two of them shook her hand as they came in. Even a few of the men. Which was nice because she hadn’t been looking forward to throwing them off the team if they got macho with her.

“Hi, everyone,” she said. “Welcome. We probably all know each other somewhat, but it might be good to exchange a little background information. We do have to trust each other. And the less secrets we have the harder it will be for people to manipulate us.” She blew out a breath. “I am Brunnhilde. I was the leader of the Valkyries until Hela killed them all. I spent a millennia or so on a planet where time has no meaning, and then came back to fight Hela again. As I think everyone is aware, the King sleeps in my bed.” She could see several of them women smile at the way she’d phrased that. “This is a really popular thing for people to throw at me—in the most vulgar way they can come up—while they are trying to get the upper hand. If you’ve got anything that is sensitive, I promise you, the assholes will find it and announce it to entire Tavern because they’re pissed you told them to stop hitting their wife.”

“Pretty sure on this ship everyone knows everyone else business,” one of the women - Astrid - said. “The walls are thin.”

“People will try anyway.”

“Do we just ignore them?”

The older woman next to her shook her head. “You hit ‘em harder,” she said, getting a laugh from the others.

“Yeah, more or less,” Brun said. “Joking helps sometimes. But mostly hit them harder.”

“I am so glad I nominated you,” Astrid said sincerely.

Brun grinned, feeling inordinately proud. “Well... thank you. I’m going to do my best.”

“We look forward to serving with you.”

They spent a couple hours on hand-to-hand combat training. She didn’t want to arm anyone unless she had to, since that only escalated things. Afterwards, she took them to the Tavern, where they drank and got to know each other better. They were good people, good recruits. And for a while it felt like old times, with her girls.

Thor was in their rooms, reading something on a data pad, when she came back, a little drunk and in a very good mood. He smiled when he saw her. “Successful first day, then?”

She grinned. “They are good people.” She crossed the room to stand in front of his chair. “We beat each other up and then went out for drinks.”

“Sounds like some of my best days as a young man.”
“Are you working?” she asked, gesturing at the data pad.

“Reading reports. Nothing that can’t wait. Did you need something?”

She nudged his knee with hers. “No. I’m just tipsy and happy and I want you.”

He blinked, then his face split into a grin and he tossed the pad aside, tugging her into his lap. “Then I am at your disposal.”

She straddled his thighs and kissed him. “Good.” He cupped the back of her head, kissing her roughly. The other arm snaked around her waist, holding her to him. She pulled at his shirt and he acquiesced, lifting his arms as she got it off. She tried not to rip it, as they had a limited supply of clothes.

He did the same with the top she wore, tossing it in the same direct she’d send his flying. Then, cupping her hips, he tugged her close so he could kiss her skin, his beard scraping against her, sending a shiver through her.

She stroked his hair, just enjoying it for a moment. She loved the way he touched her. Like she was precious. Like she was the only woman in the world. Nights like this, when her inhibitions were down, he stirred things she hadn’t felt in a thousand years. Peace, hope, safety. Love. She didn’t know how to tell him any of it.

His mouth closed over her nipple, sucking lightly. She felt the graze of teeth, before he soothed her with his tongue. His other hand flattened on her back, pressing so she would arch more firmly into his mouth.

“I need you,” she whispered. “That’s all I need.”

“You have me,” he murmured on her skin, pressing another kiss to her. Leaning back, he caught her gaze. “You know that, don’t you?”

She wasn’t sure of a lot of things, but she was certain he was hers. She ran her fingers over the edge of the eye patch and down his cheek. “I do. I’ve never doubted that.”

He smiled, soft and sweet, one that made her insides melt. “Good.” Drawing her down, he kissed her again. “I need you, too.”

“You have me,” she mumbled against his mouth. “Any way you want.”

“Just like this.” His voice rumbled through her chest, making her tingle. He cupped her rear, rocking into her so she could feel the hard length of his arousal. “I want to watch you.”

She sucked on his lower lip, and then wiggled out of his grip so she could get out of the rest of her clothes. He leaned back in his chair and watched her, looking very much a King right then. His gaze felt like a touch, and her body throbbed as she climbed back into his lap. “We need a throne in here.”

He ran his hands up her thighs and over her hips. “To fuck on?” he asked, kissing her breasts again.

“Just like this.” She reached blindly for the buttons on his fall. “Or I could put my armor on. Suck you off. Then you could fuck me against the wall.”

“I could bend you over the arm,” he rumbled, hand sliding between her legs. He groaned a little - probably at how wet she was - and stroked her clit with two rough fingers. “Bury myself deep.”
She shuddered and searched for a reply—she was enjoying this graphic conversation they were having—but for a moment she couldn’t seem to form words. So she kissed him, rough and hot, digging her nails into the back of his neck so he’d know how desperate she was. Finally she managed, “I want all of that.”

The fingers on her clit pressed harder, faster. “So do I. All of it. Everything.” His other hand squeeze the globe of her ass. “Right now I want to watch your face as you come.”

All she could do was gasp and nod. He knew exactly—exactly—how to touch her. It took just another moment of the perfect pitch and then her body exploded. The pleasure was so intense every part of her shook.

“Good girl,” he murmured, with just enough humor in her voice she didn’t feel the need to kill him later. He eased his hand away from her slowly, cupping her legs and deliberately letting her feel how wet they were. He rubbed her back in big circles and she calmed.

By now she should be used to him making her feel dazed and liquid and yet somehow still turned on. She lifted one of his hands and kissed his knuckles like he always did, and then sucked one of his fingers into her mouth. She could taste herself, and that turned her on, too.

He growled and squeezed her ass again, tilting her hips until his cock lay against her folds. Rocking, he slid himself against her, coating himself with moisture. “Ready?”

She felt him nudge inside her a little, and she sank down swiftly, taking him inside her in one stroke. She was so wet it was easy, and she was gratified by the sound he made. She kissed his mouth and whispered, “You did that to me.”

He tugged her lip between his teeth, sucking. Tugging her hips, he urged her to move, lifting up into her as she rode him. His eye closed and he tipped his head back on the chair. She braced her hands on the arms so she could ride him harder. It got rough, his hands pulling on her hair and the chair itself creaking.

Finally, he must have been near his limit, because his hand snaked between them again and he leaned back to look at her. “Come for me, Brun,” he rumbled. “I want to feel it.” His fingers framed her clit, rubbing roughly.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes, yes.” Whatever came after that was incoherent as she came apart.

His hands gripped her hips, fingers digging into the muscle as he moved her, thrusting hard and deep, before stiffening with a roar. She felt molten heat spread through her and he released.

She melted against him, whimpering a little as echos of pleasure continued to ripple slowly. “How do you do this to me?”

“Magic,” he murmured, tenderly stroking her hair and back.

She sighed. “Well... sure as shit feels like a lightning storm.”

He rumbled a laugh and kissed her cheek. “Likewise.”

Brun didn’t know it was possible to feel this content. She hummed happily. “And I’m getting us a throne if I have to build it myself.”

“I’ll help. I swing a good hammer, you know.”

*
Watching someone you cared for suffer was a unique form of hell Loki hadn’t experienced. He had to admit, he didn’t like it.

Syn was still having nightmares, though she was trying to hide it from him. He’d found her napping several times, and knew from ship’s gossip that she hadn’t taken a shift in the infirmary in a week. There were times he swore he felt her exhaustion and fear as keenly as if it were his own.

The smart thing to do, probably, was put distance between them. Find himself somewhere to sleep on the other side of the ship and see if it gave her relief. When she napped alone there were no dreams, so it seemed clear that proximity was at least part of the problem. The thought of sleeping without her was untenable, but perhaps if she had a few night’s reprieve they could go about finding a better solution.

He couldn’t bring himself to suggest it to her, or to stop joining her in bed, though he made a point to work late, giving her a chance to fall asleep before he got there. He missed their quiet routine of getting ready for bed together, but at least it guaranteed her some peaceful rest.

After one particularly late evening trying to balance three conflicting inventory reports, he dragged himself into their room in a particularly bad mood. Syn was asleep already, laying on her stomach with her arms tucked under her pillow. The covers had slipped down and he could see the scar on her spine, paler than the rest of her skin. Unable to resist, he paused at her side of the bed and stroked two fingers down the mark.

She stirred and turned her head, cracking an eye open and smiling. “Was wondering when you’d join me,” she murmured sleepily.

“Sometimes I’m astonished at how time consuming my job is.”

“When I was my brother’s right hand I worked from dawn to midnight some days. Your role is much the same.” She cuddled her pillow. “A kingdom doesn’t run itself. Neither does a ship.”

“I’m not certain he trusts me, on a personal level. But he did give me a lot of responsibility.”

“He did. But you’re off the clock now, darling. And my bed is lonely.”

“I suppose then I shall join you,” he said, going around the bed to undress.

She turned to watch him, lids drooping. By the time he joined her under the covers she’d closed them again, but reached over to place a warm arm around his waist. “Better,” she mumbled.

“You’re sleeping well tonight?” he asked her.

“Mmmhmm. No dreams. None last night either.”

He kissed her hair. “Maybe it’s getting better.”

“I hope so.” Her fingers tightened on him, then relaxed. “Goodnight, Loki.”

“Goodnight, my love.”

He fell asleep to the quiet rhythm of her breathing. And woke several hours later to the sound of her whimpering.

She had rolled away from him, onto her back, covers kicked off and tangled around her legs. She was whimpering and shuddering, a sheen of sweat over her skin. “No,” she mumbled. “Stop. Please stop. I won’t, I won’t.” Her fingers clenched on the covers and she stiffened suddenly,
back arched as if in great pleasure or great pain. Then she screamed.

Loki caught her arm and shook her. “Syn. Syn!”

She fought him, even after her eyes opened. But he was stronger than her and, though he hated it, pinned her to the bed until the sleep haze cleared from her eyes and she blinked up at him. “Loki. *Loki.*” She reached for him and he let her go so she could wrap her arms around him.

He held her. “It’s over,” he whispered. “I’m here.”

She gasped as if she couldn’t get enough air. “Hot, it was so hot.” Her arms shifted, tightening on him. “I couldn’t move, I couldn’t fight. There were voices, creatures with hoods. The burned me. Branded me. I was screaming until my voice gave out and it wouldn’t stop.” The last word cracked and she started to sob, shaking.

Loki thought he might stop breathing. He’d buried those memories down so far, the details and blurred, had been obscured. Now they were right there again, and happening to her. They’d been methodical in their experiments, looking for what worked, what would hurt the most, how much it would take to break him. “I’m sorry,” he choked out. “Gods, I’m so sorry.”

Her arms tightened again, fingers digging into his back. “Why?” She whispered. “Why were they doing that to you? What did they want?”

“Obedience. They wanted my cooperation—no, my willing participation—in something.”

She took a shuddering breath. “The thing on Earth? With the tesseract?”

He nodded, and then realized she couldn’t see it and added, “Yes.”

Syn was silent. Her hands softened, started rubbing his back, as if she was the one comforting him and not the other way around. Finally, she leaned back a little, just enough to rest her forehead on his. “I’m so sorry, Loki.”

“You’re the one reliving it now.”

“I can wake from my dreams, you lived it.” He could feel her hands in his hair, stroking, toying with the strands. “It changed you, didn’t it? I always thought finding out you were Jotun was what closed you off, made you stop trusting. But it was that, wasn’t it? No one can survive that and be the same person they were.”

“What I did after finding out I was Jotun was pretty damn bad.”

She didn’t argue that, just stroked his hair and let him hold her. “That wasn’t a no.”

“I tried to blow up Jotunheim. I wanted to impress my father. I thought if I ended them as a threat once and for all he might see me as... worthy, I guess. Thor smashed the bridge and I fell. I passed out, thought I was dying... and then I woke up in pitch dark in a box so small I couldn’t stand.” He shook his head, not wanting to go into details. “And you are right. Before they even let me out of the box, I didn’t care about anyone anymore.”

“Oh, Loki. My Loki.” She cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. He could taste the salt of her tears in the kiss. “I wish I could take it from you.”

“I wouldn’t want you to carry it. I don’t. It made me a monster.”

“You’re not a monster. There’s no kindness in monsters. And you’re kind to me.”
He didn’t really believe her, but he also knew she couldn’t lie. There was something about her faith in him that made him feel that if there was good in him, she’d somehow wrench it out. Right now he couldn’t be anything but honest. “So it turns out monsters are capable of love.”

Her breath hitched and he could see her eyes widen, even in the dim light. Her hands were shaking, but her voice was steady when she said, “I love you, too. So much.”

“I don’t deserve it.”

“Love isn’t about what you deserve.”

He rested his forehead on hers. “What is it about, then?”

She laughed a little. “I don’t know. Trust and faith and . . . two people moving together to be the best version of themselves. Love is love. It doesn’t have logic.”

Loki sighed. “I think I have a lot farther to go than you.”

“Fortunately, I’m very stubborn and persistent.”

The decent part of him wanted to argue with her. To insist that she was better off without him for a whole host of reasons. But the part of him that was selfish had long been louder, and that part didn’t want to let her go. “I do love you so much.”

“I love you,” she whispered, then kissed him. “I love you.” Another kiss, deeper. “I love you.”

He stroked his hands down her back. “I may never get tired of that.”

“Good, because I may say it a lot. It’s been pressing on my tongue for a while.”

“I will try to be worthy of it,” he said, before kissing her again. She shuddered and opened her mouth to him, hands tangling in his hair. Now that she’d said it aloud he could taste it in her kiss, feel it in the stroke of her hands. She loved him. Despite what he was and all he had done she loved him.

He tugged up the nightgown she had on. “Take this off.”

Crossing her arms in front of her, she gathered up fistfuls of fabric and tugged it off, tossing it somewhere. Her skin was soft and warm under his hands, familiar. There wasn’t an inch of her he didn’t know intimately. He loved touching her, the feel of her skin and quiet sounds she always made.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, arching into his touch. Cupping and shaping her breast, he ran the pad of his thumb over her nipple, around and around, until it tightened and swelled, drawing a little whimper from her throat. He tipped her back, and lifted her a little, so he could capture the nipple in his mouth.

Her hands fluttered, then tightened in his hair. He sucked her, nibbled gently, stroking her other breast, pinching the nipple as he gave a particularly hard suck, making her buck and gasp out his name. He dipped her all the way back to the bed, and then took a moment to just look at her, sprawled out naked for him. “I will never get tired of looking at you.”

She smiled a slow, lazy smile and stroked his jaw before running her hand down his arm where it was braced next to her. “You’re welcome to look at me all you want, mo cuisle.”

He bent to kiss her skin. “I intend to do more than look.”
“Good.” She ran her hand up and down his arm again, fingers lightly encircling it. He kissed her stomach, the wing of her hip, and heard her sigh. “I need to feel you.”

He stroked his hand along the inside of her thigh. “Do you not feel this?”

“Yes,” she murmured, watching his hand before meeting his gaze again. “More.”

He moved higher, not taking his eyes off her face. Slowly he pushed her legs apart with gentle pressure, then kissed the same spot on her thigh. Syn made one of those soft sounds he loved so much, and he could feel her tremble beneath his lips. “More,” she whispered, and he let his mouth trail up her leg. She moaned when he reached her sex, and he took his time teasing her. But he wasn’t going to torment her tonight. She could come as many times as she wanted.

Her hands were in his hair again, alternately stroking and fisting as he found particularly good spots and strokes. She grew slick and swollen and his cock grew hard enough to ache, but he stayed right where he was. Her cries and whimpers grew more desperate and she started to lift up into him. Then he slipped two long fingers into her and she stiffened, back bowed as she flexed and pulsed against him. He sent a thread of magic into her—he could make that stretch out as long as he wanted, too.

“Loki.” He lifted his head to watch her, moving his fingers slowly so he could feel her at the same time. She was beautiful, breathtaking. Head thrown back, nipples dark and swollen, body shuddering over and over. She’d released his hair to reach up and grip the ties attached to the headboard and her hands were twisting desperately in the silk. “Please,” she gasped.

For once he had control over it, so he eased her down slowly, gently. She’d taught him all sorts of unexpected things he could do with his magic.

She was still whimpering a little when he moved up to kiss her. It was unexpectedly fierce, her tongue exploring his mouth as if to catch a taste of herself. “I love you,” she whispered. “Please fuck me.”

He had some clothes to get out of the way, but it wasn’t much before could slide inside her. She wrapped her legs around him and he hitched them higher. She moaned and her body clenched around him, surrounding him in her wet heat as he started to move inside her.

There was no reason for it to feel different, better. She was not tighter or hotter. Her skin wasn’t softer. But he swore it was and she was. It was deep and intense. “Don’t stop,” she mumbled, and he felt her magic tangling with his, firing nerves along his spine and stroking along his skin. “Don’t stop, more, more.”

“Anything,” he told her, moving harder and faster than he probably should. “I’ll give you anything.”

The bed was rocking with the force of his thrusts and she was gripped the headboard again. The very small part of him that was still thinking straight worried he’d hurt her. But then he felt her body start to flutter around him and even that part stopped thinking.

“Yes,” she gasped, arching into him. “Yes. Mine. Mine.” She shook, muscles clenching, and the tight passage of her sex grew even tighter, pulsing around him in time to her climax.

“Fuck,” he gasped, just because it felt so good. He was completely lost in her, the sound of her voice and the feel off her body. He clutched at her when he came, letting it drown him.

He was dimly aware of her arms coming around him, of him melting bonelessly into her and
crushing her into the mattress. And he was only certain of it because it was how he found them when he finally came back to his senses. Syn was gently stroking his hair, dropping tender, affectionate kisses on his shoulder. Their magic was still roused, thrumming between them like a heartbeat and he swore he could feel her contentment, and love and the little echoes of pleasure that were still pulsing through her.

He buried his face in her neck and mumbled, “I adore you.”

She smiled and squeezed him tight a moment. “I love you.”

Loki took a shuddery breath. “I’m sincere, right now I’m well beyond love.”

“I don’t have words for what I feel for you.” She stroked his hair out of his face. “I think in the morning we should talk to Heimdal. He has the best chance of knowing what’s happening to us.”

He blinked, then laughed. “The magic. For a moment I was really confused.”

She laughed and kissed his mouth. “I’m sorry. I should have waited until your brain was working again.”

“I agree, though. We should talk to him.”

“Tomorrow. Right now I’m incapable of doing anything but what we’re currently doing.”

He yawned. “I approve of this plan.”

Somehow he found the energy to shift off of her, enough so he wouldn’t crush her overnight. They slept like that, tangled around each other, and she had no more dreams.
Chapter 20

In the morning, after a shared bath that ended with them sprawled atop a collection of towels on the very damp floor, Loki and Syn ventured out for food and to find the Gatekeeper.

He was at the top of the ship, staring out at the black through the observation window. “I was wondering when you two would decide to talk to me.”

“I really don’t like it when you remind me you can see us in our bedroom,” Loki muttered.

Syn snorted and Heimdal actually smirked, turning to look at them. “I look away for the unsettling bits.” He focused on Syn. “You’ve been having dreams.”

She nodded. “They’re getting worse.”

“Your bond is getting stronger.”

“And that’s making them worse?” Loki asked. “They’ll only keep getting worse?” That was . . . untenable.

He shook his head. “No. They are a symptom of the growing bond. Your magic wants you to be in sync with each other. To act as one. This can’t happen until you fully understand the other. And so it is showing you the parts the other hides. She dreams the secrets you keep. And you have begun to feel the emotions she won’t speak.” Syn’s eyes widened comically.

“That’s . . . disconcerting,” Loki said. “How do we make it stop?”

“When your bond is solidified and you’re fully in sync with each other, it will stabilize.”

“Well this all sounds equal parts romantic and terrifying,” Syn said. “My question is why is it happening? I knew dozens of magical couples on Alfheim and never heard about anything like this.”

Heimdal glanced at her, then looked at Loki. “Jotun rarely mate, when they do, it is for life.”

He stared back. “So this is my fault?”

“The man generally recognizes his mate first, but the woman much accept it.”

Syn raised her hand like she was in class. “I’m not Jotun.”

Heimdal shrugged. “Magic is magic. Jotun, Alfan, Asgardian. His magic called to you and you answered the call. The bond has been made.” He tapped the choker on her neck. “You’re halfway there. Find a way to finish it.”

Loki looked at the necklace. “So we need to get married?”

“A marriage is not mating. It’s a promise, it helps. But this bond goes deeper. You must be in sync. Work as one. Understand what the other is thinking before they think it.”

“It’s like the magic,” Syn said. “When we’re both using it - when we know the other’s intent - we don’t burn.”

“Then what, we practice?”
“Practice. Talk. Learn the other.” He gave them both a pointed look. “Trust each other.”

He felt uncomfortable under Heimdal’s gaze. “I’m working on it.”

Syn’s hand tucked into his, fingers tangling together. “You are.”

A faint smile touched Heimdal’s mouth. “I think you’ll be all right.”

“How long will it take?” He couldn’t stand watching her suffer.

“I am not actually an expert of Jotun mating rituals. As long as it takes you to sort it out.”

Loki bit down on a growl of frustration, but Syn squeezed his hand. “It’s more than we knew an hour ago,” she said softly, then added, “Thank you,” to Heimdal.

“You may ask me questions any time you want,” he replied. “And I will do my best to answer.”

“Thank you,” she said again, then gave Loki a little tug. “It will be all right,” she said softly as they walked away.

“I hope so,” he said quietly.

“Do you have anything worse than the memory from last night hiding in there?”

“No. For sheer misery, that’s probably the worst. Certainly the most horrifying.”

“Well then. The worst is over. Perhaps I’ll start getting some pleasant ones. Turning Thor into a frog? Some youthful sexual fumbling? Someone must have taught you all those wonderful things you do with your tongue.”

He laughed. “Surely you can’t want to hear about my previous lovers.”

She shrugged easily. “When I dream it’s like I’m you, experiencing what you did. So I’d get to have a sex dream and wake up to you next to me. I can see all manner of upsides to this.”

“I admit, that does sound hot.”

They had reached the main part of the ship, the large area that Loki tended to think of as the Great Hall. It was where people seemed to spend time mingling and occasionally trading when they needed goods. Syn stopped him there in the middle of the crowd, cupped his face, and kissed him.

He wrapped his arms around her waist. “Well, hello.”

“I love you,” she told him, playing with the ends of his hair. “And I want everyone to know it.”

He touched the necklace. “They know you’re mine.”

“And now they know how happy I am about it.”

Loki laughed. “I love you too.”

She drew him down for another kiss and this time he heard someone whistle as they walked by.

“Now all I want to do is take you back home,” he murmured.

“I wouldn’t say no.” She glanced at something over his shoulder, then frowned a little. “I think someone wants to talk to you.”
Loki turned and frowned at the meaty man who looked like he drank too much. “Yes?”

He glanced at Syn before saying, “Wanted a word with you.”

“Who are you?”

“Name’s Knut.”

It didn’t ring a bell for Loki, but based on the way Syn wrinkled her nose, she knew the name. She pressed a kiss to Loki’s cheek. “I will see you at our rooms.”

He watched her go, then looked back at Knut. “Well?”

The man smiled a little. “Have a proposition for you.”

*  

Thor was having a good day.

Heimdal had told him he’d gotten sight of Midgard, and that apparently his father had obtained a large plot of land for them in Norway, though he couldn’t tell how. But there was definitely a place for them there.

Brun had been engrossed in her work, training her security team and also building a sauna—which people were very excited about. She came home happy at the end of every day and crawled into his lap.

He was in the Tavern, having an ale and tucked into the corner. It was slow, before the post-dinner rush, and the handful of people there were politely ignoring him so he could enjoy his drink in peace.

Halfway through his ale, his brother strode in, making a beeline for him. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” he agreed, lifting his stein. “Ale?”

“No. We need to talk. Privacy would not go amiss.”

Thor felt his brows lift. Loki looked serious and sincere, which usually meant his day was about to be ruined. Still, he nodded, downed the last gulp of his drink, and stood. “My rooms.”

Loki was silent until they were behind closed doors. “Do you know a man named Knut?”

He crossed his arms. “Regrettably, yes. What’s he done?”

“He came to me and asked me if I would like the throne.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

Loki sighed. “I am not. He wants to start a rebellion. He says he has people. They want the ship to stop for good at the next planet.”

“Dammit.” Thor rubbed his head. “What did you tell him?”

“That I accepted his exciting offer, and we would meet tomorrow to discuss details.”

“Good.” Later he would reflect on the fact he hadn’t for a moment, worried this was some sort of plot. “We need to get Brun and Heimdal in on this. Figure out exactly how many people he has
“What are you going to do with him?” Loki asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “We don’t have the facilities to hold someone in jail long term.”

“Treason generally isn’t an offense punished with imprisonment.”

Thor sighed. “You want me to execute him?”

Loki shrugged. “It’s not my call to make. You are the King. I only note that if not for Mother’s intervention, Odin was going to execute me. Whom—I now really should admit—he saw as his son.” He waved a hand and the door. “In this case, we’ve got an asshole who likes to publicly call your woman a whore.”

He had to admit, he liked this new, more self aware Loki, quite a bit. “There are so few of us. I don’t know how the people would react to me killing someone.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “But you make a good point. He’s not shown a lot of redeeming values.”

“He may have a number of people involved, which does make it messier.” He crossed his arms. “I guess it boils down to . . . what kind of King do you want to be? Father preferred peace at the tip of a sword. I preferred stepping back and allowing self determination. But you seemed pretty pissed at me for doing so.”

“I was pissed because you were ignoring the other realms in the interest of stroking your ego with theater.”

“I was letting them fight their own battles.”

“Did you tell them that? Did you ensure that after centuries of Asgard protection they were prepared to fight their own battles?”

Loki sighed, looking elsewhere. “No.”

“I do not want to be Father,” he said firmly. “But there is a happy medium between that and your way.”

“Honestly, that’s probably for the best.”

“And part of that is listening to other opinions. So I’m going to talk to Brun and Heimdal. And make a decision before your meeting tomorrow.”

Loki nodded, and turned towards the door. Then he stopped and looked back at Thor. “I’m ashamed to say, I thought about it for a moment.”

Unsurprised, Thor asked, “Why didn’t you?”

He smirked. “Maybe I’m finally growing.” The smile faded, and he added, “Maybe I just didn’t want to kill my brother.”

That did surprise him a little, not so much the sentiment but that he had said it out loud. “Careful, Loki. Keep talking like that and I may start hugging.”

He held up his hands. “Let’s not get carried away.”

“Are you sure? Just a quick one. We could smack each other’s backs.”
“I’ve no need of bruised ribs, thank you.” He smiled. “You may be officiating a wedding sooner rather than later. I promise to hug you then.”

Impending coup momentarily forgotten, Thor found himself grinning. “Oh really? I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

That was certainly the truth. “And you’re certain she’s the one?”

“If Heimdal is to be believe, it’s a done deal.”

He didn’t entirely know what that meant, but he had truly never seen his brother as happy as he was with Syn. She seemed to settle him in ways Thor had only just begun to recognize were out of place. “I’m very happy for you,” he said sincerely. “I look forward to welcoming her to the family.”

“Thank you. Let me know whatever else you need from me in dealing with this matter.”

“I will.” With that, Loki left and Thor went to track down Brun and apprise her of the issue.

She was about as outraged as he expected her to be. “I’ll go kill him. I’ll enjoy it.”

Sometimes she and Loki really did have a lot in common. “I need to catch him conspiring with Loki. And then we need to figure out proper punishment.”

“Chuck him out the airlock,” she said immediately.

“I will not rule at the end of a sword,” he snapped, probably too harshly.

She put her hands one her hips. “There is a difference between conquest and defense.”

“I’m not-“ He ran a hand over his hair. “I can’t just stand on high and order someone’s death. He has followers, people who agree with them. Am I to kill them all? There’s too few of us to do that.”

“First of all, yes you can, you’re the King. Second of all. . . generally only the leaders of a rebellion are dealt with. The followers see it and that’ll be enough to settle them down.”

“That’s not the kind of king I want to be.”

“What if the next time they don’t go to Loki, they just come kill you themselves? Or maybe next time Loki doesn’t say no.”

He was not in the mood to defend his brother right now. “How does killing him make people less likely to kill me next time? Clearly getting caught isn’t an option.”

Brun held up her hands. “It may make them less likely to try. At least send the message that it won’t be tolerated.”

Running his hands over his hair again, he paced away from her, glad he’d thought to bring her back to their room for the conversation. He sank down into his chair and buried his face in his hands. “I don’t know how to do this.”

She came over, and he felt her stroke his hair a moment before crouching down. “How to handle a traitor?”
“That. What to do with the rest of them. All of it.” He took a breath. “A month ago I had successfully abdicated the throne and was doing what I was good at. Now I’m king to less than two thousand people on a cruise ship with only a vague destination and I just... I can’t do this.”

She stroked his arm. “Yes, you can,” she said gently. He was going to crack if she was going to be like that. It was easier when she was mad.

“I know what kind of king I don’t want to be. I have no idea what kind I do want to be. And I have no one to guide me, not really. And still everyone is looking at me to make decisions.”

“That’s got to be terrifying.”

He took a deep breath, when he let it out it was shuddery. “Maybe I should just let them go. Whoever doesn’t want to be here.”

“I think that’s reasonable. And very much the kind of King you are.”

Leaning forward, he rested his forehead on her shoulder. “You’re more sure of that than I am.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “Maybe I have more faith in you.”

He sighed. “It’s nice someone does.”

Her warm fingers rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s funny how well we see each other, and how poorly we see ourselves.”

“People in general? Or you and I in particular?”

She kissed his shoulder. “You and I. I know plenty of people who have that flipped.”

He snorted and slid his arms around her. “I can’t shake the feeling I’m going to make a decision that dooms us all.”

“I’d stop you,” she said. She nudged him so he’d lean back and let her climb into his lap.

“Would there be stabbing?” he asked gruffly.

“With the sword you bought me,” she said without missing a beat, but he could hear the smile in her voice.

He hugged her tighter and rested his head on her breast. “What would you do? Execute him and glare the rest into submission?”

She was quiet a moment. “Probably. But you’re a better person than I am.”

“Loki thought I should execute him, too.” Thor sighed. “Maybe I’m in the wrong. If everyone around me is telling me different.”

“Or maybe everyone else is wrong and it’s your job to put your foot down and say ‘I don’t want to rule with a sword’. And you’re definitely a better person than your brother.”

“Well, that’s not a hard bar to clear,” he grumbled. For a few minutes he sat and rubbed her back, turning things over in his head. “We’ll capture Knut tomorrow when he meets with Loki. And then I want to hold a meeting with all the people. If they’re unhappy, I want to hear if there’s something I can do to help.”

“That’s a good idea.”
“Do you really think that or are you humoring me?”

“I think your instincts on democracy are good ones. It worked really well with the security team. I would imagine people rebel because they feel desperate, and probably unheard. Maybe you can help them find what they want without violence.”

That made him feel a bit better. He kissed her shoulder, then her cheek. “Thank you.”

“You’re a good King. You can do this.”

He took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Will you stand with me?”

“If course I will,” she said. “I’m a Valkyrie. Sworn to protect the crown.” She cupped his cheek in her hand. “And the man beneath it.”

He kissed her palm. “Even when he’s doubting himself?”

“Everyone needs somebody they can trust to let their guard down with. Might as well be someone who can defend you when you’re weak.”

“I do trust you,” he told her, voice soft. “With my life.”

“Good,” she told him, voice just as quiet. “I’d absolutely get in front a sword thrown at you.”

He touched her cheek gently, then drew her down for a kiss. It took him a moment for the odd phrasing of that to make sense—people didn’t generally throw swords. Hela had. Brun had told him once about the woman she’d loved who had gotten in front of one of those swords for her.

When the kiss broke, he stroked a thumb over her cheek. “I love you, too.”

She inhaled sharply, and looked almost surprised. Not by his words, so much as by hers. Like she’d said it without realizing what she was admitting. He watched tears collect in the corners of her eyes. She blinked and they slid down her cheeks, but she didn’t turn away. She smiled, and he knew letting him see the tears was as big an act of trust as just about anything.

He wiped the tears away with his thumbs, and drew her down to rest on his chest. Rubbing her back in big circles, he listened to her breathing, not sure what to say. Eventually she sighed and said, “It’s been a long time since I left someone this far under my skin.”

“I’d apologize,” he said. “But I rather like it.”

“I like it, too.”

Kissing her hair, he squeezed her tighter. “Thank you for rescuing me from those cannibal scavengers.”

She laughed. “Your rose-colored glasses are world class, Thor.”

“Well, someday they’ll tell stories about us. We should clean it up somehow.”

“A, yes, the Legend of King Thor, and The Woman Who Saved Him From A Giant Pile of Trash. I like it.”

“It had a good ring to it. Flows off the tongue.”

“I may demand you come up with a better title for me.”
His very first thought was *Queen*, but that would probably freak her out.

“I’ll give it some thought,” was all he said.
They spoke with Heimdal in the morning, who confirmed none of Brun’s guards were sympathetic to Knut. When the man met Loki at the appointed time, he was instead faced with Thor, Brun, and half their police force, who took him into custody, locking him in a storage room emptied out specifically for this purpose. Then Thor called a meeting of the whole ship.

He was waiting in one of the small rooms off the cargo bay while everyone filed in. Brun opened the door and slipped in. “Hey. Loki wanted to make you a big throne to sit on before you addressed the crowd.”

Stifling a sigh, he asked, “Did you talk him out of it?”

“I told him he could do it only if he’d promise to move it to our bedroom afterwards. He looked horrified and fled.”

“Well played.” He fussed with his hair and shirt a moment. “How do I look?”

She grinned. “I wish I had a throne to ravish you on.”

“Not sure sexy is what I was going for, but I’ll take it.” He tipped her chin up and kissed her. “Wish me luck.”

“I always have your back.”

With a nod he took one more moment to center himself, then stepped out into the main hall. The whole population was there, as they had been that first night leaving Asgard. All staring at him expectantly.

With a deep breath, he began. “It had come to my attention that some people are growing anxious to leave this ship and find a permanent home. They feel the journey to Midgard is too long and wish to disembark on the next planet. Rather than tell me this, they plotted violence behind my back.”

A murmur of talk went through the crowd and he waited for it to ebb and dip. “I am not my father,” he continued. “There are too few of us for me to keep myself distant from you all. If there is something people are unhappy about I wish to know.” He took a breath. “If some of you wish to leave and stay at our next stop, you will not be forced to stay. As much as I would like to keep us all together, I cannot order everyone to stay. It wouldn’t be just. You are free to leave at any port.”

There were murmurings and rumblings of an indeterminate nature, as if people had no idea what to make of this. He supposed they didn’t.

“I know that we are all still mourning. We likely will be for some time. The future in uncertain. But if there is anything I can do to ease your grief, to make this easier, please tell me.”

After a beat of silence, from halfway back in the crowd someone shouted, “A funeral.”

It was followed by a murmur of agreement from the rest of the crowd. Thor could kick himself for not thinking of it sooner. “We can do that,” he agreed. “I’ll see to it when we land again.”

“Could we stay for a little while?” Someone else asked.
“If we can get permission to, then yes. If not, we will do what we can to find somewhere we can stay and have some shore leave.”

Another hand went up. “What’s going to happen when we get to Midgard?”

That was a harder question. “Heimdal tells me that before his death my father arranged to buy a large parcel of land on Midgard, in a place called Norway. We will land there and my council and I will speak with the Midgardian governments to ensure we are welcome and can settle there.”

Someone else asked, “Can you marry people?”

It took a great deal of effort not to glance at Loki when he said, “Yes, I will perform marriages if both parties agree.”

They peppered him with questions for an hour and a half. They ranged all over. Can we start hydroponics garden? What happened to your hammer? Are we in danger floating out here? How did your brother come back from the dead? Can you put someone in charge of handling housing complaints? When is the sauna going to be finished? Can we arrange to teach people missing skills? (Apparently no one on board could fix shoes). Isn’t it time we set up a school? Can you make the lightning thing happen in space?

He answered them all as best he could and eventually had Loki start writing down some of the ones he couldn’t immediately settle. It was overwhelming, but in the end productive and by the time the crowd started to disperse he thought most of them were in a better place than where they’d started.

Brun had come out to watch, but stayed toward the edge of the crowd. As the crowd thinned, she came up to the little platform he’d stood on, grinning ear to ear. “You were great.”

“It turned into a bit of an interrogation at the end there. But I think it went well.”

“It did.” She came close to him, and then hesitated. “Is it okay to kiss you in public?”

“It’s very okay to kiss me. Anywhere you want.”

She leaned up to kissed him, and he wrapped an arm around her waist. Some of the people still in the cargo bay applauded. He laughed against her mouth, lifting her off her feet. This had been a good day.

*   *

For obvious reasons, Syn had never attended an Asgardian funeral. She knew, vaguely, that they involved fire, and a prayer, and almost certainly some feasting and drinking, because Asgardians. But that was about it. Funerals on Alfheim had been solemn, ritualized affairs with offerings to the spirits and a great deal of general fuss.

The memorial service they were planning to hold in the upcoming planet wasn’t a proper funeral, of course. There were no bodies and too many to mourn to even list them all. But it seemed very important to everyone to hold it. And they were definitely going to set something on fire.

Their next scheduled stop was a resort world that was popular stop for intergalactic cruise ships. It meant there would plenty of large-ship docking facilities, plenty of hotel spaces for those who wanted to spend a few days away from the ship, and a wide selection of venues in which to hold large gatherings. Planning was taking a lot of coordination, and had sprawled all over the bridge meeting room.
They’d discovered, unsurprisingly, that putting Loki on the comm to negotiate their host of accommodations was the most efficient method.

“Is it morbid to be planning a funeral and a wedding at the same time,” Syn wondered aloud, sorting through the list of forms the resort had sent. She wasn’t entirely sure if she’d ever been properly proposed to. But she had no actual argument for not getting married and this was likely their best venue for it for quite a long time.

Brun looked over at her. “They’re not going to be held at the same time.”

“I know, I know. I’m just hoping we keep the details straight. Don’t have the wrong flowers delivered or something.”

“Maybe get all white flowers for both?” she suggested.

“I need some of various colors to make a crown. But otherwise, yes, probably safer.” Asgardians had ridiculous helmets for weddings, Alfans had flower crowns. Syn had ceded most of her traditions to make the ceremony as Asgardian as possible, but that she wasn’t budging on.

Brun smiled. “Maybe you should see if you can find some gold flowers for that.”

“That would be funny.” She scrubbed a hand over her face. “No eloping in Asgard, huh?”

“No. It’s literally not legal unless it’s publicly witnessed.”

Had to fall in love with an Asgardian. “Right. Let’s focus on the memorial for now. What are we setting on fire?”

“It’s usually boats. Large boats with the bodies on them, traditionally, but I was thinking either one large one that’s communal, or a bunch of little ones.”

Syn tilted her head. “One big one might be more practical. But I think the image of lots of small ones might be more impactful. There is a lake Loki got permission to use. We could let them all go and they’d be like little dots of light. Like stars.”

“I think people would really like that,” she said quietly.

Syn made a note. “All right. We’ll gather at twilight. Thor will say a few words, we’ll light and launch the boats and then the crowd says the prayer?”

“Sounds about right.”

“And then drinking and feasting.”

Brun grinned. “Well, of course.”

“Right.” She looked down at her forms again. “Well, that’s all pretty straight forward. I just need to requisition the boats. And figure out who should set them on the water. Everyone here has lost someone. Perhaps Loki and I should just do it magically?”

“We could ask around a little, get a sense of what people would like. Though that’s probably the best.”

Syn nodded and made a note. “I’ll order the food and drink when we get a bit closer. Maybe we’ll get a discount for having two feasts in a week.”
You could probably do that with everything but the boats.

You know if we held the wedding the next day we could reuse some of the stuff from the memorial.” Brun gave her a look and she stuck out her tongue. “I’m kidding.” She sighed, feeling a stab of emotion she couldn’t quite name. “This isn’t how I pictured planning my wedding,” she admitted.

Brun looked amused. “When was the last time you pictured planning your wedding?”

Whatever the emotion was, there was a bit of grief to it. “I was young. My mother was probably still alive. I’d have had servants to do it. There’d have been less helmets,” she added wryly.

“The helmets are half the fun.”

“Will you be wearing one?”

“No, no. They’re only for the men.”

She clucked her tongue in disapproval. Looking down at her notes, she said quietly, “I don’t want you to ever doubt I love you. But there are moments when I do miss my family.”

Brun reached out and closed her hand over Syn’s. “I know. But if there is role your family would play in your wedding, please, please let me do it.”

“I think part of the problem is it’s all very . . . foreign. Alfan weddings were much smaller and more intimate. Even as a princess or Queen the ceremony itself would have been fairly private. The bride and groom say their vows to the other and there’s a handfasting . . .” She shook her head. “It’s very strange to go from hating Asgard to becoming Asgardian.”

“Rather quickly, too.”

“Very quickly,” she agreed. “And demoted to princess at the same time. I can hardly keep up.”

“Maybe you could remain a queen, and he could be your consort.”

That made her smile a bit. “I do like the sound of that.”

The were stuck in orbit for several days waiting for a berth, though she and Brun took the Commodore down early since it they had more open space for small ships. They took a look at the venues and made what arrangements Loki couldn’t make over the comm. Then they decided to go dress shopping.

Asgardian dresses were traditionally more elaborate than her usual wardrobe. They went to several shops, and tried on a variety of styles. “I’d have given up an hour ago,” she admitted on their fifth stop. “But I know the more elaborate I go the fancier your dress will be, and that’s a worthwhile goal.”

“Now you’re just being mean,” Brun grumped, turning around to look at the silver dress Syn had put her in.

“Nonsense. You look lovely. It’s a good color for you.”

“It’s the same color as my Valkyrie armor.” She smirked. “Thor will like it.”

“That’s important.” Maybe she should look at it that way. What would Loki like to see her in. Though that would really be more skin showing than usual. “You said the bride’s dress could be
any color?"

“Any. Except blood red. It’s kind of the unofficial but accepted color of the crown. I could probably get away with it, but people would look at you funny.”

“I think Loki would look at me funny.” She frowned and studied the dresses. “My royal colors were blue and gold.” And Loki’s were clearly green and gold. Green and blue often clashed, but she could definitely find gold.

It took two more shops to find it one she liked, then they had to back track to get the silver one for Brun. “I’m exhausted,” she admitted as they trudged back to the resort hotel. “He’d better appreciate it.”

“Do you have enough energy to do something relaxing?” Brun asked.

“I think that’s the only thing I have energy for.”

“The hotel has a spa.”

“We can call that research for the sauna you’re building.”

She grinned. “I will book us an appointment.”

They spent their evening in the spa, relaxing in a hot tub and sauna and getting hot stone massages. In the morning the main ship was cleared to dock and they went down to meet them.

It was kind of a madhouse, with people streaming in every direction. Thor and Loki were some of the last people to get off. Feeling a little silly, but unable to stop herself, Syn went on her toes and waved, feeling vindicated when he waved back and started beelining towards her.

He swept her up in a hug as if they’d been separated for weeks instead of a day. “Hello, darling,” she murmured.

“Heello. I’d forgotten how good fresh air smelled.”

“I think it smells especially good here, but I may be biased. The lake is beautiful.”

“Does our room have a nice view?”

“It does. It’s the honeymoon suite.”

He grinned at her. “Well played.”

“You’re rubbing off on me.” She kissed him lightly. “The memorial is scheduled for tonight.”

He put an arm around her as they walked down the dock. “That’s going to be... interesting.”

“We’ve planned everything out as best we could. A very nice carpenter is making the boats. He’s aiming for one hundred. Brun and I checked the exact time the sun sets. It should be lovely.”

“I think it will be good for everyone. My feelings about Asgard are just... complicated, I guess.”

“I sympathize.” She wasn’t entirely heartless, and had come to know enough of the Asgardians to feel pain for their loss. But there was that other, older, harder part of her that was quite happy to have seen Odin’s death and the fall of Asgard. “I’m trying to look at it as a memorial for the past in general. You can’t move forward if you’re looking behind.”
He sighed a little. “They didn’t let me out of the dungeon to go to my mother’s funeral. They
didn’t even tell me she was dead until after it was over.”

She squeezed his arm, not sure what to say to that. Sometimes it was also hard to remember she
liked Asgard, now. “I’m sorry, Loki.”

“Never say Odin’s not a vindictive son of a bitch.” He smirked. “You know, he forbid her from
seeing me ever again, after I was confined. So she’d send an illusion down to talk to me.”

“I think I would have liked your mother.”

“You would have. You would have been friends.”

He looked a little wistful when he said it, so she squeezed his arm again. “Well, anyone to help
her quest to keep you in line.”

“And to keep Thor and I from killing each other. My mother was a saint.”

“I’ve heard exactly one story of your childhood and I learned that you played with knives and
Thor picked up strange snakes. It’s a miracle either of you survived.”

He laughed. “Asgardians are sturdy.”

“Clearly.” They had wandered away from the rest of the crowd, who were heading to the main
resort to get their room assignments. Their room was sorted, and he seemed to be enjoying
stretching his legs, so she led him towards the gardens. “Have you thought about . . . us having
children?”

“I can’t imagine that would be biologically possible.”

“There were stories about Jotuns and other races interbreeding, at least when I was alive.”

He shook his head. “I think those were just stories.”

She arched a brow at him but stayed silent. She didn’t like reminding him that things that were
“just stories” to him were things that had happened in her lifetime. “Well, I suppose it will be up to
Thor to make heirs.”

“I’m sure he’ll have a whole barrel of them. All enormous and good at punching things.”

“Maybe we’ll kidnap a few. Take them out into space with Auntie and Uncle.”

He smiled. “You know, human lives are very short. By the time they get any sort of interesting
age, I and my conquests will have been long forgotten. We can go home.”

“That will be very nice. Heimdall tells me Norway in on the water.” She looked out at the garden
and to the lake beyond. “I’ve missed the ocean.”

“You did live a long time on an awful place, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Looking back I don’t really know how long it was. It didn’t feel like centuries, but—” She
shrugged. “It was far too long.”

He put his arms around her. “We’re going to rest a bit here. Enjoy solid ground.”

Leaning into him, she felt immediately. . . settled. Comforted. “Have a honeymoon?”
“Well, we do have the honeymoon suite.”

“It would be a crime for it to go to waste.”

He kissed her gently. “And... look. About the other thing. If you have your Time, don’t lock yourself in the room, and we’ll see what happens.”

It took her a moment to sort out what he’d said, then she winced. “Ah, Alfans don’t have Times like Asgardians do.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t?”

“No. We sort of... if we want to have a baby then we do. And if we don’t then we aren’t fertile.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s hard to explain,” she admitted. “Alfan women are only fertile if they want to have a baby. It doesn’t have to be conscious. Lots of honeymoon babies.”

“That’s unfortunate. Fertile time sounds like a hell of a lot of fun.”

“If it helps, I kept some of the more effective aphrodisiacs. I’m sure a few of them mimic the effects.”

“That also sounds like a hell of a lot of fun.”

“I’ll stock up before the honeymoon,” she promised, kissing him. “But for now, we should go get ready for the memorial.”

“Are you all right with coming?” he asked.

“I...” She frowned, finding herself unable to give an unqualified yes. “I am used to doing uncomfortable things for the good of the people. If I’m the Princess of Asgard, then I need to be there.”

“I just... I know you have very mixed feelings about Asgard’s demise.”

“I promise not to giggle in the middle of the solemn memorial.” He made a face and she sighed, stroking a hand over his chest. “I have a lot in my past I never got a chance to mourn. Before I start my life with you, I would like to say goodbye to it. Whether or not I’m actually mourning Asgard probably won’t matter to the rest of them.”

“That is very valid,” he said. “And, if I’m honest, I would really like you there.”

“Then I will be there. Right by your side.”

And so she was. At twilight they all gathered, all that was left of Asgard. Thor said a few words about what they had lost, big voice booming across the field. People were already crying. Then Syn wove her fingers with Loki’s and together they used their magic to launch the boats into the lake.

It didn’t burn or even feel uncomfortable. The magic flowed between them like it was the most natural thing in the world. When the boats were a good ways out from shore, Loki squeezed her hand and together they sent a wave of power out, igniting them. The sun had dipped low and they glowed like little stars on the lake.

On Alfheim, the dead were placed in tombs, usually with a few personal items and letters from
On Alfheim, the dead were placed in tombs, usually with a few personal items and letters from their loved ones, and allowed to return to the land. It was believed their soul became part of the land as well, a spirit who would help the plants grown and protect those that prayed to them. Asgard’s tradition of burning their dead had always seemed barbaric, cutting people off from the land.

But looking out at the burning boats, she could see the peace in it. The closure. She thought of her parents and her brothers. Her people and the land she’d left and would never see again. She let the grief and anger and resentment and regret flood through her and then sent it out, pictured it clinging to one of the boats and burning with it, sinking into the calm waters.

She was a little surprised to feel tears spilling out onto her cheeks. Loki let go of her hand to wrap his arm around her, pulling her closer. She sighed and tucked her arms around him, pressing her face into his shoulder. Around her, the Asgardians started to recite a prayer.

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“Nor shall we mourn but rejoice for those that have died the glorious death.”

Brun had not said the prayer for the dead since the day Valkyrior were destroyed. At the time she’d expected someone to come for them eventually. Asgard never left its fallen behind—you had to burn the dead to release their souls to Valhalla. Because no one came, she’d assumed Hela had gone on to Asgard and laid waste. The task of finding and burning the bodies of all her women had been the most brutal, exhausting, and miserable task she’d ever undertaken. But it had buried her grief. She’d blotted out the rest by drinking.

Now it seemed to be all bubbling back up, and she was focusing her entire being on not crying in public.

Beside her, Thor was still and steady and stoic, his eyes on the lake. She was so lost in her own thoughts she didn’t really register the thunder rumbling, but everyone noticed the web of lightning arcing across the sky.

He glanced up, as if he hadn’t realized he’d been doing it. She watched him take a deep breath and the lightning repeated, filling the sky with light but not striking the ground. As if he was making a light show just for them.

It was beautiful and oddly haunting. A majestic send off to the other side. Much better than a hasty mass funeral pyre.

She was not going to cry.

Then he reached out and slid an arm around her shoulders, tugging her closer to his side. She wrapped an arm around his waist and leaned into him. She rubbed her eyes with her free hand, wiping away what tears fell. He was safe. As safe as anything had ever been in a thousand years.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and they watched at the boats slowly burned and sank into the water.

People started to wander off then, slowly, in groups of one or two. It was all very natural and organic. Peaceful.

She tipped her head up to look at him. “Nice lightning.”

He smiled. “Thank you. Figured if I was making it I should do something with it.”

“How are you feeling?” she asked.
“Worn out. But . . . better. I think. This was a good idea. It was needed.” He looked down at her. “Are you all right?”

She moved her head in a way that mean neither yes nor no. “Scars from long ago hurting more than expected.”

He nodded as if he understood. “It’s always hard to say goodbye.”

“The last funeral I was . . . traumatic.” She shook her head. “Today I’m not sure what I feel.”

“I’m not sure I do, either. It will take a long time to process it all, I suppose.”

“For now there is food and drink. You’ll probably have to give another speech.”

He sighed deeply and squeezed her tight. “Maybe I can talk Loki into it.”

“Come on,” she said, because taking care of him made her feel better about things that were bothering her. “I’ll hold your hand.”

Weaving his fingers with hers, they walked to the large ballroom where the buffet had already been set up. In a few days it would host Loki and Syn’s wedding reception, with a very different menu. Now it was full of Asgardians, strung out at the tables, eating and talking and laughing. Telling stories of their lost loved ones and remembering them well.

Thor made the rounds of the tables, taking her with him like it was the most natural thing in the world. People told him stories about his parents, and stories about his friends who had died defending Asgard. She could hear his voice catch sometimes, but he talked to each of them warmly and personally. It struck her as something Odin wouldn’t do.

Their core group was at a small table in the corner, where they ended their circuit. Thor collapsed into a chair and his brother pushed a plate in front of him. “I got you a leg.”

Brun got herself a drink while he ate, and has it took the edges off she relaxed a little, even leaning over to rest her head on his shoulder. He placed a hand on her knee, rubbing lightly as he sipped his own drink and surveyed the crowd.

“This was a good thing,” Loki said. “A necessary thing, even.”

Thor nodded. “I think so, too. The air is different. Lighter. A few days on shore, some big feasts. It will do everyone good.”

“I am hoping my wedding has a slightly more cheerful tone.” Syn snorted into her wine.

“Well the bride doesn’t have any concerned relatives to interrupt,” Thor said with a teasing grin.

“Well, now, nothing says an Asgardian wedding like a good drunken brawl,” Brun said, and they all look at her in surprise. Even Heimdal. She blinked. “Wow, it really did get boring in the last millenia.”

Syn laughed out loud now. “It does sort of sound like as Asgardian thing to do.”

“I’m happy to pick a fight with someone if that will provide entertainment,” Brun offered.

“As long as it’s not Loki,” Syn agreed.
“If I’m following tradition, it would actually be one of your relatives.” She looked over at Thor and grinned. “You look like you can take a punch.”

“It’s been a while, but I used to be quite the brawler.”

“Hasn’t been that long. And it was fun.”

“You fought me and lost,” Banner added from across the table. “Also not long ago.”

“That was really more of a draw.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“I’m going to beat you, too,” Brun informed him. “Because you will have a shirt on this time.”

“Well if that’s all it takes -“

“No,” Syn said firmly. “No shirtless brawling at my wedding.”

“But you’re agreeing if they’re fully clothed?” Loki drawled.

“Jesters and entertainment was common at Alfan weddings.”

“When you say ‘jester’ think more songs and juggling and less your family beating my family senseless.”

“I was under the impression that was what passed for entertainment on Asgard.”

“In some corners.” Brun was drunk enough to find the snobbery dripping from his voice funny. Syn clearly did too. “You would prefer carefully choreographed dancing and a poetry reading?”

“Yes, because I’d rather save your magic for later, instead of using it to fix that guy’s ribs.”

She grinned and kissed him, tucking into his side. “You’d have made a good Alfan, mo cuisle.”

“Thank you, dear heart.”

Beside her, Thor muttered, “I like how everyone assumes I’d lose.”

“Of course you would,” Loki said. “You’d let her stab you before you’d hurt her, and that means you’ll lose.”

Brun looked at Thor in time to see his cheeks pink. “I’d make a good show of it,” he grumbled. “Throw a punch or two.”

“Lying,” Syn teased.

“I wouldn’t want to hurt you, either,” Brun said.

He smiled at her and stole a kiss. “It would be a very boring fight, then.”

“Might be fun in private, with a little less clothes,” she murmured, quiet enough only he could hear.

The smile turned into a grin and he kissed her again. “I’ll take you up on that.”
Hey guys, remember after Ragnarok came out and we were all happy and humming Immigrant Song and quoting a New Zealand rock monster? Let's go back to that. Infinity who? Never heard of her.

The gathering began to disperse not long after that. Some would go out to drink and party more, but most went back to their hotel rooms. Everyone was emotionally exhausted.

Banner left early, as did Heimdal. Brun, Thor, Syn, and Loki stayed until the last of the others had gone, before heading to their rooms. Thor kept his arm around her shoulders, as if afraid she might sneak off somewhere. “I missed you when you were down here and I was on the ship.”

“I missed you, too,” she replied, and it was the truth. “I like sleeping next to you. You’re warm.”

He rumbled a laugh. “I’ll happily warm your bed for you.”

“You did good today,” she told him as they reached their room.

“Thank you.” He sat on the edge of the bed to unlace his boots. “It was difficult, but necessary.”

She stopped to ruffle his hair. “I know you didn’t want to be one, but you’re good King.”

He caught her hand and kissed her palm. “I’m better with you at my side.”

It made her smile. “I think all the best partnerships work that way.”

He studied her a moment, still holding her hand. For a moment, he looked like he might say something, then he shook his head a little and smiled. “Does this room have a bath?”

“Sadly, no. But it does have a shower big enough to have a naked fistfight in. If you were so inclined.”

“That sounds like a fantastic use of an evening.”

She gave his hand a tug, and he stood, towering over her. She didn’t generally like being made to feel small or delicate, but she didn’t mind when he did it. He lifted her like she weighed nothing, and carried her back to the bathroom. She turned the water on, and they kissed and pulled each other’s clothes off.

He tugged her into the shower with him, the hot water pouring down on them both. The water pressure here was much better than the space ship. Thor ran his fingers through her hair, kissing her deeply. It felt very . . . private, in there. “I have no real desire to punch you,” she murmured against his mouth, letting her hands slide over his wet skin.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he chuckled. “Did you have any other ideas?”

“I guess we could wash our hair and have a cup of tea.”
One hand cupped her ass. “You don’t like tea.”

“Got any better ideas?” she asked, nipping his lower lip.

He swayed with her a bit. “We could skip the punching and go right to grappling.”

She ran her hands down over the muscles of his back and around his hips, thinking she’d never get tired of touching him. He sighed when she curled her fingers around his cock, and she smiled. “Sounds like fun.”

Backing her up against the wall, he slid his other hand down to cups her ass. “Think we’ll break something?”

“M-maybe,” she stuttered as his hand moved between her legs. It was just a little bit, his fingertips stroking over her sex. But it was all she could pay attention to. He kissed her again, fingers moving idly against her, as if he had all the time in the world. She shifted her weight and squirmed, wanting more. “Please,” she whispered.

Kissing her again, he shifted his hands, gripping her thighs and lifting her up. She wrapped her legs around him and he pressed her into the wall. With a little maneuvering, he slipped into her in one thrust. She gasped in surprise as he filled her. It wasn’t going to be a slow torture sort of night. She dug her fingers into his hair and tugged a little.

His kiss got a little feral as he drove into her, long deep thrusts that had her gasping and sliding against the slick wall. He shifted her up, fingers digging into her skin, as he sought a different angle that took him even deeper.

When she came it was sudden and sharp, and more intense than she expected. She held onto him, gasping and shaking and begging him incoherently as she broke. And then something else seemed to crack inside her, a wall holding back everything she tried not to feel. Grief and loss and fear and this crazy, fragile hope. Tears came and this time she couldn’t stop them.

He clutched at her, growling as he released, pressing impossibly deep. His legs trembled and he held her tightly, rubbing her back even as he panted and shuddered.

Somehow they ended up on the floor of the shower, her in his lap and sobbing into his neck.

“IT’s all right,” he murmured. “I know.”

She shook her head, because he couldn’t. Or maybe he did—he’d lost as much if not more than she had. He shouldn’t have to comfort her. She managed to get out, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you dare apologize for having emotions.”

She wanted to tell him how much she loved him. But the words just wouldn’t come out. Irrational as it was, some part of her fear that if she told him then she’d lose him. Instead she sniffled. “Could have been better timed.”

He gave her a little squeeze. “Granted. But sometimes we don’t get to chose.”

The water was still on, spraying them with warm droplets and steam and making it feel private and safe. She kissed his skin and whispered, “You can have them, too.”

“I know. With you I can.”

She leaned back to look at him. “We’ll take care of each other.”
He smiled and touched her cheek. “I think that’s how partnerships work.”

Eventually they got out of the shower. He dried her hair and they got into bed. It wasn’t as nice as their bed on the ship, but it was much less garishly decorated. They passed out, tangled together, physically and emotionally spent. He woke her in the middle of the night, tossing and turning with troubled dreams. She shook him awake and kissed him when she didn’t know what to say. She was better at showing him what she felt, anyway.

Nothing knocked a man out quite like plenty of sex, but she was awake a while after he fell asleep with his head pillowed on her stomach. She stroked his hair and got lost in her thoughts. She felt fiercely protective of him sometimes. He was hers and she was his.

In the morning she had an idea, and went to find Syn. “How would you feel if I changed my dress for the wedding?”

She blinked in surprised, but recovered quickly. “I don’t mind, but we’re running short on time.”

Brun shook her head. “I know, I know. I’ll figure it out.”

“What brought this on? You were rather ambivalent on the whole dress thing when we were shopping before.”

“I decided I want to wear red.”

Clearly remembering what she had said about red, Syn’s brows went up. “Oh, really?”

She felt her cheeks heat. “Sometime us impossible people have to come at things sideways.”

“Well, he’ll understand it better than I did the necklace, at least.”

“He will,” she replied. “I hope.”

With a grin, she rubbed her hands together in a way that was a little too reminiscent of Loki. “Then let’s shop.”

*

When he was young, Loki had expected he’d get married. He was a Prince, it was expected. Perhaps to a woman from one of Asgard’s noble families. A daughter of one of his father’s advisers, maybe. Or even something for diplomatic reasons—such as to the daughter of a King from a different realm.

After all the years that passed, and everything that happened, the idea had eventually become farcical. Yet, today. . . here he was.

Thor reached over to fiddle the lapels of his leathers into place. They were waiting for the cue to go out into the main hall, once the guests had been seated. “Now, has anyone given you the wedding night talk?” Thor asked, deadly serious.

“Should I lie back and think of Asgard?”

“Remember that it’s to get you an heir and just let her do whatever she wants.”

“That always makes for a fun evening,” he said with a grin.

Thor returned the grin and leaned back. “How do you feel?”
“Good, but also like this is all very surreal.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad that’s not just me.” He paused. “Not the fact you’re getting married. Just that it’s happening...here. Like this.”

“It’s weird that I’m getting married, too. I’ve been dead twice. And in the dungeon. This isn’t the ending I pictured...as recently as bailing on you in Sakaar.”

“You do seem to be getting off rather well given all your sins. Feel like I should punch you a couple of times to even it out.”

“I honestly probably deserve it.” He looked at Thor. “I am so sorry, for so many things.”

Thor clapped a hand on his shoulder. “I forgive you. Whatever else happens, I want this to be a new start. For everyone. I’m very happy for you and I wish you nothing but good in your marriage.”

“Thank you, brother,” Loki said. There was a knock on the door, and he called out, “Yes?”

The door opened and Brun stepped in. She had on a silvery dress and draped red shawl. It was very...Asgardian. He was really looking forward to seeing what Syn was wearing. “Two minutes,” she said.

Thor grinned widely. “You look lovely.”

She grinned back at him and dipped a little curtsey. “Thank you, your majesty.”

“How is Syn?” Loki asked. She’d left to get ready before he woke this morning.

“She says she can’t wait to see you,” Brun replied. “I’m going to go get in place,” she said and ducked out.

He blew out a breath and picked up his helmet. She was going to make fun of it, but he didn’t care. Currently, he was happy it had survived.

“I can’t decide if the helmet adds or detracts from the surreality,” Thor commented.

“We Asgardians like our traditions.” He was in a good mood today, so he felt Asgardian. “I noticed you’ve got your woman wearing your colors.”

“That was a surprise. I didn’t even know she was wearing a dress.”

“It’s a wedding.”

“And she’s a Valkyrie.” Music started to play from the other room. Thor smiled. “I think it’s time.”

Loki opened the door. “For what it’s worth, though she and I don’t exactly get along, I think she’ll be a great Queen.”

He grinned. “So do I.”

In the hall, guests were arranged in concentric circles around a center area ringed with flowers. Loki and Syn approached from opposite ends and met in the middle. He caught sight of her when he was almost to the center and for a moment forgot how to walk.

Her dress was a deep midnight blue, the color of the sky just after sunset, and clung to her like a
second skin. Gold threads were woven into the blue, shimmering like stars in the light. She wore her betrothal necklace, her hair unbound, and on her head was a wreath of gold flowers trailing ribbons of green and gold into her hair.

They reached the center and Thor stepped to his left and Brun stepped up from the right to stand next to Syn. “You look gorgeous,” Loki told her.

She beamed at him. “Thank you. So do you. Even with the helmet.”

“That’s quite the compliment.” He lifted a hand and waved his fingers, and the crowd disappeared, leaving the four of them in a shimmering circle of gold light. “They can still see,” he said. “But I thought the illusion of a little privacy might help.”

Syn looked around, squinting a bit. “I can still see them, but they look a bit like ghosts.” She looked back at him. “It does help.”

Thor clapped his hands for attention. “We are gathered here to witness the joining of Loki Odinson, son of Frigga, Prince of Asgard, and Syn the Truthful, daughter of Hoenir, Queen of Alfheim.” Syn looked startled and Loki wondered if Brun had told Thor her father’s name.

“Syn of Alfheim,” Thor continued, turning to her. “Have you come here of your free will and take this man willingly as your husband?”

She grinned up at Loki. “I do.”

“And do you Loki Odinson come here of your free will, to bind this woman to you and join with her as husband and wife?”

He grinned back. “I do.”

“Do you have the rings.”

Loki flicked a hand, conjuring one of his knives, a gold ring balanced on the tip. Syn had also made a gesture, and had her staff in her hands, a thick gold band laying on it. With a bit of maneuvering they exchanged the rings, slipping them onto their fingers.

“Now the cup?” Thor asked.

Brun produced a large goblet of mead and handed it to Thor, who held it up for everyone to see before handing it to Loki. He took a drink, and then handed it to Syn to drink. She did so, watching him over the rim. She wrinkled her nose at the taste and he bit down on a laugh.

In a traditional ceremony, this was where Thor would proclaim them married. Syn was clearly expecting him to. Instead, Thor took the cup back and Brun stepped forward with a handful of ribbons. Loki reached for Syn's hand. “We’re not 100% certain how this is actually done. . .”

The look she gave him all but broke his heart. He feared she might cry. There was definitely a sniffl e. “Oh, mo cuisle.” She took a breath. “Um, I’ll say a vow and you repeat it, then Brun and Thor take turns tying the ribbons on between each line. At the end you cut the back go the ribbons and we save the knot.” He nodded and Brun laid the first ribbon across their wrists. “You cannot possess me, for I belong to myself, but while we both wish it I will give you what is mine to give.”

“You cannot possess me, for I belong to myself, but while we both wish it, I will give you what is mine to give.” He paused. “Which is pretty much just this helmet, though it is solid gold.”

She laughed, as Thor tied the first ribbon on. They went through more vows, five in all, and Syn
talked Brun through weaving the ribbons together to connect the knots. After the last one, she gave Thor a nod and he lifted his hands over his head. “With these guests as witness and your families in agreement I declare you man and wife. You may kiss to seal the bond.”

Loki lifted his free hand to cup her cheek and pull her in for a kiss. She curled her other arm around his waist, their tied hands trapped between them. For a moment, he legitimately forgot their audience, sinking into the kiss. She sighed softly into his mouth, pressing closer. When the kiss finally broke, he rested his forehead against hers. “Hello, wife.”

Now there were definitely tears in her eyes. “Hello, husband.”

“I love you,” he told her, wiping the tears that spilled onto her cheek.

“I love you, too.” He bent and kissed her again, letting the illusion surrounding them fall so they could hear the roar of applause from the crowd.

When he righted her, he said, “Now lets cut this knot and go party.”

He carefully freed their arms while the crowd filed out into the hall. With a gesture, Syn sent the knots and ribbons somewhere safe and then tucked her arm into his to go take their place at the head table.

The buffet was twice as large as the one for the memorial service, merriment being more appetite forming than grief. There was the usual Asgardian roast meat and ale, but he saw more delicate dishes and fine wine reminiscent of Alfheim as well.

He hadn’t been all that hungry that morning, but now he was starving. It was so nice to eat real meat that hadn’t been freeze dried.

She waited until he was mostly finished before poking his side. “We should go say hello to our guests.”

“We see our guests every day. We live with them.”

“It’s polite.”

Loki sighed. “Oh, very well.”

They did the rounds. He was surprised at how many names Syn seemed to know, and the little details about their families. The extremely pregnant woman who seemed to be eating more than Thor thanked her profusely for the blanket she’d made for the impending baby.

“I don’t think you’ve been demoted,” he told her between tables. “I think you’re still a queen and I am just your consort.”

She smiled and stroked his cheek, cupping his face to kiss him. “And a beautiful one, you are.”

“I believe we’re going to be required to dance later.”

“We are. Are you any sort of dancer?”

He sighed. “Thor and I were forced to take copious lessons as children.”

“Oh, to be a fly on that wall.”

“It’s honestly a miracle no one died.”
She ran her thumb along his jaw. “We’ll dance and smile and have cake. And then retire to our room for the next few days.”

He kissed her again. She was his wife and he was going to kiss her all he wanted. “That sounds like the perfect reward.”

Their dance went perfectly, twirling around the floor along with the swells of the music. They sat through a few toasts - Thor told the snake story - and drank from their wedding cup. The cake was delicious and Syn delighted in dabbing a bit of frosting on his nose. It was, all in all, a perfect day and in all likelihood far more fun than the stodgy political alliance he’d once thought his marriage would be.

“You know, my father thought I would be diplomatically useful with the Jotuns. But I could also see, if our timings had been aligned, that you would have been just the sort of bride my father would have chosen for me.”

She looked amused. “I’m not sure if I’m flattered or irritated. But I agree, you and I would’ve looked like a good alliance. And just think! You could have been a king.”

“He’d have seen it as a way to take over your realm without bloodshed—as that had become his thing. But we’d have bonded, and then rebelled.”

“That might have been fun.” She licked the last of her frosting off her fork and put it back on her plate, leaning into his side. “This is nice, though. Just as it is.”

“Our little happy ending? Yes, it is. You even seem to be sleeping a little better.” Every time they used their magic together, she seemed to have less nightmares.

“The dreams I remember are pleasant, more or less.” She watched the others dance a moment. “Perhaps I’ll get a glimpse of those dance lessons.”

“I can’t say I’d call that a pleasant memory.” He put his arm around her. “But doubtless you will find it entertaining.”

“I’m sure I will.” Quietly, she added, “I saw your mother last night. She was very beautiful.”

That made him smile even as it made him ache. “Yes. She was.”

“She was helping you with your magic. Teaching you to make a double of yourself. It was. . . very informative. Brought back memories of my own mother teaching me.”

There was a lump in his throat now, that he was having trouble swallowing. “She taught me near everything I know.”

Syn squeezed his hand and pressed close to him. “I’m sorry, my love. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, no, I’m glad you mentioned her. I wish she could be here.”

“Mine, as well. They’d be over in the corner, planning the grandbabies.”

Loki sighed. He knew she hoped for children. It was just. . . impossible. But he wasn’t going to bring that up today. “They would.”

“And then probably get drunk and start telling embarrassing stories.”

He laughed. “That most definitely.”
Tipping her head back, she kissed his jaw. “What do you say to sneaking away from the festivities?”

“Skipping out on our own wedding. Tsk, tsk.” He grinned. “Let’s go.”
Chapter 23

Thor had quite a variety of Loki stories he could tell. Many of them involving illusions and violence. But the snake one was one of this favorites. And it got a good laugh.

The whole day was a little surreal, in what had been a very unexpected couple of months. But here he was, presiding over his brother’s wedding. Which he was pretty sure Brun had paid for. She gave a toast, too, one that was more brusque and less funny but managed to make Syn tear up.

Afterwards she sat back down and put her head on his shoulder, watching the dancing. “We throw a good party.”

“We certainly do.” He looked over at his brother. “They look happy.”

“They do.” She took a sip of her drink. “We’re probably going to need to dance at some point, or people will think we’re rude.”

“I’m an excellent dancer,” he told her. “Our mother made us take lessons.”

“I’m a terrible dancer. I had sword fighting lessons instead.”

“I’ll walk you through it. A good partner is important.”

She sighed heavily, like she was going to her own execution. Even though she had brought it up. “Very well. We should get it over with.”

He stood and offered her his hand, bowing a bit, the way his stuffy dance teacher had taught him. She stood and took it, and dipped a little curtsey. She pulled her shawl off the back of her chair and draped it over her shoulders before letting him pulled her onto the dance floor.

“I meant to tell you,” he said. “That that is an excellent color on you.”

She grinned up at him, but looked almost shy when she said, “I was hoping you’d like it.”

“I love it,” he assured her. “I’m glad you wore it.”

Her eyes searched his face for a moment, before asking, “Because it says I belong to you?”

“No,” she said quietly. “That’s why I wore it.”

He couldn’t help but grin. “Good. Because you do.” She returned the grin and went up onto her toes to kiss him. He had not been completely sure the choice had been deliberate, but he was delighted it was.

They twirled around the dance floor and he caught her smiling. It was true, a good partner made all the difference. “You should wear it more often,” he told her.

“Maybe I’ll do a little shopping before we go.”

“We will be stuck here a while. To give them a proper honeymoon.”

“People did want to loiter a while.”
“Heimdall says it’s a few weeks until the next port. We should enjoy the sunshine and fresh air while we can.”

“I hear there are other resort areas on the planet. Maybe we could get away from the rest of Asgard. Have a little private time.”

“That sounds extremely appealing.”

A week after the Loki and Syn’s wedding, Brun surprised him with a trip to a different part of the planet. It was warm and had a beach and she had procured herself what might be the tiniest bathing suit he had ever seen—in scarlet red. It was a fun trip. He might have had more fun that his brother, but that was not a competition he was interested in having.

They returned to the main resort the day they were scheduled to disembark and had to go their separate ways to help with the logistics of boarding. It gave him just enough time to do a little shopping of his own.

Though everyone was given the option to stay behind if they wanted to, the only Asgardian who didn’t leave with them was Knut. Thor let Brun personally throw him out the airlock. He just landed on the dock, and they shut the door in his face.

“Did you enjoy that,” he asked her as they strolled back to the main hall.

“As much as I have ever enjoyed anything fully dressed.”

He snorted in laughter. “His expression was hilarious.”

“And, see, I can compromise.”

“You can.” He sighed. “I think it was a good solution. When we settle somewhere permanently we may need to think of something else.”

She tucked her arm through his. “We have time.”

“Years, apparently.” Or more, if they kept staying at planets as long as they had. It had been good for everyone, but part of him still felt it had been wasted time.

Brun got the rest of the equipment she needed to finish the sauna. She invited him to test it with her the day before the opening. “There will be no sex in it,” she told him sternly. “None.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he promised. “No sex.”

She’d built a series of small, private saunas, each with a cold plunge pool, a bath and shower. It was very Asgardian. And involved him having to sit alone in a very, very hot room with her, completely naked.

“If I may say, the no sex rule is a little cruel.”

“You agreed to it,” she replied, though her expression indicated she might regret it. Her skin was quite literally glistening.

“I can’t help but think everyone else is going to be doing all sorts of things in here.”

She sighed. “Probably. I got equipment that will sanitize them between uses.”

“That was a very good idea.” He sighed and tipped his head back. “This whole thing was a god
idea. The sauna. Feels like home.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” She looked over at him. “People are homesick. Maybe it’ll help a little.”

“I hope so. The more. . . fun we can make this trip the easier it will be for everyone.”

“Was thinking my next project might be a playground for the children.”

He smiled. “I like that. I know some of the women have been cobbling together a school.”

“And we’re probably going to have a bunch of toddlers by the time we reach earth. Syn was telling me women seem to be having their Time much more frequently than would be logical. As if somehow people’s bodies know we need to increase the birth rate.”

Great, that was exactly what they needed. “Are people using the sequester room or indulging?”

“Mostly indulging,” she replied. “You’re making a face. Don’t like kids?”

“I like children. On a planet. With space. When I’m not solely responsible for their well being.”

“You’re the King. You’d be responsible for them on a planet, too.”

“Yes but there we’d be surrounded by more planet, not the unfeeling vastness of space.”

“Fair enough.” She held up her hands. “I promise I will sequester myself should it happen to me.”

Despite his words, he wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about that. “Did you have any on Sakaar?”

“I didn’t. Syn thought it was because of the weird time thing. Haven’t had since I was a Valkyrie.”

He was not going to ask what she did when it happened then. “Well. If you feel it. . . maybe we could talk about it before you lock yourself away.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Going from previous experience, I would probably have my hands down your pants before we got past the first sentence.”

The image made him chuckle. “I’ve never been with a woman on he Time, obviously. So I wouldn’t know.”

“I have been on both sides.” She grinned. “It’s fun all around. Admittedly, I never had to worry about either of us getting pregnant. That does add complexity.”

“It does.” He paused. “Do you like kids?”

“I. . . I mean, it think they’re cute. Given what I did for a living I didn’t think I’d ever have them, but it might be fun. And...” She looked at him for a moment, hesitating like she was choosing her words. “One doesn’t get involved in a serious relationship with a King without understanding she will someday need to produce an heir.”

“I don’t want it to be about that.”

“But you will need one eventually. It’s the kind of thing that makes people feel secure, that there’s a succession plan and there won’t be chaos after your death.”

He had assumed, really, that he’d be the last king. There wasn’t enough of them to make a real kingdom, and he was on the young side. Most people currently on this ship would die before him
and their children would wander off to start their own lives. He didn’t think he was leaving much of a legacy to any children he’d have. But she probably had a point, about security. The semblance of normality and order. “I suppose we don’t have to decide right now.” Maybe Loki would have a kid, that would solve things.

“We don’t,” she said. “But if we haven’t talked about it, then I’m locking myself in the sequester room. It’s not something to decide under the influence, y’know?”

“Agreed. We’ll table it for another day.”

“We would have some pretty cute kids.” She leaned back on her elbows, and he greatly enjoyed the view. She’d probably let him touch her, just a little. Edging closer, he stretched his arm out and stroked a knuckle down her arm. She smiled and returned the favor, trailing her fingertips up his arm.

Scooting closer, he flattened a palm on her back, rubbing in circles. She arched her back and murmured, “Now, what are you up to?”

“Me? I’m just giving you an innocent back rub.”

“That’s probably not against the rules.”

“Glad to hear it.” He kept rubbing, tugging her a little so she’d turn her back to him and he could massage her properly.

She made a lot of very sexy noises while he did so, and didn’t complain when his hands went wandering. At least until they wandered between her legs—then she caught his wrist and said, “I’m getting overheated, I should dip in the cold plunge.”

He made a grumpy noise and kissed the back of her neck. “If you insist.”

She shivered, and then sighed. “Think we could make it home.”

“We’re very fast runners,” he murmured, nuzzling her.

For a moment she felt like she might sink back into him, and then she leapt up, grabbing one of the sauna’s robes and tossing the other at him. “I’ll race you.”

He had no idea who won, as they reached the door at nearly the same time, and were kissing by the time they stumbled inside. He yanked her robe off and bent her over their table. It was fast and rough and hot and she gouged marks in the wood.

“You know,” she gasped as they were trying to catch their breath. “It would probably be really, really fun if I had my Time.”

Marriage did not fundamentally change Syn’s life. She still worked in the infirmary and attended Thor’s cabinet meetings. She worked with some of the other women to set up a school and daycare and even took a shift at the daycare, walking with the babies and entertaining toddlers. Loki was still skeptical about their ability to have children and she’d found mentioning it made him grumpy, so she stopped. The Asgardian babies scratched that particular itch for now.

Two weeks out from Rigel, they added a new member to the crew. Muriel went into labor in the middle of the night - it was always the middle of the night - and gave birth to a healthy baby girl that afternoon. Syn and Bruce took shifts sitting with her and coaching her through it. In the end,
Syn was the one who caught the newborn. They would announce her name in a few days, at a big ceremony. Asgardians love their ceremonies.

“At least it was a girl,” Loki said. “The first boy born will probably be named Odin, and won’t that be awkward.”

She laughed, reaching out to stroke his hair. He was doing paperwork in bed, which had become a habit, and she was reading a book she’d picked up on Rigel. “What if they name it Loki?”

“That would be fantastic. Obviously.”

“Of course.” Given the general sentiment, she suspected they were in for a generation of Thors and Lokis in the coming years. “Two more women had their Time this week. In a few months I’m going to be knee deep in pregnant women.”

“That seems like more than there ought to be, given the population.”

“Bruce was telling me that times of stress can make humans more fertile. The body thinks they need to repopulate and so puts more effort into reproduction. I suspect the same is happening. It’s not ideal, but I can see how biologically it makes sense.”

“And now we have a baby boom.”

“On a spaceship, years from our destination.” She lifted her hands. “Wheee.”

He looked over at her a moment. “Will you be upset if my brother has one?”

“I will be impressed if your brother had a baby.” He made a face and she giggled. “No, I’m not upset with any of them. Their home has been destroyed. Nothing says new start like a baby.”

“I know you want your own,” he said gently. “And I’m sorry.”

Ignoring the little pang it caused, she leaned over to kiss him. “It’s all right. What will be will be.”

“I’m still sorry.”

She nodded and kissed him again before resettling with her book. “There will clearly be plenty for me to borrow.”

“Perhaps at one of the planets, I could arrange to purchase one.”

With a sigh, she closed her eyes. “Oh, the worst part is I know you’re serious.”

“Perhaps that was phrased poorly. But there are all sorts of unwanted children in the universe. We could acquire one.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is adopt, darling. And yes, that is something I’d be open to looking into.”

“I’m sure as long as we’re honest with them, it won’t turn out like did.”

“If we can learn anything from your upbringing, it’s the honesty and clear expectation setting are important.” She reached over to rub his back gently. “I think you’ll be a good father.”

“Because I had such a wonderful example.”

She lifted a shoulder. “Doing better than your father is as good a motivation as any.” I have faith
you would cover my deficiencies.”

“I’m not entirely sure I remember my childhood. But I seem to have turned out fairly maternal so hopefully we’ll be all right.”

He grinned. “Sometimes I find great comfort in the fact that you can’t bullshit.”

“I do try.”

There was something eerie about being in deep space for so long. Syn knew she wasn’t the only one that felt it, but no one seemed to want to admit it, or how to articulate it. Brun was actively working on leisure activities and such to keep people relaxed and occupied. Syn had to admit the sauna and plunges were very nice.

It was probably because they’d all resigned themselves to a long, boring slog that it took everyone so completely by surprise. Syn was in the day care room, just finishing her shift when a large boom echoed from somewhere below them, making the walls and floor shudder.

The adults in the room froze, glancing at each other nervously. Some of the children started to cry. Syn was trying to comfort a little girl named Lyra when she heard Loki’s voice, clear as a bell, calling for her.

Without even thinking about it, she handed the girl to one of the other worked and went sprinting out of the room towards the engine.

Angry alarms were blaring when she got down there. People were fleeing, and she could smell smoke. Lights flickered and then turned red. They were evacuating the engine room.

She had to dodge out of the way, but pushed forward. Loki was in there, she just knew it. And there was almost certainly wounded who needed her help.

The smoke got worse the further into the room she got, and she hunched down to try to see better. In the engine room, fire suppressants were spraying everywhere, and seemed to have gotten the better of whatever was burning. She had to squint to see Loki emerging from the cloud. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard you call to me,” she said, reaching out instinctively. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I . . . How did you hear me?”

“I don’t know. I was in the nursery and we heard the explosion. A few minutes later I heard you call for me and I knew you were down here, so I ran. What happened?”

He coughed. “A piece of the engine blew up. Apparently we’ve done something wrong with the maintenance.”

“Spirits. Just what we need.” She put a hand on his chest, ignoring his trying to push her away, and cleared out some of the smoke damage to his lungs. “Is there anyone back there?”

He shook his head. “All Asgardians on shift, they’re pretty fireproof.”

“Well good, let’s get out of-“

Behind him, there was the unmistakeable squeal of metal sheering. She and Loki exchanged a panicked look and plunged back into the cloud of steam and smoke, in time to see the back wall of the room warping, compromised by the force of the explosion. “That’s an exterior wall, isn’t it?” Syn asked.
He grabbed her arm. “We need to get out and seal the blast doors before the hull breeches.”

They had taken a single step when the squeal hit a new pitch and the metal gave. Instinctively, she threw up a hand, calling to her magic and saw Loki do the same. Her mind flicked through a list of options but her magic seemed to know the best solution without her having to think about it.

A moment later they were looking at a hole in the wall, the vast blackness of space visible behind a shimmering gold-green film covering the gap in the metal.

“Are we really doing that?” he said, sounding a little awed.

She glanced down at his hand on her arm, relieved neither of them seemed to be burning. “It seems we are.” Looking back at the wall, she sort of poked at her magic a little. “I can . . . feel it. The space on the other side. Pulling.”

“I think technically that’s the air pushing out. Space is a vacuum.”

She supposed his ability to twist science and magic together was one of the reasons she loved him. “I admit I’m not entirely sure what to do now.”

“I’m a little afraid that if I let go of your arm, we’ll be sucked out into space.”

A very valid concern. “I don’t think either of us is capable of holding it alone. Or from a distance.”

“I agree.”

Which meant they were stuck there for the time being, in the still smoky room, with the silent engine.

Eventually Thor and two of the main engineers came down to check the damage. The look on their faces was almost worth being stuck there.

“How are you doing that?” Thor asked, pointing.

“Magic,” Syn said in perfect, sarcastic unison with Loki.

“Is it stable?”

“As long as we stand right here and keep it so.”

Thor frowned. “That’s . . . not ideal.”

“Our next stop has a station orbiting the planet,” one of the engineers said. “They’ll have space docks. So we won’t have to try and land like this.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Loki said. Syn doubted this would hold up to anything like re-entry.

“How far out is the stop?” Syn asked.

Thor sighed. “Three days, at full power. Which I doubt we’ll be getting,” he added, eyeing the engine.

The idea of sitting in the engine room full time for that long was rather . . . grim. But the alternative was probably worse. “Some one is going to need to bring us comfortable chairs.”
“We’ll get beds,” Thor said. “Or. . . well, I guess you can’t sleep?”

“We may be able to take shifts,” Syn replied, eyeing the wall. “Theoretically.”

“Should probably close the blast doors before we try.”

Thor and the engineer paled but Syn put on her brave face and nodded. “I suppose we could try staying awake as long as we can.”

“One thing at a time,” Loki said. “Chairs, and some provisions, please.”

Thor went to see to it, while the engineers started poking at the engine, assessing the damage and organizing a plan of repairs. Brun arrived with Thor and the chairs, and hugged Syn. Worry radiated off her in every direction, but she didn’t say anything obvious or silly. Only, “Do you want me to stay with you?”

“I’m all right,” she said, because she didn’t think Brun and Loki together would be soothing. “But I appreciate the offer.”

They’d brought down the two big leather chairs from their room. Brun had had them custom made on Rigel because she and Thor had broken both the armchairs in their suite. They were probably the most comfortable chairs on the ship, so Syn decided not to think about how much sex might have happened on them. They were only a few weeks old, at least.

Arranged properly they could sit and prop their feet up on the other’s chair, keeping in contact while remaining comfortable. Getting settled had taken some acrobatics, but confirmed they didn’t have to both be keeping their focus on the wall for it to stay up.

They were brought dinner and tea, then left mostly alone while even the engineers left for the night.

“I appreciate that this isn’t hurting either of us,” Loki said.

“Me too. We seem to have gotten past that hurdle, at least.” She looked down at his hand where it lay on her ankle. “I wonder if that means the bond has settled.”

“Seemed to work at the funeral too. But this feels oddly. . . easier. At least for me. Comfortable, natural.”

“It was instinctive. I’m not even sure which of us put the wall up.” She looked out at the swirl of stars. “Perhaps neither of us did.”

“Our magic is acting independently?”

“You make it sound rather ominous. But I’ve often thought of my magic having a mind of its own. It brought me to Sakaar without my conscious thought.”

“I think if you suggested to my brother that my magic was in any way out of my complete control he’d turn this boat around and take me back to Sakaar.”

She laughed. “Give his difficulty with his lightning I don’t know that he gets to judge anymore.”

Loki looked over at her. “You know, it’s funny. . . my father had a lot of power. For whatever reason he didn’t consider it magic. Mother had magic, as did I. He did not. Despite, you know, when you look at it even remotely objectively, what he was capable of. . .” Loki huffed. “‘Magic’ was women’s work, I think.”
“My father had no magic - other than the truth curse, which was done to his family, not their doing. My mother had all if it, though she always said I was stronger than anyone in her family. My older brother could do some, but preferred his sword.” She tilted her head, considering. “When I would beat him at sparring using magic he’d claim I was cheating.”

“My mother saw what I had and trained me. Very well, honestly. Odin handed Thor a hammer and told him it was magic. I mean, Molnjir was clearly enchanted. But it clearly wasn’t the source. I got centuries of instruction. He got ‘here you go, smash.”

Syn was quiet a moment. “Hela had magic. Clearly well taught and powerful. Perhaps... Odin tried to learn from his mistakes with her but took away the wrong lessons.”

“That sounds just like him, doesn’t it?”

“Very much. Some of the things you’ve told me about Thor as a young man, I can see similarities.”

“There’s a lot of my mother in there. She saw the best in everyone and everything.”

“To marry Odin, she must have.”

“I don’t disagree.” He looked out at space a moment. “You think he’d be offended if I offered to teach him?”

“Your brother?” Syn considered what she knew of him. “As long as you phrase it like a sincere offer of help and not you being smug and condescending, I think he’d be happy for your help.”

“I just think he clearly has a lot of power and Odin left him to the wolves.” He paused. “I won’t say it like that.”

She smiled. “That would probably be good. If he doesn’t like your teaching style I’ll do it. But I agree he needs some sort of training. He has too much raw power to leave him to his own devices.”

“He and Brun have a fight and he could blow up the ship.”

Especially given the type of magic he clearly had an affinity for. “I remember blowing out a few windows and destroying some furniture when I was a teenager and trying to get a handle on it.”

“When my mother died I accidentally smashed all the furniture in my cell.”

Her heart ached for him, and at the memories of her mother’s death. He frowned a little, as if he’d felt it. “I was furious when my mother died,” she said quietly.

“I know,” he said, sounding surprised by that.

She tilted her head. “Have you been having dreams you haven’t told me about?”

“No,” he said. “But I feel it. Despair and rage. Not unlike how I felt myself, but it’s different. It’s yours. But I feel it.”

“That must be strange, feeling things that aren’t yours.”

He shook his head. “Not as much as you’d think. You... fit in my head, I think.”

She smiled, at the words and the soft tone he used when he said them. “I’m glad. You fit in mine.”
“Instead of leaking through in dreams, is it just . . . permanent?”

“Well, I’m not getting full thoughts or memories any more. That would probably be annoying. But I do have a sense of you most of the time. I swear I heard you call my name when the engine blew.”

“I thought about you. I suppose just because something was wrong and so I worried.”

“Perhaps you thought it loudly,” she said with a twisted smile.

“Do you hear other thoughts?”

She tilted her head. “The other night when we made love you had some very complimentary things to say about my ass.”

“Well, your ass is fantastic.”

“Thank you, darling, I’m rather fond of yours.”

The teasing and banter came easy to them. It entertained them while the time dragged and the ship quieted around them. Loki kept his hand on her leg, thumb stroking her skin now and then. She found herself drifting a little, so tired her eyes were drooping. They weren’t sure if they could sleep and hold the wall and she really didn’t want to find out.

Watching the stars through the crack in the metal, she poked a bit at the tug she felt towards him. The bond that hummed in her chest, stretching out to him. It was stronger than it had ever been, but instinct told her it wasn’t fully settled yet. They still needed to touch to share power. Their connection required effort or extreme emotion and the impression she’d gotten from Heimdal was that shouldn’t be the case.

She had seen all his worst memories, the things he had told no one. Perhaps, just this once, the problem was her.

So she dug down deep and said the thing she’d hidden from just about everyone. “My mother killed herself,” she said quietly. “That’s why I was furious. I was angry at her for leaving me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “Why did she do it?”

Syn sighed. “My father was killed in a skirmish with Vanaheim. This was before Odin and Hela had started their rampage and there was a great deal of in fighting among the realms. When the news came that he was killed, my mother threw herself on the floor, wailing.” She shifted in her chair and he kept careful hold of her ankle. “In Alfheim the mourning and funeral process is very long and involved. You have to get the tomb ready and inter the body as soon as possible. There’s certain clothes family and loved ones have to wear. Certain gifts that must be sent by others - it’s complicated. I was just barely of age, Boe only a little older and he was overwhelmed by suddenly being king of a realm at war. And my younger brother was . . . very young and very angry. So I handled it all. The tomb and the clothing orders and the receiving of gifts and writing of thank you notes. Plus a coronation for my brother and trying to keep Tig from running off and getting himself killed.

“My mother had locked herself in her room and I’d left her alone for the most part. But I needed information about some ridiculous nuance or another and none of the etiquette books I had were helpful. So I went to ask her and found her in bed, cold and not breathing.” She took a deep breath. “There was a bottle in her hand and I recognized the scent of poison. So I hid it before calling the guards and everyone told a lovely romantic story about her dying of a broken heart. And I arranged the tomb and received the gifts and wrote the notes and comforted my brothers.
and never let any of them know how angry I was.”

“I’d be angry, too. That was a terrible thing to do you.”

She took a deep breath and felt something unclench a little bit inside her. “In a hundred years I’d lose both my brothers, then everything else. But I think my mother was when I started holding everyone at arm’s length. It was the first stone in my wall.”

“I have wondered,” he said. “Ever since you asked about mine.”

She looked down. “I suppose I should have told you before. You’ve been remarkably up front with me. It’s just . . . hard.”

“We both like to keep our secrets. This thing just. . . isn’t letting us. And maybe that’s okay.”

“I think it is. I don’t think we would do it otherwise. And we’d be the worse for it.” She smiled fondly. “It’s not so bad, having you know my secrets.”

As she spoke, something shifted inside, just under her breast bone. There was no pain, just an odd sort of settling. As if something had suddenly fit into place. The sensation made her gasp, pressing a hand over the spot.

Across from her, she could feel him staring at her. “Did you feel that, too?”

She nodded, taking a deep breath. There was no longer the tug towards him. There was now an awareness of him that was a part of her, the same as her finger or nose. It was pleasant, comforting. Oddly intimate.

He was quiet a long moment, then asked, “Do you trust me?” It was nearly a rhetorical question.

“With my life,” she said immediately.

He took a breath, and lifted his hand off her leg. The barrier held.

They both let out a long breath, studying the barrier. Syn nudged at the combined power she felt shimmering between them. “Do you think we could. . . fix it?”

“How?”

Good question. She stepped closer and peered at the gash, studying it. “Patch it with something more permanent?”

He tilted his head. “You think we can weld metal?”

“I managed to attach that gun to the Commodore. This is more finicky, obviously, but . . . there’s a lot more power available right now.”

“Where do we get the materials?”

She glanced around. “There must be something around here we could scavenge.”

“I think I’d feel better trying it while we’re in the space dock, and might not accidentally kill people.”

She shot him an amused look, but sank back into her chair. “Cautious Loki.”

“It’s an uncomfortable feeling,” he huffed, and sat back in his chair.
“I’m a bad influence on you.” She poked him with her foot, feeling oddly giddy.

“You make me better,” he said, as certain of that as he’d ever been of anything. “And that’s a feat—historically I’ve been pretty awful.”

“I told you. Love is two people moving towards the best version of themselves.” Leaning forward, she kissed him. “And I do love you.”

“I love you. And the version of me you have unearthed.”
Chapter 24

The ship limped to its next port. As a backup, Brun had spent long hours figuring out how to—if she had to—tow the big ship with the Commodore. Everyone was exhausted and on edge the entire three days it took, and took a deep breath when they finally reached the space station.

Brun had to detach the Commodore and wait for another day before space opened to dock it. Then she went home, crawled into her bed, and slept for about 15 hours.

Thor wasn’t there when she woke, though someone had left her tea and a meal. It was still warm so either she’d just missed him, or Syn had put an enchantment on it.

Whomever had done it, the food was delicious. There was way too much of it, which made her think it was Thor—his enormous appetite often caused him to overestimate hers. As a favor in return, she decided to fold and put away his laundry, something he was honestly terrible at. No one taught royalty to do their own laundry in a competent fashion.

It was then that she found the box.

It was plain, unwrapped, about the size of her hand, with no shop name or anything on it. She dithered a moment, debating whether to open it or not. Curiosity got the best of her and she tipped the lid open to find a thick gold necklace, woven with deep red stones.

Brun stared at it for a long moment. Then she gently put the lid back on the box, tucked it back under the clothes, and closed the drawer.

Then she went looking for Syn,

She was in the infirmary, rummaging in her cabinets, but smiled when Brun came in. “You’re awake.”

“I am.” She said in one the the chairs. “I need help.”

Syn clearly heard the faint note of panic in her voice because she turned to look at her fully.

“What happened?”

“I found what I am pretty sure is a betrothal necklace in Thor’s dresser drawer.”

“Okay. Why are you acting more like you found a disembodied head?”

“Syn!” She rubbed her eyes. “Look, I know you’ve got the whole psychic bond going on that makes everything make sense. . . but I’m kind of terrified.”

"But . . . you clearly like him. I’d venture to suggest you even love him. And you’ve been with him since that last night in Sakaar. Didn’t you expect him to, you know, take it the next step?"

She picked lint off her shirt. “I do love him,” she said, because she couldn’t lie to Syn.

“And that’s the part that terrifies you?”

Brun sighed. “Yes.”

“It is scary,” Syn admitted. “You warned me it would be. But it’s not so bad, either.”
“The last person I was in love with died for me.”

“I know,” she said gently. “That doesn’t mean he will.”

“Yeah but . . .” She shook her head. “He would.” She was about as certain as she’d ever been of anything.

“Yes, he would. But so would I. I believe that’s the risk of having people in your life.”

“I know it’s irrational. I just can’t shake it.” She looked up with a smile. “I held you off as long as I could.”

“Impossible, as you are.” Syn smiled. “I’m sorry, I know you’re scared. But he’s a good man. And he clearly adores you. And odds of him having to throw himself on a sword for you are relatively low. At least lower than when you were a soldier.”

“I think I have this crazy idea that leaving doubt might make him pause.” She sighed again. “It sounds ridiculous when I say it out loud.”

“You said it, so I won’t. What do you want to do? He hasn’t proposed yet. Maybe he just bought the necklace as a just-in-case. He’s still giving you time.”

“I didn’t think that far. I just saw it an panicked a little and came down here.”

Syn chuckled. “Do you need a hug?”

“I think I need a stiff drink and a kick in the head.”

“Well, why don’t we hit the station bar for the first one and see if it leads to the second?”

Brun grinned. “See, this is why you are my best friend.”

The station was a little more rugged outpost than the last planet had been. The bar was the kind of place one could get in a fight, if one was inclined to do so and had a best friend who was both magic and a healer. Syn also packed a mean left hook when provoked.

It was crowded—a lot of people from the ship seemed to have similar ideas. There was a ripple of notice when they came in, but they were left alone at a table. “So, how is being married treating you?”

“Very well. He’s is loving and attentive. And while we were holding the ship together we seemed to have sorted out the last of the bonding.”

“That was pretty impressive of you two. God knows what else you’d be able to do.”

“He wants to experiment while we’re on the station and less likely, to, you know, kill us all.”

“I appreciate that.”

“We figured people would.” She sipped her drink, wrinkling her nose a little adorably. “He’s trying very hard to be good. To deserve me, he says. I think it’s strange for him, but he’s falling into the role of Thor’s advisor very well.”

“Thor seems to have forgiven him for their history and wants a fresh start. Probably because he’s a much better person than I am.”

“Thor is a much better person than most people,” Syn admitted.
“Some days I cannot fathom how he could be Odin’s son.”

“I do legitimately wonder if he’s the adopted one. I feel like Hela and Loki have a bit more in common.” She slugged back some drink. “And this is me saying that.”

“If you’d told me all those years ago some day we’d end up with that man’s heirs. . . Brun shook her head and took a drink.

“I do regret he wasn’t around to see it happen. Though he’d had found some way to take credit for it.”

“I’d have punched him in the face.”

“That adds to my regret,” Syn admitted.

Brun laughed, and then she looked over and saw a familiar dark-clad figure in the doorway of the bar. She sighed a little. “Your husband has found us.”

She followed her gaze. “I’m sorry. You want me to shoo him away?”

“He’s already coming towards us. I can be polite, I promise. You shouldn’t have to keep us separated like quarreling children.”

Syn didn’t comment, mostly because Loki had reached them. She did smile and tip her head up to meet him for a kiss. “Hello, mo cuisle.”

“I talked to the guys fixing the ship. Apparently they need more material and so want more money.”

She made a face, mouth thinning. “Seriously? They’re already robbing me blind.”

“You want to try? I could sell water to fish and I couldn’t get them to budge.”

“They’re all men?” He nodded and she got to her feet, knocking back her drink. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Brun patted her arm. “Good luck.”

She gave them both a little salute and sauntered towards the doorway.

Brun looked back at her drink and Loki hovered awkwardly a moment, before dropping into the chair Syn had vacated. “I owe you an apology.”

She eyed him. “Just one?”

Undeterred, he clarified, “For the day we met. And fought.”

“Ah, yes. When you invaded my mind and dragged up my worst memory? That day?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes. That. I wish to apologize for that. Though I know it is likely unforgivable.”

“Did Syn put you up to this?”

“She didn’t ask me or order me to do it. But I can’t deny my relationship with her has influenced my decisions.”
Brun looked at him a moment. “I know it upsets her that we don’t get along.”

“It does.” He fiddled with the empty glass Syn had left behind. “The bond I share with her required us to both share our deepest secrets. And worst memories. It put into sharp focus how painful what I did must have been.”

“It was,” she said. “You are . . . carelessly selfish. Whatever happens in the moment, and repent later. Maybe because your brother has forgiven you anything, your entire life.”

“You’re right. But I am trying to change that.”

She was surprised by the honesty—but then, Syn did that to people. She studied him. “Why?”

He lifts a shoulder, looking awkward. “Because she loves me, and I don’t deserve it. But I can spend my life trying to.”

“I guess I know a bit of what that’s like.”

“She seems to think we have somethings in common.”

“That is likely true. Much as I imagine we both dislike it.”

He smiled a little. “Clearly she has a type.”

“I worry you’ll hurt her,” she said. “That if it came down to it, you would put yourself first.” She looked at him. “And I worry one day you’ll put a target on Thor’s back.”

Loki was quiet a moment. “I will not insult you by solemnly promising it will never happen. I have been a selfish asshole for a very long time and my first instinct is still often that. But I now have a bit of Syn in my head. My soul. And she makes it easier for me to ignore that first thought and think about what I really want to do.” He paused. “I will promise you I mean my brother no harm. And that I will leave before I come to blows with him again.”

She considered that. “You don’t want to be king?”

He sighed. “I was the king. I thought I did a pretty good job of it. But Thor has made valid arguments to the contrary. I’m currently enjoying my role as advisor. I’m good at planning and logistics and bad at being personable and remembering everyone’s name. My father used to promise us both the crown. If he’d thought to prepare and train me for the job I was actually suited for then our lives would have been quite different.”

She smiled despite herself. “That sounded honest.”

“She’s a terrible influence.”

“So do we call a truce in honor of our loved ones?”

“I would be amenable. I’ve had enough family drama for several lifetimes.”

She held up her drink to him. “Deal.”

With a gesture, Syn’s glass refilled and he lifted it to clink against hers.

Eventually, Loki went to check on Syn and her meeting with the engineers. Brun went in search of some kind of decent and interesting takeout she could bring back up for her and Thor for dinner. Rations were getting old.
The stuff on the station wasn’t as fresh as the food on the planet had been, but there was meat and some decent tasting bread and fruit. Thor wasn’t particularly picky, more interested in quantity than quality. She loaded up a couple bags and headed back to the ship to see what he’d been up to all day.

He was in their rooms when she got there and grinned when he saw her. “Hello. Glad to see you’re up and about.”

“I brought food. No idea what it is, I just followed my nose.” She put the boxes on the table.

“I trust your nose implicitly.” He joined her at the table and kissed her. “I missed you.”

She slid her arm around him. It felt silly, but she’d missed him, too. “I talked to your brother.”

“Is he bleeding?”

“No,” she said pointedly. “We came to an agreement. Called a truce.”

Thor’s brows went up, and he leaned in to kiss her again. “I’m proud of you two.”

“I didn’t even threaten to kill him.”

“Goodness, he must have been on his best behavior.”

“He and Syn have developed some sort of bond through their magic. And he seems very aware he doesn’t deserve her.”

“Does that endear him to you?” Thor asked, beginning to unpack the food boxes.

“I guess I understand the instinct is all.”

He paused and studied her. “Brun. You don’t think-“

“That you deserve someone better than me? Sometimes. But altruism isn’t really in my nature, so you’re stuck with me.”

That got her a laugh. “Well, good. I’m happy to be stuck.”

Bravado was her most cherished weapon sometimes. She made herself a plate of food. “It’s hard on Syn to worry about him and I having issues, so a peace was needed.”

“It would be good if the four of us all got along.”

“I am doing my best. That’s all I can promise. I’m not saying I’m ready for a double date.”

“I’ll cancel my plans for the couples weekend.”

She laughed, and went about eating her dinner, as did he he. Eventually she said. “I think you probably deserve someone better at relationships than I am. But I’m glad you put up with me anyway.”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “It may surprise you to know I’m not particularly experienced with relationships either.”

“That does surprise me. You do pretty well from where I sit.”

“Romantic relationships, at least, are not my forte. I have many friends.” He tilted his head.
“Come to think of it my history with family relationships isn’t great either.”

“I would put blame for that on your family members.”

“There’s probably an argument to be made for that,” he conceded.

“Before I knew you, I’d have assumed just by looking at you, that you’d left a trail of broken hearts behind you. But now I expect that’s not even remotely true.”

He shook his head, sipping the cup of tea she’d brought him. “I bedded my share of camp followers and courtesans in my youth. But everyone involved knew what it was about. As far as actual relationships you could count them on one hand.”

“Any hearts get broken?”

“Mostly mine,” he said with a small smile. “But for the most part they just . . . petered out. I’m told I’m not an easy person to date.”

Brun raised an eyebrow. “Okay, that part I don’t believe at all.”

“Apparently, I’m married to my job.”

“Ah,” she said. “Not a problem I’ve seen, but we’re all stuck on this ship. But I can see how the Realm Protecting business would take you away a lot. I could never maintain a relationship while I was in the field unless they were in the field with me. I suppose that’s how Eir and I lasted so long.”

“Well, my realm protecting days are likely done, with the Bifrost gone. And any other jobs I might be doing I intend to keep you at my side.”

“Going to take me Avenging with you?”

“If you wanted to. They’d be happy to have you.”

“Might be fun.” Might also give him an opportunity to get in front of a sword, so to speak. The thought was scary enough to give her pause. It could be like Eir all over again.

“Of course, my first priority is going to be getting our new home set up on Earth,” Thor said, seemingly oblivious to her change in mood. “It’s going to be a bit of a culture shock for everyone.”

“After years on this ship? Yeah, probably.”

“I suppose Midgard will look less backwards after being on this thing for a long time.”

“Asgardians are stubborn and resilient. They’ll be okay.”

He smiled fondly. “I know. I think we’ll all be okay.”

She watched him a moment. “How about you?”

“What about me?” He asked, looking a little startled.

“I admit you’re pretty stubborn and resilient, but I worry about you anyway.”

He smiled again. “I’m all right, I think. This mess with the engine and repairs has been stressful. I’m tired. But I feel like we have something resembling a plan. It helps.”
Brun reached out and traced a pattern on the back of his hand with her fingertip. “We’ll go to bed early. That will help with the tired.” She couldn’t do much for the rest.

“That would be nice. The station isn’t as entertaining as our previous stops.”

She would take care of him in whatever way she could. “I’ll book us a sauna, and we’ll get a good night’s sleep.”

Leaning over the table, he kissed her temple. “That sounds wonderful.”

She still wasn’t sure she deserved him, but she did the best she could.

* *

The station was far more boring than the previous stop. And with a more structured crew Loki was able to delegate the supply refills and spend his time with Syn. Much as he might have liked to spend all of that time holed away in their rooms, they both felt it was important to work on their shared powers.

So they booked one of the gymnasium rooms and practiced using and focusing the rather enormous amount of magic that now pooled between them. Which, them being them, somehow ended with them sparring a bit.

He had never been one to indulge in fisticuffs with his bed mate. But he’d admired her skill with the staff on the Bifrost bridge and enjoyed another chance to see it up close. And sparring with someone who could all but read your mind turned it into a bit of a dance.

“I had an idea,” he said, when she had him pinned to the wall—at least partly just to to distract her.

Her mouth twisted up into a smile. “I imagine you’re having all kinds of ideas right now.”

“We’ll get to those in a minute.”

“All right.” She kissed the tip of his nose and eased back to let him off the wall. “What was your idea?”

“Back on Sakaar, we made a shield to protect Thor, and it burned you. Combined now we can seal a hull breach. So I was thinking... remember when we made the illusion together and it was... sort of solid? That burned me.”

“Yes, you were demonstrating your personal porn.” She tilted her head. “You want to try it again?”

“I’m wondering if we can make an illusion you won’t make vanish.”

With a thoughtful look, she started twirling her staff, passing it behind her back in a way he found distractingly sexy. “I don’t see why not,” she said finally. “It’s worth experimenting, certainly.”

“A steady illusion would allow us to stay on Midgard.”

Her eyes lit up, making him very glad he’d brought this up. “It would.”

“We should start with something separate from us, and then work on glamours. I think, anyway. This sharing thing is still new.”
Syn stroked a hand down his cheek. “I know. But I think we’re managing rather well.”

He grinned at her. “So what shall we make?”

After a moment’s consideration, she suggested, “You? I’m sure your brother would happily throw things at it to test solidity.”

Loki laughed. “That’s not a half-bad idea.” He flicked his fingers, and a clone appeared. Syn studied it and he felt a surge of her magic pass through him and the double shimmered a bit then became more substantial.

“Shall we call your brother?” She asked.

He reached for her staff, and poked the clone with it. It was... semi-solid. He could run it through, but it took force. “This is weird.”

“I’m not sure stabbing yourself is good for your mental health,” Syn told him. She stepped close and touched the arm of the duplicate. It didn’t dissipate, but she pulled her hand back. “Oh, that is weird.”

“We could call Brun, she’d probably enjoy stabbing it.”

“Again. Bad for mental health.” She made a fist and the double disappeared. “Maybe try something smaller. Do you have cats on Asgard?”

“No, but I’ve seen plenty on Midgard.” He created a small black cat.

Syn crouched down and he felt a pulse of her magic again as she reached a hand out. The cat pranced over and she stroked it, face breaking out into a brilliant smile. “This feels real.” She scratched the illusion under the chin and a purr rumbled from it.

Through their bond, he could feel an odd mix of pleasure and grief and longing and realized she must have had cats on Alfheim.

He was now as determined as he’d ever been to make this work. “When we get to Midgard, I will get you a real cat. Perhaps several.”

She picked up the illusion of the black cat and stroked it. “Several would be nice.”

“How solid does that feel to you?”

“It’s lighter than a cat this size should be, but the fur feels real and it’s warm.”

“Perhaps your truth sense allows it because it feels real.”

“Or it recognizes my magic in it.” She petted it again. “Can we keep it? See how long it lasts? For research purposes.”

“Are you going to get attached? I have no idea how long it will last.”

She frowned. “I’m probably going to get attached, yes.”

That was what Loki had been worried about. “Is there an animal you’re less likely to get attached to?”

A pause. “Something less fluffy?”
He snapped his fingers and it turned into a snake. Thor would laugh.

Syn squeaked, though he thought more in surprise than fear of the snake. It slithered up her arm to twine around her bicep. She stroked its nose. “Aw.”

Loki put his hands on his hips. “You’re going to get attached to anything, aren’t you?”

“You shouldn’t have chosen an animal that reminds me of you.” She kissed his cheek. “I will accept the snake disappearing and being replaced more easily than the cat.”

“Fair enough. Let’s see how long it lasts.”

The snake lived on her arm during the day and in one of her dresser drawers at night. She named it something in Old Alfan and did seem quite fond of it. After a week it still hadn’t disappeared and Loki was becoming quite hopeful this plan might work.

“How long do you think we should give it before trying something larger?” he asked Syn.

“I think we could try something bigger whenever we like,” she said, letting the snake wind from one wrist to the other. “It all depends on how often we’re willing redo your glamour. A week seems like a good starting point.”

“Maybe I’ll make something large but ugly.”

“I don’t think there’s room on the ship for a bilgesnipe, love.”

He laughed because that was exactly what he’d been thinking of. “We’ll put it in the cargo bay.” He turned and looked at her. “Do they have those on Alfheim?”

She shook her head. “No, I saw one one when I went to Vanaheim with my mother. I recall desperately wanting to ride it.”

“Clearly you didn’t get close enough. They smell.”

“It was from a distance,” she conceded. “I got to ride a horse instead.”

“After a longer test, perhaps we could make us a pet. I would need something that would hold up for years, if I’m going to wear it every day.”

She tilted her head. “It just occurred to me, I can see the illusions. So you’ll look like your glamour to me. That will take getting used to.”

“Maybe I could put it on only in public?”

“I’d prefer that.” She held a finger out to the snake. “Maybe we can keep it as close to your real looks as possible.”

“Different coloring might help. Blonde curly hair and some sort of facial hair. More like I might actually be Thor’s relative.”

She smiled. “It would be like having two husbands. One for the week and one for weekends.”

“They say variety is the spice of life.”

“We get these clones right maybe I can have both at once,” she teased.

“I know I’m famous for having a very high opinion of myself, but I’m not really interested in
having a threesome with myself.”

Laughing, she reached out for him and he obligingly let her pull him down for a kiss. “You make me very happy, husband,” she murmured on his mouth.

The ship shuddered, and alarms began to blare.
Chapter 25

Thor took the steps up to the bridge two at a time, crashing into the wall when the ship shook again. “What’s happening?” he asked the room in general when he finally made it up.

“We are under attack,” Heimdall said. A large ship loomed in the viewport. “They’re pirates. They want to scavenge us for parts. And slaves.”

“I need to take the Commodore up and try to fight them off,” Brun said.

His instinct was to offer to go with her. But he was a piss-poor pilot and was needed here. “Be careful,” he told her instead.


“Do we have a damage report?” Thor asked Heimdall.

“No hull ruptures at this time, but they are aiming for the engine core.”

“So they can cripple us,” Brun said. “Damage the engine and we can’t run. I did this from time to time, I know the playbook. They’re trying to overload it—and it’s already fritzy. You’d have to shut it down to protect it.”

“No power, no shields,” Loki said. “Syn and I might be able to build some extra shielding, but . . .” He shook his head. “We need to fight them off before the engine goes.”

Bruce had come up to the bridge by this this point, and had been listening. “Loki, can you transport me over there. Let the Hulk smash a while and then come get me.”

“I can’t transport between two spaceships, no. It’s too dangerous.”

“Well, I’m going to go put my guns to use,” Brun said. “I need a co-pilot.” She pointed from Loki to Syn and back. “One of you.”

They exchanged a look and Thor wondered if they had actually reached a point of telepathy or just communicated through facial expression.

Syn seemed to win, because she kissed Loki’s cheek. “I promise I’ll be careful. You two won’t work together as well as she and I do.”

The ship shook with another blow, and Brun jogged to the door, grabbing Syn’s arm. Before they reached it Thor called out her name and she turned. And then he had no idea what to say, considering there was an audience.

“Don’t die,” he said, remembering the last time they’d said goodbye before a battle.

The way she smiled at him, he knew she understood. Then she nodded and was gone.

He turned to Loki. “Can you do the shielding without her?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll try.” He look at him. “Can you make lightning in space?”

“I don’t see why not. Magic is magic, right?”
“I believe you’d have to go out into space to do it,” Heimdal said. “The electricity comes from you. You’d fry the ship doing it from in here.”

Thor considered that. “I can think of no way to do that that doesn’t end in my horrible death.”

On screen, the Commodore shot past, drawing fire from the pirates and shooting back. Thor got on the ship-wide comm and made an brief announcement about what was going on and asked every one to return to, and remain in, their quarters.

When he looked up, there were now a dozen copies of the Commodore flying around out there. “I gave them something else to shoot at,” Loki said.

“I’m going to go down to the infirmary,” Bruce said. “Call if you figure out a use for the Hulk.”

“Will do.”

The comm crackled on the pilot’s console. “This is the engine room. We need some help down here. Power’s fluctuating too fast for us to keep up.”

Loki looked over at him. “How well can you control the electricity?”

“Well enough,” he said, turning for the door. “Come on.”

*

The sudden appearance of dozens of identical ships was a little startling to pilot through, but Syn immediately understood what Loki was doing, and she stretched her magic out to help give them more substance. Their connection held over much longer a distance than she’d have expected.

She was doing the piloting while Brun fired. “I’m going to try to get along the left flank,” Syn told her, tapping things on the console. “That kind of ship, power module is on the underside. You got anything that’ll shoot up?”

“I do, there’s one in the back.” She stood up. “Should have brought a third crew.”

“I was surprised you would have accepted Loki as a second,” she admitted, swinging down and left of the ship.

“Man knows how to fly,” she said, prepping the tail gun.

“That he does. Right, I think we’re only getting one shot at this, you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Times like this, Syn wished she still believed in the spirits to protect her. She blew out a breath and pushed the throttle forward, banking under the pirate ship. Brun’s gun rattled behind her and she saw what looked like a couple good hits in her peripheral vision.

The pirate ship had a bank of guns on the right side, which is why she’d ducked under on the left. As the Commodore cleared the ship, two of those guns swiveled in a way she’d have thought was impossible and she cursed, yanking the stick forward and to the left to try to dodge.

Something hit, and the whole ship shook. Syn’s panel flickered; she could hear Brun cursing. “Just blew the fucking thing off!”

“What fucking thing?” She called back, trying to get her steering back under control.
“The tail gun. And I think part of the tail.” She came back to the front, cradling an injured hand.

Syn glanced at it. She could fix it when they got back. “I’m heading back in. Steering is shot, I can’t maneuver.”

Brun looked alarmed. “We can’t go back, we have the only guns.”

“Without the tail we’re sitting ducks out here. The guns don’t help if we get shot up, too.”

She sat at the other console, poking at it with her good hand. “They’re not responding at all.”

“Yeah.” With some fiddling, she managed to get her side thrusters working on tandem and got them pointed back at the main ship. “You can put all the guns on her, you want, this really isn’t a fighter plane.”

“Wish we could throw it at them,” she muttered. She looked up at the enemy ship. “We can’t let them board, Syn.”

“I know.” She sounded grim to her own ears. “Loki and I have been practicing. . . We’ll think of something.”

Brun studied the other ship while Syn docked. Done with them, they’d begun firing on the Asgardian ship again, making docking hard. “We raked them good, too,” Brun said. “One big hit might knock them out. I guess you can’t illusion a missile.”

“I don’t know if it would be solid enough to do enough damage.” Even the snake had a certain. . . unsubstantialness to it they couldn’t quite perfect. “We can help with the shields, though.” The clamps finally locked in and she stood. “Maybe we can do some damage the old fashioned way. Peel pieces off.”

“Before they do the same to us?”

Syn didn’t answer, because she couldn’t lie. Brun looked at the ship, and then the control panel. She sighed and stood, too, following Syn to the door. Then she stopped at the threshold and said, “Syn.”

She turned to look at her, the tone of her voice making her skin prickle. “What is it?”

Brun took a breath and said, “I love you and you are the best sister I could ever ask for. You tell him he’d better take good care of you.” Then she shoved Syn, hard, so she flew backwards into the hall. The hatch doors slammed closed.

“Brun!” she screamed, scrambling to her feet and slamming herself at the door. On the other side she heard the Commodore’s engines start up. “Brun!” Syn punched the door hard enough to dent it but it stayed shut.

She stood panting a moment, staring at the door. Then she whirled and ran to find Loki.

*

Shoving Syn out of the airlock had been one of the hardest things Brun had ever done. If only for the look on her face.

But she felt at peace with it, once she got the Commodore undocked and back in the air. It wasn’t exactly precision flying, but the shields would hold long enough. She just had to hit the right spot.
Her comm was beeping. That had to be Syn. She hit the button. “I’m not turning around.”

“I specifically told you not to die,” Thor’s voice came through the speakers.


“I wouldn’t call a suicide run a plan.”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not doing this by accident.” She slowly made her way underneath the enemy ship. Loki’s clones had returned, for cover, which she appreciated. “You’re one to talk. What happened to the safety of the people is all that matters.”

“Brun, please turn the ship around. We’ll think of something else.”

She stared out at the stars. “I know these people,” she said quietly. “I know what they’ll do. We have no weapons. It’s only a matter of time.”

“You do not have to throw yourself on this sword. I thought… I thought we were a team. We could fix things together.”

“So I come back and we die together instead?”

“You don’t know we’ll die. But I would prefer it to you dying out there alone.”

“There will be a big explosion, I won’t feel much.” She regretted it as soon as she said it—this was not how she wanted her last conversation with him to go. But she couldn’t tell if he was being an unbearable optimist, or telling a desperate lie. Maybe both.

“Brun…” He trailed off, because really, what was there he could say? She was almost at the other ship. “Please,” he whispered.

Her throat closed and she felt tears sting her eyes. “Hey. Listen. I never told you I love you and I’m sorry. I don’t know why I couldn’t, I just…” She swallowed. “Thank you for making me happy. I’d forgotten what that felt like.”

There was a sound like a shuddery breath and she really hoped he wasn’t crying. “I love you, too,” he said.

The ship filled her view screen now. She closed her eyes. “I’ll hold you a place in line to yell at Odin.”

“Brun!”

“I’m afraid punching the old man will have to wait.”

She jumped at the sound of Loki’s voice and opened her eyes to see him standing next to her. He grabbed her arm, pushed the throttle up and everything disappeared in a flare of green.

* 

Magic, for all it’s power, still had to interact with the rules of the universe. There were limits. Boundaries. You still had to contend with time and space.

Transporting from one vehicle moving in space, to another moving away, through a bunch of electromagnetic shielding and firing weapons, was about as feasible as knocking one bullet out of the air with another bullet fired while flying upside down. Never mind doing it twice.
But there was Syn, crying in his arms. So he did the impossible.

He reappeared on the ship more or less where he’d left from, in the hallway outside the engine room, Brun with him. He was pleased to see they both had all their body parts in all the correct places.

A tear stained Syn launched herself at Brun, alternating between hugging and punching her. “Don’t you ever do that to me again! You don’t want anyone else jumping in front of swords but it’s okay if you do it?! What is wrong with you?”

The ship rocked with the worst blast yet, hard enough it threw them all against the wall.

“Their ship has been destroyed,” Heimdal said over the comm.

“Damage status?” Loki asked, leaving Syn and Brun to their fight/reunion.

“One more blow and we’d have had a hull breech,” Heimdal said.

“That!” Brun yelled. “That is why!”

“You’re still a stupidhead and I’m pissed at you!”

“Fine!”

“Good! Now hold still and let me fix your hand.”

Brun turned and glared at Loki for a moment. “I thought you couldn’t do that? Transport between ships.”

He searched for something flippant to say, then went with the truth. “Syn was crying.”

“And that made your magic work different?”

“It made me willing to do the impossible.” Syn finished with her hand and turned to wrap her arms around him.

“Well... thank you for saving my life.”

He nodded and gave Syn a tight squeeze. “If you died she would never be all right again.” Damn her and her truth curse. “And I couldn’t abide that.”

“Ah.” Brun ducked her head. “Thanks.”

“Thank you,” Syn echoed softly in his ear.

“Come on,” he said to her. “I think there’s wounded in the infirmary.”

“Hey,” Brun called. “Where’s Thor?”

“Engine room,” Loki told her, gesturing. “He’s keeping the engine running.”

* 

Thor wondered, sometimes, if he’d eventually reach a point where he would simply become accustomed to losing people he loved. It sure as hell wasn’t today, though.

The comm signal had cut out, and a moment later an explosion. He hadn’t needed Heimdall’s
message to know what it was.

He was still stuck here keeping the engine powered until the crew could repair the damage. But at least he didn’t have to worry about any more damage. And once he was done he could go to his room and drink. A lot.

He had no idea how long he stood there, staring at nothing. Id and the rest of the engine crew scurried about making repairs, but no one talked to him. They’d all gotten to listen to his last conversation with Brun and clearly knew to give him a wide berth.

When the doors opened and she walked in, he thought he might be hallucinating.

She walked over to him, and the others seemed to see her. So he risked saying, “How?”

She looked him over, crackling with electricity, like she wanted to touch him but knew she shouldn’t. “Loki,” she replied.

He loved his brother. Adored him. “I am . . . so glad to see you.”

Brun’s chin trembled. “Me too.” She swallowed and added. “I’m sorry.”

God how he wanted to hold her. “Promise me you’ll never do that again.”

She bit her lip. “I would,” she said quietly, a catch in her voice. “But it would be a lie.”

“Brun,” he said quietly. “You are worth more than a sacrifice.”

“I didn’t do it for them. I did it for you.”

“Why?”

She looked down a moment, and shook her head. “You’d have been the first one they killed when they boarded and I just . . . a world without you isn’t one I want to live in is all.”

He supposed he understood that. Far to well at this particular moment. “A world without you isn’t one I want to be in, either,” he told her gently. “Are we going to spend our lives trying to our sacrifice each other?”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “I’m hoping the opportunities will stop soon.”

“I think we’re ready to turn her back on!” Id called from the other side of the room.

Finally. Thor looked over at him and waited for his signal before releasing the contacts he’d been holding. Everyone held their breath, but the engine whirred happily to life, without so much as a flicker.

The engineers cheered, and Their turned to scoop Brun up in a hug. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in them. She mumbled things he didn’t understand, and he could feel her shaking like she was crying—or trying desperately not too.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“I’m here,” she replied. She was definitely crying. “I’m sorry. I love you, too.” She sniffled. “I have for a long time.”

“Good. Me too.” He hugged her tightly. “It’s all right. Shh. We’ll figure it out. I promise.”
She took a shuddery breath. “I want the necklace.”

This day was full of shocks. “You know about that?”

She pulled back and wiped her eyes. Why she felt compelled to then wipe his face, he couldn’t say. “You’re lousy at hiding things.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “All right.” He took a breath. “When we get back to the room I’ll put it on you.”

“I love you.” She leaned in to kiss him, almost heartbreakingly tender. She didn’t need to say it right then. He could feel it.

*

The biggest problem with being the main healer on board, was that in times of extreme stress, Syn still had a job to do.

Loki had brought her to the infirmary but was immediately called away again to deal with damage reports. So she was left alone with Bruce and the long stream of wounded trailing in the doors. No one had anything serious, but a string of minor burns and contusions from being jostled around the ship. She might have preferred something big and life threatening, at least it would have distracted her from the rather awful half hour she’d just had.

There was a commotion in the doorway, people began applauding. She looked up to see Thor and Brun standing there.

Syn helped her last patient off the table and waited for the applause to die down before gesturing them over. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I just came to see if you wanted to punch me more.”

She crossed her arms. “I do, but I’m very busy right now. Could we schedule it for later in the week?”

Brun sighed and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Are you sorry you did it? Or are you sorry I’m mad at you? Because if it’s the second it means you’re going to do it again and I will be twice as angry that time.”

“I’m sorry I scared you. I’m not sorry we’re not all dead of the hull breach that was apparently imminent.”

That was probably the best she was going to get out of her. For all her bluster about being a scrapper and hating Asgard, Brun was still a Valkyrie at heart. “Loki’s right. Losing you would break me.” She let that sink in, before adding, “I have lost everyone I’ve ever loved. I would really like to not add you to that list.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again, because there wasn’t a whole lot she really could say. “It seemed the best of a list of terrible options.”

Syn sighed. It wasn’t like she could stay angry forever. Brun was here and safe and sincerely sorry for hurting her. So she stepped closer and hugged her sister tightly.

Brun hugged her back, just as tight. “I’ll schedule some punching time for tomorrow.”
“That seems fair.”

“We have work to do,” she said. “I just wanted to come see you.”

Syn nodded. “Try to get some sleep when you can.”

“You too, huh? And eat. You spent a lot of magic today. Loki and I will nag in shifts.”

“Oh, I just realized a downside to you two getting along.”

She grinned. “Yeah, he saved my life so I think we’re square. We can gang up on you now.”

“I will try to find joy in that.” She kissed Brun’s cheek. “Go do your work. I have people to heal.”

Brun squeezed her once more, and then turned and left. Syn watched her go, then blew out a breath and called the next patient over. The line was even longer than it have been before.

Loki came down an hour later with food. He had a smudge of grease on his face. “Break time.”

She was tempted to ask if Brun had sent him. But she just sat at her desk and held her hands out for the food. “How is the rest of the ship?”

“Good. We’re going back to the last port. Hull is pretty banged up and they have the facilities to fix it. Again.”

“Lovely. At least it’s fairly close.”

“I stopped over to check—would you believe the snake is still there? All the power we’ve used today, and it’s totally fine.”

That made her laugh, though it felt oddly close to hysterical crying. “Does that mean I can have a cat?”

“Today I would give you anything.”

She smiled and caught his hand. “You already gave me Brun back.”

He grinned at her. “And now she owes me.”

“Always looking for the bright side, aren’t you darling?”

He sat on the edge of the desk. “And it wasn’t entirely for you. I mean, mostly it was. Some was for my brother.”

Privately, she suspected it was more for Thor than Loki would ever admit. But she had shown her pain more than Thor had, so it was easier to lay at her feet. “He would also not have been all right without her.”

“No,” Loki said. “He would not. But he’s stoic and she’s cagey so they won’t talk about it.”

“One of these day I should stand and hold both their arms until they admit everything to each other.”

“We’d be just as bad, if not worse, if not for various kinds of magic forcing our hands.”

That was a very good point. She hadn’t liked him much when she met him, though that now seemed centuries ago. She ate the last few bites of food he’d brought her. “I would not be all right
without you, either.”

“I think I would revert to the appalling person I used to be. If I managed to get out of bed, which is a big if. You’re a part of me. It would be like losing a limb or... my sense of sight. You would take everything that is good about me with you.”

She pressed a hand to his jaw, drew him in to kiss him. “I don’t intend to go anywhere.”

He pulled her to her feet. “Is that a promise?”

“I swear to the Tree,” she said. “I’m yours.”

He grinned. “Well that part you already promised. And tied a knot.”

“I did.” She sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m exhausted.”

“Maybe it’s time to call it a night. No one is dying.”

True, but there were still a lot of people in line. “But-

“Go,” Bruce said from his table. “I can triage. He’s right, we haven’t seen anything that can’t wait until morning.”

Everyone was ganging up on her today. “All right,” she finally said.

“Come on,” Loki said. “I’ll run you a bath.”

“That sounds heavenly.” He tucked an arm around her and guided her to the door.
Back at their rooms, he settled her into a chair and went to run the bath. Watching him, she thought that if his transport hadn’t worked, she’d have lost them both. The thought hit her like a blow and she felt tears well up again.

Sometimes she missed having so many walls up she didn’t get upset about things. It had been much easier on her eyes.

Loki came back out, and stood in front of her. “Dear heart. . .”

“I’m -“ Reassurances wouldn’t come and she bit her lip, swiping at her eyes. “I could have lost you both.”

“You could have,” he said, because she could never get comforting lies.

That made the tears come in earnest and she reached for him, letting him haul her up into a hug. “It’s over,” he whispered. “It’s over.”

She shook her head, pressing her face into his shoulder. He guided her back to the bathroom where the steamy, floral scented bath was waiting for them. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled finally. “I think it hit me hard just then.”

Gently he peeled her clothes off. “It was an awful morning.”

It was nice to be taken care of for a little while. She let him undress her and help her into the water. It was delightfully hot and bubbly and she took a deep breath to dunk her head and get her hair wet.

He sat on the edge. “Do you want company?”

“I always want your company,” she told him.

He smiled and stood and she enjoyed watching him strip. He sighed as he sank under the water. “Thank you.”

She trailed her fingers along his leg where it lay alongside hers. “Do you think our lives will ever be calm?”

Loki sighed. “A man can dream.” Funny thing for the God of Mischief to say.

It was likely even reaching Midgard wouldn’t solve anything. There would be governments to deal with and the stress of keeping Loki hidden. Suddenly, she felt exhausted and turned to lean on him, smiling when he started washing her hair.

“We have long lives,” he said finally. “We’ll get old and boring eventually.”
That got a chuckle out of her. He was good at making her laugh in terrible situations. “Retire with our cats?”

“We’ll have a farm of skogkatts,” he said. “We’ll breed them.”

“Skogkatts?”

“It’s a kind of cat they have in Norway. Very burly and furry and... viking. If Thor were a cat, he would be a skogkatt.”

Syn smiled. “I approve. Perhaps with a few sleek black ones to add chaos.”

“It’ll be part of the cover. Nobody would believe the cat farmer tried to take over the world.” He sighed. “Though with cats it’s really more like ranching, isn’t it?”

“I believe there’s a famous saying about herding them.”

He laughed and tipped his head back. “I love you.”

“Because I make you laugh?”

“That’s number two on a list of at least a hundred reasons.”

“Dare I ask what the number one reason is?”

He looked at her seriously a moment. “You looked at me and saw something in there worth saving.”

She turned in his arms she she could hold him. “That’s a good reason.”

“Number three is how good you look naked,” he told her.

“I assumed it was up there somewhere.” She kissed him. “I think I’m ready to move to the second part of our post-battle decompression.”

There was heat in his gaze when he grinned at her now. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

With another kiss, she stood, water running down her body, and stepped out of the tub. She could feel him watching her, the look at heavy as a touch. He reached up, tracing a droplet of water that ran over her hip and down her leg. He touched nothing of interest, yet it was somehow intensely erotic. It sent shivers down her spine.

Rather than reach for a towel, she used a flicker of magic, drying off the worst of the water. He clearly felt the pulse of it, because he grinned, standing as well. She used the same trick on him, pushing a little more so he felt it like a touch. He repeated it back with his magic, the touch gliding over her skin. She stepped back and he caged her against the wall with his arms. “I bet I could make you come without touching you at all.”

She gave him her most crooked smile. “Where would the fun be in that?”

“It would be fun to watch.” She felt his magic settle between her legs, gentle pressure that slowly started to hum.

Sucking in a sharp breath, she tipped her head back against the wall. “Loki,” she whispered.

The vibrations picked up. They spread inside her. “Do you want me to stop?”
She gasped and shook her head, reaching up to grip his wrist where it was braced beside her head. Her hips rocked, searching for release. More sensations started, as if hands and mouths were stroking and sucking on her skin. She whimpered, closing her eyes pressing against the wall as her orgasm peaked and released, leaving her shaking.

He caught her before she fell, and he sounded very proud of himself when he said, “That’s my girl.”

Groaning, she clung to him, burying her face in his shoulder. “Okay,” she said, breathless. “That was fun.”

“You know I can feel it,” he said. “When you come.”

She blinked in surprise. “You can? Even if we’re not-“ She made a vague gesture. “Connected?”

“Yeah.” His hands skimmed her skin, up her body to cup her breasts. “I really want you. I need you.”

Syn shuddered at his words, the heat in his tone. He was passionate, affectionate. She never doubted he loved her or found her attractive. But when he was pushed far enough to say it out loud, to let a little desperation show, that sent heat through her in a way little else could.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Please. Now.”

He lifted her right up against the wall, cupping her thighs to spread her legs open. He hitched her higher and thrust into her. She gasped, as much in surprise as pleasure. Wrapping her legs around him, she let him press her more firmly into the wall as he started to move. It felt amazing, deep and hard. The position caused friction in her clit and she moaned helplessly, fingers tangling in his hair as she held onto him.

She could feel their magic tangling again, connecting them and sharing their feelings. She could tell how good she felt to him. How gorgeous he thought she was. His hands tightened on her thighs, fingers flexing. She let her head fall back again and felt his mouth on her throat, kissing, then sucking hard enough she was sure she’d have a bruise.

Pleasure tightened in her belly, hot and aching. Loki made a sound, clearly feeling the same urgency. “Don’t stop,” she whispered, hardly aware she was speaking. “Please, don’t stop. Please, please. I need...”

She hadn’t even fully formed the thought, and she felt the magic again, strumming just where she needed it. It was enough, it was just right. Syn wailed as the climax swept through her, legs tightening on him, body rippling around his cock where it was buried inside her. Once it started, she could feel his magic swirling through her, drawing it out, keeping the waves coming. She gave herself up to it, let it take her, and got lost in the pleasure and heat the scents and sounds of Loki loving her.

She knew he came with her, she could feel it, and it became impossible to tell whose pleasure was whose. His legs buckled, but their magic cushioned the slide down the wall. Syn ended up sitting in his lap, wrapped around him in every way possible, body still pulsing with aftershocks of pleasure.

“I adore you,” he mumbled. “You know that, don’t you? You’re...perfect.” As he said it, she felt his thumb trace her scar.

“I know,” she said softly. “I know how you feel. I can feel it.” She kissed his cheek, touching his own scar. “Do you feel what I feel for you?”
“I do,” he replied. “I just sometimes don’t know how it could possibly be true.”

She hoped that sometime in the years and centuries to come she’d be able to convince him he was worthy of her love. Because she did love him. Despite his faults and his temper and the scars he kept hidden from the world. Possibly because of them. He had almost died to save Brun, because he loved Syn and his brother more than he seemed capable of admitting. And so she would love him loudly and fiercely until he believed it.

“Whatever souls are made of,” she said. “Yours and mine are the same.”

He lifted her in his arms and stood. “I like that.”

Curling her arms around his shoulders, she held on as he carried her out of the bathroom to the bed. Syn felt happy and sleepy and found herself wondering - not for the first time - how much she might like to have a child with him. A dark haired little girl with her mouth and his mischievous smile. Or perhaps a green eyed little boy doing magic with graceful, long fingered hands.

Loki set her on the bed, tucking them under the covers, and she buried the thought before he could pick it up. He refused to entertain the idea they might be able to have a child and she didn’t want to upset him. But she let herself have the desire, let the truth of it sink into her bones and heart. And she hoped.

* *

There were people to see to and things to fix. They had to turn the ship around and head back to the last station to repair the hull damage, and tests and inspections to get them underway took the rest of the day.

Brun’s comm conversation with Thor had apparently been broadcast over the entire ship. Everyone heard, and everyone seemed to have an opinion. Some were grateful, some thought it was romantic, some thought she should have listened to the King’s orders. Some were quite put out by what she’d ‘put that poor man through’. One of them even told her she was going to need to learn to be more obedient if she thought she was going to be Queen.

How backward attitudes had gotten on Asgard since she’d lived there still surprised her.

“My mother would have been very amused to know she was supposed to be obedient to my father,” Thor said when she mentioned it to him.

She hadn’t been this exhausted since Ragnarok. In every possible way. “I’m going to run a bath.”

He nodded and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll be right in.”

She turned on the water and sat on the edge of the tub to peel off her clothes. She hadn’t even stopped to put her armor on. She got down to her underthings and just watched the water tumbling from the spout. She really had almost died today. She’d thought she was doing the right thing, but clearly nobody else thought so. Now she wasn’t sure what she was supposed to feel about it. What she really wanted right now was a good stiff drink. It had always been good at burying her feelings.

She didn’t realize Thor had come in the room until he reached past her to turn the water off before the tub could overfill. He perched on the edge of the tub and rubbed one big hand on her arm. “You all right?”
“If you’d realized that to keep the engine running and the shields up it would have electrocuted you, would you have still done it?”

He sighed a little, but nodded. “Probably.”

“Because that’s what heroes do?”

“I suppose it is.”

She looked over at him. “I get different rules, I guess.”

“I suppose I’m willing to do a lot of things that I’d prefer my loved ones not do.”

“Dying is easier than being the one who survives,” she said. “I sure know that. Maybe there wasn’t anything heroic to it. Maybe it was just fear.”

He slid his arms around her, tugging her against his chest. “I understand. I really do.”

She tucked her head under his chin. “We’d all be dead if I hadn’t done it.”

“I know. Next time that might not be true.” He rubbed her back and rocked her a little. “Neither of us is ever going to promise not to do this sort of thing. But do you think we could try to do them together?”

He’d have come on her suicide run with her. Somehow she was sure of that. “Your people need you.”

“They would have Loki. And Syn. And they would be far more competent than I would be without you.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.” She leaned back to look at him. “You want to get in the bath?”

With a nod, he stepped back to strip his clothes off. She took the opportunity to shed the last of her clothes before they both climbed into the water. Thor tugged her close, into his lap with her back to his chest. “Maybe you underestimate how important you are to me.”

She turned her head so she could see him out of the corner of her eye. “Do I?”

“If you think I could function after losing you, then yes, you do.”

His tone was hard to read, and she closed her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, because she felt like she might have hurt him again. “I don’t want to fight.”

He pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “I know. I don’t want to either.” Giving her a squeeze, he added, “I love you.”

“I love you,” she replied quietly, tracing a fingertip in circles on his arm. “I thought if I didn’t say it somehow I could keep you safe. Keep you from getting in too deep. I wanted you to be all right without me.”

“I bought you a betrothal necklace,” he murmured, and she swore she heard a smile in his voice. “I was in pretty deep.”

She smiled too, then she sighed. “You seem to take so much and keep going. Sometimes you fool even me.”
“Everyone has a limit. And I suppose to the average person looking in from the outside I might seem fine. But I wouldn’t be.”

“I know. I knew. I just convinced myself I could somehow spare you.”

He hugged her tightly and sighed, leaning back on the wall of the tub. “It’s all out in the open now. That’s for the best, I think.”

She gently wiggled to loosen his arms, and turned to look at him. “When Eir took the sword for me, she bled out so fast I couldn’t say or do anything. I spent years replaying it, trying to imagine what I would have said if I’d had any time.”

“Do you think it was anything she didn’t know?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I hope not. I wasn’t as impossible back then. I may have spent it yelling at her for dying and leaving me.”

“That sounds like you,” he admitted with a little smile.

“I wish I’d made sure she knew what she meant to me. And... you, too.”

He stroked her cheek, pushing her hair out of her face. “I love you. I knew it wouldn’t be easy, but it happened anyway.”

“I was still broken after all those years. Still just surviving. You put me back together and filled the cracks. I still don’t know how, but I’d be lost without you.”

Lifting her hands out of the water, he kissed the back of both of them. “It really does sound like we’re stuck with each other, my Valkyrie.”

“I’d be happy to be stuck with you for the rest of my life.”

“Good.” Reaching behind him where he’d left his clothes, he brought out the box with the necklace. “Would you wear my colors?”

Of course he’d brought the necklace into the tub. They had all their important conversations here. “Yes.”

He took the necklace out of the box and reached behind her to fasten it on her neck. She kissed him while he did it, and felt him stroke his hand over it. Then he broke the kiss so he could look at her wearing it. He put a hand over the necklace, and over her heart, and the breath he let out had a little hitch to it. She rested her forehead against his.

After another shaky breath, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her deeply. “Beautiful,” he murmured on her mouth.

She didn’t know why the necklace was the thing that hit him, but clearly it had. Like he finally felt the weight of the day. “I’m here,” she whispered. “I’m yours.”

“I like the sound of that,” he admitted.

“I have been yours since you showed up in my room wearing pajamas and smelling like salad dressing.”

He laughed and tugged her close, into his lap. “Sounds like I owe Loki a thank you.”

“For several things. I am reluctantly forced to admit.” She kissed him again. “I overfilled the tub.
“We’re going to cause a flood if we don’t get out.”

“I suppose it would be best not to add another catastrophe to the day.” He shifted his grip on her and stood, lifting her out of the tub. Some water sloshed anyway, but she didn’t entirely care. He wrapped a towel around the two of them but didn’t put her down until he got to the bed.

Setting her down, he rubbed her dry with the towel, taking a moment to run his thumb along her necklace. “I didn’t think it would matter so much. But I like that it shows you’re mine.”

“You’ve lost nearly everything you had. Of course it matters.”

“Feels a bit... unenlightened, is all.”

“It’s not ownership. You will have to put up with a queen who doesn’t obey. It’s just... belonging. I choose to belong to you, and you choose to belong to me.”

“That sounds a bit better.” He kissed her, cupping the back of her head. “I wouldn’t love you if you obeyed, anyway.”

She adored him. She honestly did. “I wouldn’t love you if you wanted me to.”

He grinned, stroking a hand down her arm. “We are a perfect match then.”

Brun slid her arms around his waist, pulling their bodies closer together. “We fit.”

With a groan, he kissed her. “We do.”

She stood on her toes to kiss him better, and it took off. The day’s tumble of emotions leeched into it, adding a thrum of desperation between them. She put a knee up and climbed onto the bed without breaking the kiss. He followed her, bending over her to ease her back onto the covers.

His hands roamed her, cupping her breast and stroking a thumb over the nipple. She shivered, the nipple tightening to a peak. Thor’s skin was so pale compared to hers, even the back of his hand that got plenty of sun. “I love watching you touch me.”

“That’s useful, because I’m very fond of touching you.”

She arched her back, like an offering. “I am all yours.”

Bending, he took the nipple in his mouth, sucking hand before leaning back to blow on her wet skin. She shivered again, nipple tightening. Thor pressed affectionate little kisses all over her breasts, hands cupping and shaping her.

Despite her desire to watch, she let her head tip back and let out a little whimper. Anticipation made her ache as his hands and mouth moved slowly lower. He pressed a kiss to her belly, hands spanning her hips.

A little nudge of his elbow got her to open her legs to him and then he kissed her where she ached, stroking her with his tongue exactly the way she liked it. She gasped and sunk her fingers into his hair—though he didn’t need any guidance at this. He knew just exactly... “Please don’t stop, please,” she begged him. He hummed, but didn’t budge, giving her thigh an encouraging squeeze before sliding his hand around to slide two fingers into her. That was all it took, and she had a moment on the edge where the pleasure was so intense she couldn’t breathe, before she snapped and the orgasm washed over her.

It faded slowly, and when she opened her eyes she could see his big hand spread over her sex,
stroking her gently. The sight was so hot she groaned a little—and he seemed to take that as encouragement, and suddenly he was coaxing a second one from her.

This one was all fingers and he stayed propped up to watch her. When she came down again, he looked extremely smug, but she decided to let it slide. He probably deserved it. She watched him trail his wet fingers up over her stomach while she tried to catch her breath. He settled his hand over the necklace again.

She leaned up to kiss him, messy and explicit. Then she turned around. “Like this. I want you as deep inside me as you can get.”

He gave a groan that was more-or-less a growl, and shifted his grip, holding her hips as he positioned himself behind her. She felt the hot head of his cock against her swollen sex. Then he pressed forward, filling her in one deep stroke. She arched and rocked her hips, opening her legs further, changing the and taking more until he bottomed out. He filled and and stretched her completely. “Just like that,” she mumbled, pushing back against him.

His breathing turned harsh and he gave her hips a squeeze as he started to move, slow at first, then harder as she started to rock back, encouraging him.

It was rough and intense and felt so good. “You-you can- “ she mumbled, trying to tell him he didn’t need to wait for her. She wanted to feel him come inside her. “I don’t . . .”

Instead, his hand slid down again and found her clit, rough tipped fingers swirling around it in time with his deep strokes. She gasped, her skin tightening and her body trembling. It was harder to reach this time, but more intense on the way up. He didn’t let up and she was all but sobbing when she finally broke.

He growled, and for a few seconds his thrusts got frantic, before he buried himself fully inside her and shuddered his own release, heat filling her. She reached back and gripped his thigh, wanting him to stay there, stay inside her. She didn’t want to lose the connection yet.

She was still shaking from the intensity of it. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you,” he replied, voice so deep she could hardly understand the words. She felt him press a kiss to the back of her shoulder, tender and affectionate.

“I won’t leave you,” she told him, some instinct, maybe born of the intimacy of the moment, telling her she needed to say it. “I won’t leave you to survive alone like I did.”

He shifted, rolling them onto their sides so he could hold her. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“I’ll be a good Queen,” she told him. “I promise.”

“I know you will. You’ll be my queen.”

They drifted like that for a while, tangled up and spent. He pulled a blanket over them and she snuggled closer. “Hey Thor?”

He snorted a little as if she’d woken him. “Yes?”

“If I get my Time. . .”

After a pause to see if she was going to continue he prompted, “Yes?”

She took a breath and said, “I’d like to stay here.”
She could *hear* the grin in his voice when he said, “I’d like that.”

“Okay,” she said with a laugh. “Good.”

He kissed the back of her neck and gave her a gentle squeeze. “It’ll be fun.”
Chapter Notes

Suuuper long epilogue/final chapter for you all. We hope you enjoyed the adventures of our motley little crew.

*Five Hundred and Eighty Nine Days Later*

Midgard loomed large out the windows of the ship’s bridge. Loki had never seen it from this particular angle and found it looked almost serene, all shades of blue and green. There was an excessive number of satellites hovering around the globe.

“I’m surprised they haven’t contacted us yet,” one of the pilots commented.

“They can’t,” Thor said. “They don’t have interspace communications.”

The looks of horror around the room were hilarious.

“They do have interspace missile capability,” Heimdal said. “And one of the countries is going to start shooting at us if we sit in orbit too long.”

“Without contact?” Syn asked.

“They are a primitive and barbaric people,” Loki said. Not, really, that Asgardians were any better on the barbaric scale.

“They’re probably freaking out down there,” Bruce said, sounding amused. “Track North America, I bet Tony’s up here as soon as he notices us.” He paused. “If he doesn’t have a heart attack. Which he might.”

“I think I can fix that,” Syn offered.

“That’s Norway,” Thor said, pointing. “Our land is there and they’re not particularly aggressive. Let’s try to land there and contact the government when we can.”

“You don’t think the Russians will shoot?” Bruce asked. “We look like a UFO.”

“Unless they fire a nuke they won’t actually damage this ship,” he replied.

“I might. This is really stressful.”

“How about,” Loki interjected, “I transport the two of you down there, you can talk to whomever you need to talk to, and then we can land with no one shooting.”

“It would be nice to have a couple uninterrupted minutes to work on your glamour,” Syn added.

Thor and Bruce exchanged a look, then nodded. “Norway or New York, do you think?” Thor asked the other man.

“New York. It’s not like we can just show up in Norway and ask for an audience with the King.”
“Loki would,” Syn said, and he felt obliged to give her a glare.

“New York it is,” Thor said, looking over at Loki. “Stark’s Tower. I recall you being familiar with it.”

“I can’t aim that well at this distance. I’ll put you in the park.” He pointed. “Also, you should probably take that off.” His brother had a very new, very small baby that didn’t sleep unless someone was holding him. He and Brun just wrapped him in a sling and wore him everywhere. When the baby was sleeping—which was most of the time—you could forget it wasn’t just a lumpy article of clothing.

Loki found it funny that someone once so alarmed about the children on board now conducted most ships business with one tied to his chest.

“Ah, right.” He loosened the wrap enough to wiggle the baby out and hand him to Syn, who cooed at her nephew while Thor finished unwrapping the rest of the sling. “Ready.”

“Good luck,” he said, reaching his hands out. They disappeared in a flash of green.

Syn turned to him. “Shall we return Magni to his mother and see about disguising you?”

“Indeed.” He nodded at the baby. “I can’t believe he’s not crying. Or spitting up.” That seemed their only function at this age.

“He loves his auntie,” Syn said, snuggling the baby on her shoulder. “But only for about fifteen minutes at a time. So we should definitely go find Brun.”

Thor had said she was sleeping, and in fact did not look pleased when they woke her up. “I had an hour left.”

“We’re orbiting Earth and Thor needed to go down to start negotiations.” Syn held the baby out to her. “You know his tolerance for not-Mama is short and fickle.”

“Mmm, I know.” She took her son and tucked him in her arms. “He’ll be hungry soon. I didn’t realize we’d be arriving today.”

“I don’t know if we’ll be landing soon or not, I suppose it depends on how charming your husband it.”

“As charming as someone sleeping in shifts.”

“We sent Bruce down, too,” Syn offered.

Magni began to make that newborn ‘feed me’ squawk, and Brun sighed. “Well, fingers crossed. I’m going to go nurse him and see if he’ll sleep.”

“Good luck. We’re going to go rearrange Loki’s face.”

“Have fun with that,” she said.

“She must be tired,” Syn said as they walked to their rooms. “I was sure she’d made a joke about helping.”

“There are two of them and one baby. My sympathy is limited.”

She chuckled, pushing open the door of their room. They were met with a pair of excited shrieks.
“Oh, thank the gods you’re back,” a very exhausted sounding Muriel said. “They woke up twenty minutes ago.”

Loki went over to the playpen where their twins were trying to climb over each other to get out in their excitement. He appreciated the ruthlessness at this age. Just step on your sibling’s head. “Now, now,” he said, scooping up one in each arm. “We talked about the shrieking.”

“Dada!” Frigga, threw her arms around him while Nari continued shrieking.

Syn came over to take their son and brace him on her hip. He promptly grabbed a handful of her hair and rubbed it on his cheek. “We’re going to play a game,” Syn told them. “And make Dada look different.”

Frigga blew raspberries. Loki blew raspberries back at her. She giggled and clapped. “Dada silly.”

“So,” he said to Syn. “We need to make me look different, but not so different it freaks the babies out?”

“I think that’s the goal, yes.” She bounced Nari and let him down to crawl on the floor. “Let’s start with a hair change.” Studying him a moment, she waved a hand.

Frigga leaned back and looked at him quizzically, then grinned. “Bond Dada!”

“Well, she approves.” He looked in the mirror, to find his hair was sort of strawberry blonde and curly. “Huh.”

“You did suggest you should look more like Thor.” Syn came to stand next to him. “What do you think, little princess? Should I give Dada a beard?”

That got raspberries, which could mean either excitement or disapproval, and so a beard appeared on his face. It was mostly his magic that was doing it—his illusions were far better than hers—but she was controlling it. These days it was like a communal pool they both pulled from.

Frigga seemed to approve of the neat goatee Syn gave him. She tweaked a little more, tanning his skin and softening his cheek bones. “I think that’s enough,” she said taking a step back. “Anymore and I won’t recognize you.”

“It’s a little disconcerting. Which I think is good.” And the kids weren’t shrieking.

She kissed his cheek and wrinkled her nose. “The beard will take getting used to. But it’s not as scratchy as a real one.”

“I suppose you can make it whatever texture you like.”

“I could pet you like a cat,” she teased.

“Cat!” Nari announced, tugging at her skirt.

Syn bent and picked him up. “That’s right. Once we get settled, Dada promised me a cat.”

“An entire flock of cats. Or whatever you call a large group of cats.”

“I like flock.” She leaned into his side. “I can’t believe we’re finally here.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Not a moment too soon, we need space.”

“Yes, we do. Everyone does.”
Living in a very tiny space with two adults and two children was growing old—particularly as they were mobile and getting into everything. When Syn had told him she was pregnant, he was the most surprised he’d ever been in his life. He’d nearly had a heart attack when she told him there were two.

“Of course, we’ll probably have to live on the ship a while longer while we build.” Syn tossed Nari in the air. “But it will be nice to have fresh air. Let the kids crawl around on some grass.”

“Thor and I were talking this morning—we have no money in this realm, because they’re so isolated.”

She frowned. “That’s... unfortunate. Do we have anything to barter with?”

“We thought the ship could be dismantled to a certain degree. Sell some of the technology, metals that don’t occur on this planet, that sort of thing. But I actually had a simpler, more immediately useful idea.”

“You sound more like him than Thor ever has,” she admitted.
"I didn’t know the original Odin. Just the reformed one. Not that that one couldn’t be a asshole sometimes."

She looked thoughtful a moment. "He was clever and quick on his feet. He would go into a negotiation thinking his way was correct and everyone was mad to think otherwise. I don’t believe he conquered the realms out of greed or whatever it was that drove Hela. I really do think he thought he was the best possible ruler and we would all thank him once he was done."

He turned and looked at her. "Wow, that is... uncomfortably familiar."

"If I had not seen you turn blue with my own eyes I would be convinced Thor was the adopted one."

"Perhaps behavior is in the raising and not the blood."

"Perhaps," she agreed. "Just because you misinterpreted his intent doesn’t mean you didn’t learn his lessons. He gave Thor his warfare and you his plotting. Together you’re a formidable team."

"But he had no idea how to teach us to cooperate."

"A man who rules by the sword is not known for his cooperation skills."

He picked Frigga up and blew on her tummy. "We will raise them different."

"Of course. They’re already plotting against us. We couldn’t pit them against each other if we tried."

"I don’t know, you should have seen them trying to get out of that playpen."

She laughed and took Frigga when she reached for her. "Well, they are also babies."

"They’re my babies. There’s probably a good dose of devious in there."

Nari had come to tug on her leg, so Syn sat on the edge of the bed and gathered him up, too, settling the twins in her lap. Frigga had Loki’s dark hair and pale skin, but Nari took after Syn in coloring. They were both going to be magic users, thought fortunately nothing had manifested yet.

"They are your babies," Syn said, smiling fondly at them. "Our babies. Midgard won’t know what hit it."

He sighed a little. "Let’s hope it doesn’t end with me in jail."

* 

It could have gone worse.

That was Thor’s mantra for the next few days. Stark and Steve met him and Banner when they landed in New York, very relieved to hear the large space ship hovering overhead was friendly. Then began negotiations. Much had changed with the Avengers since Thor had left, and with their new government oversight it was... complicated getting anyone to listen to his story.

Stark’s computers were able to track down the deed to the land in Norway, which was, in fact, in Thor’s name, which simplified some thing. Not that Norway was thrilled to be informed a couple thousand alien refugees wanted to land on a cliff.

There had been so many different calls and meetings and conferences, on top of having no real way to contact the ship up there aside from going to the park and yelling for Heimdal and then
waiting for Loki. He’d barely been up to the ship in three days. Brun was looking increasingly
like she was plotting his murder, and he might not blame her.

“So I was thinking,” Stark said. They were in a jet flying back from Norway. “I can go up in a
suit, hook up a comms array so we can communicate. Banner thinks the tech is pretty
incompatible, but I have some ideas.”

Of course he did. But for once, Thor wouldn’t judge Stark’s mad scientist ways. “That would be
be a great help.”

“Might be good to look at your heat shielding. Earth has a very thick atmosphere and you might
have some trouble landing.”

“Our shields are top of the line, but you’re welcome to poke around, since I know you will
anyway.”

He chuckled. “And listen, I know you want to be with your people, but the thing in the park is
drawing a crowd and, like, press. Why don’t you stay in the tower until we get this all sorted out.”

It was a very good point, and probably a good idea. There was just one thing. “I would need to
bring my wife and son with me.”

Stark looked genuinely startled. “You have a wife? And a kid?”

Right, he hadn’t gotten around to mentioning that. “Yes. It’s been a very busy few years.”

“Apparently,” he said.

From his spot across the aisle, Steve leaned over and patted Thor’s arm. “Hey, congratulations.”
He looked at Stark. “Tony, you have both of those things, why do you look so scandalized?”

Thor whipped his head around. “You have a wife? And a kid?”

“It’s been a busy few years.”

“I have a girlfriend and a cat,” Steve offered.

“Congratulations to you both,” Thor said sincerely. “When this is all settled I look forward to
sitting down and catching up.”

“So, yes, bring your family,” Stark said. “Pepper is in California with Junior, but she’ll be back
soon. Particularly when I tell her this.”

“Magni - my son - is still an infant. Brun will be happy to have a co-parent again.”

“I’ve got baby stuff in storage somewhere.”

“You will have a friend for life if you dig it out.”

When they reached New York, he went back up to the ship to update everyone. Brun was very
nervous about having the baby transported, but agreed. Thor also discovered Loki and Syn had,
while he was gone, built a giant pile of gold in the cargo bay.

“Why?” He said, studying the pile. “And how?”

“We figured we would need money if we were going to build houses and feed people,” Syn said.
“Our credits won’t work here.”
“We made it with magic,” Loki said, sounding very proud.

Thor didn’t know why he’d bothered asking. “Is it real? It’s not going to disappear as soon as we spend it?”

“No, it’s real. We transformed lead into gold on a molecular level.”

“Well. . . thank you. That will be very useful.”

“We figured we could say we brought it from Asgard. Plus you muttered the other day about Norway being a little put out. Governments love cash.”

“We’re not bribing Norway,” Thor said immediately.

Loki rolled his eyes. “No. But we are going to buy lots of products and employ lots of workers to build our city. And then we’ll pay lots of taxes. In advance, even.”

That was a very good point. And an angle he hadn’t thought to work yet. “I wish you were down there negotiating with me.”

Loki grinned. “Brother, that might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“He meant it, too,” Syn piped up.

“If Stark can get reliable communication set up perhaps I can call you for meetings.”

“I could put on a different glamour and come down with you.”

“That would be useful.” There were a lot of people negotiating with him and at times he felt quite alone.

“Perhaps not in the tower, though. I have. . . bad memories.”

“Yes, I would imagine so.” He hadn’t mentioned to the others that Loki was alive and would be living with the rest of Asgard. He didn’t think they’d take it well.

“I’m happy to find a hotel and set up camp in Norway. See what we can get rolling.”

“Can the babies and I come?” Syn asked. “I’d love to get off this ship.”

“Yes, absolutely. I don’t like sleeping without you.”

Even after two years it still sometimes surprised Thor to see his brother so open and honest with someone. “I’ll let the Norwegians know you’re coming.”

Magni spent his trip down to New York tucked in his sling and none the wiser. Brun leaned on him as they rode the elevator up, and when the doors opened on the top floor, they were met by a tiny red-haired boy who stared at him with wide eyes before yelling, “Mommy! There’s a pirate in the elevator!”

Thor couldn’t help but boom out a laugh, which made the little boy’s eyes widen even more.

Pepper Potts came around the corner, shaking her head. “Junior, let them in and stop staring.”

“I wanted a pirate for Christmas,” he said excitedly.
“Yes, yes.” She reached out to hug Thor. “My God, it’s been a long time.”

He held her carefully. “It has. It’s good to see you well.” He stepped back and brought Brun forward. “This is my wife, Brun. Brun, this is Pepper Potts.”

Brun shook her hand. “It’s really nice to meet you.” She rubbed the baby’s back. “This Magni.”

Pepper grinned and leaned in a bit to get a peek at him. “Hello there. Welcome to the Tower, all of you. I was so happy Tony said you’d be staying with us a while.”

“While we’re getting sorted, at least,” she replied. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Not at all, we have plenty of room. Come on, I’ll show you where you can put your stuff.” She waved them back towards the rest of the apartment. “Tony dug out some of Junior’s baby things for Magni to use. Changing table, sleeping pod, that sort of stuff.”

“Sleeping pod?” Thor asked.

“Kind of like a cradle or crib but. . . Tony.” She opened a door to reveal a well furnished and decorated bedroom. To one side of the large bed was a table with baby supplies and a little hovering pod with a red racing stripe.

“I see what you mean,” Thor said. “That is. . . very him.”

“Mangi doesn’t sleep in any sort of container. He sleeps only like this.” She gestured at the sling.

Pepper nodded. “Junior was like that too, when we first brought him home. That’s why Tony invented the pod. Give it a try. It can simulate movement, a heartbeat, everything the baby wants. And it will monitor his vitals and keep you posted on any changes.”

Thirty minutes later, sure enough, Magni was sound asleep, curled up on his tummy and being rocked gently by the pod. Brun and Thor stood and stared at it in wonder.

“Am I hallucinating this?” she whispered.

“It must be some sort of illusion,” he replied, voice just as quiet.

“We’ve got round the bend.”

“Still, maybe we should sleep. Take advantage of the madness.”

She sighed a little. “That sounds really nice. I don’t think we’ve slept in a bed together since he was born.”

With a kiss to her temple, he herded her over to the adult bed. “That’s far too long.” They sat down to take their shoes off and climb under the covers. They’d dimmed the lights for the baby, so it was already dark.

Thor tugged her against him, sighing into her hair. “This is nice. I vaguely remember this.”

“I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. I’m hoping things can start to settle now.”

Brun chuckled. “It makes me nervous when you say things like that.”

“I know you think my optimism jinxes us. And yet, things do seem to work out.”
“Ask me again after I’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

“Yes, dear,” he murmured, kissing her hair. All he got in reply was a sigh, and he felt her body relax.

They slept about fourteen hours straight, which caused a minor panic when they woke up until they realized Stark’s computer AI had let Pepper know when Magni fusses and she’d fed and diapered him to give them more rest. When the stumbled out of the bedroom they found him happily sitting in her lap, watching Junior do some sort of interpretive dance routine and chortling merrily.

Pepper smiled when they came out. “The prime minister of Norway called. He said you’re negotiator had arrived and they were beginning to work on a contract. They left a number.”

“Oh, Good,” Thor said. “One of my advisors who is better at negotiating offered to assist.”

“What did you feed him?” Brun asked, sitting on the couch.

“There were several bottles in your bag labeled Baby Milk. FRIDAY found them, I didn’t root.”

Brun looked at Thor, amused, as he was the one who used the bottles. “You label them?”

“Sometimes I’m tired,” he replied. Loki had warned him about the time he accidentally gave Nari coffee creamer.

“All manner of things look the same at four am when a baby is shrieking in your ear,” Pepper said sagely and Thor became utterly sure Stark had fed his son something far worse than creamer.

He went to the kitchen to call the number that had been left for him and was unsurprised when Syn answered. “Hello, I’m trying to convince my husband not to tell Norway they need to give you a title.”

Thor sighed. “Put him on.”

There was shuffling, then Loki said, “It’s a throwaway clause so they can feel good about excluding it.”

“Sure. I see you’re already making friends?”

“Money greases the wheels. I’m trying to get them to stop thinking of us as refugees—whom they’d have to care for—and think of us as bringing investment and prestige and a true piece of their own heritage to their nation.”

“Is that working?”

“Surprisingly well. If we didn’t have land already it might be worth opening a bidding war with Sweden and Denmark.”

Thor chuckled. “How have you introduced yourself?”

“I told them I was your chief of staff. My name is Lars.”

“Is Syn managing not to spill the beans?”

“She thinks Chief of Staff is really what I actually do, and she addresses me by endearments.”
“Sounds like you have it well in hand. I have a meeting with the UN later this week regarding something called the Sokovia Accords. Stark and Rogers have promised to catch me up on it, but it seems to be some sort of agreement for people with powers that they want me to sign.”

“Just you or all of us?”

“That is part of what the meeting will be about.” He’d already decided not to mention the magic users among them.

“I’ll need to see what they say, Syn can’t sign something that she doesn’t agree with—or is not logically consistent, even.”

That might be a problem. “I’ll get you a copy as soon as I can. Stark is bringing several lawyers. Our goal is for just me to sign it on behalf of everyone and make it clear I’m responsible if anyone gets out of line. We aren’t exactly bursting with want-to-be superheroes.”

“You want me to talk to Norway about this?”

“No, no. You have enough to deal with. I’m not going to sign anything until I talk to you and I trust Stark’s lawyers to know what they’re doing.”

“I will keep you updated on our end.”

“Thank you.” He considered setting up a regular call or something, but this was Loki. Even well-behaved, enlightened Loki would call regularly to brag. “Take care, I’ll talk to you soon.”

*

Norway reminded Syn of Alfheim, in a sweet, nostalgic way that should have made her sad, but didn’t.

The land Odin had arranged for was near the water. When she and Loki went to go look at it, the combined smell of wild grass and salt water had brought her back to her childhood, running on the cliffs near their summer palace. It was a good place to settle, a place she looked forward to raising their babies.

“So I had an idea,” Loki said.

“A good idea or and idea that will give me a headache?”

“I think a good one. People seem concerned it’s going to look like a refugee camp, and suggested hiring an architect or urban planner. My thought was to make it a contest.”

“Is this because you can’t make a bunch of countries bid of our favor?” From across the field Frigga shrieked and came toddling towards them, holding her arm up like it was hurt. “Ah, our first boo-boo on Earth.”

“No, no. A public architecture contest. You’ll get students and other creative people, not just stuff and expensive firms. Good publicity, too. We’ll limit it in country for goodwill reasons.”

That was actually a good idea. “I like it. Ingratiate us with the local people, show we’re willing to respect Midgardian style and innovation.” Frigga reached them and Syn crouched to heal the skinned elbow she presented. “And it would solve the housing problem. Who would be the judges?”

“Thor will probably want to put it to a vote.”
“I’ll see if I can talk him into a committee. So no one is counting 1500 votes.”
And in the mean time we live on the ship. Only on land, and with some space to move around.”
“We can also start using land we don’t intend to build on. Start gardens and farms and such.”
“I’ll make a note to ask for green space in the plans”
“I know we won’t be an entirely agrarian society,” Syn said, kissing Frigga’s cheek before allowing her to toddle off again. “But several people have talked about having a garden or the like. It will be good for morale.”
“I think it will be a good idea. We’ve been on that damn ship way too long.”

Being stuck on the ship had annoyed him more than her, if that was possible. By the last few months it had honestly felt like the walls were closing in. “Do you think you’ll get bored here?” she asked, watching the kids explore a flower patch. “Stuck on one planet? No space travel, rudimentary technology.”

“Watching our children grow up without conquest and bloodshed? No, I don’t think that sounds bad at all.”

“This planet has no conquest and bloodshed?” she asked sardonically.

“Not that can harm us. Their weapons are as rudimentary as their other technology.”

She inclined her head, silently conceding the point. “I suppose it will be interesting watching what they come up with next.”

“I’m waiting for them to ask to dissect the ship. I’m not sure humans need interspace travel.”

“That would either be tragic or hilarious, depending on who they run into first.”

He looked out at the land. “So where shall we put our house?”

“I’d like a view of the water,” she told him. “It reminds me of home.”

Loki put an arm around her. “I will see it done.”

“Thank you, my love.” She leaned on him. “Sometimes I can’t believe we really made it.”

“Like it might suddenly vanish? I feel like that, too.”

She rubbed his back, watching as Nari handed Frigga a blue flower. “Are you happy?”

“I am. And more than that I am content. Our life, our family, our future.”

“Good. So am I.” It had felt impossible, once, but it was true.

“We should get back,” Loki said. “I have meetings.”

“Of course. Children! Come back please.”

They weren’t too good at listening at this age, so they had to go collect them. Nari was completely covered in dirt. They huddled together so Loki could transport them back to their hotel.

“Go to your meetings,” Syn told him, kissing his cheek. “I know two little children who need
baths.”

“Good luck with that.”

He poofed out in his flare of green and she herded the twins into the bathroom to hose them down.

It took another week of meetings - plus all the meetings Thor was having in America - to finally get the okay to have the ship land. The king of Norway and his family came to the landing to say a few words and shake hands. So far Syn had observed humans loved meetings and dressing up to wave at cameras.

Construction workers were there to hook up certain systems that needed to be run differently on the ground; waste couldn’t be vented into space any more, for example. The ship was crowded and some trailers had be brought for overflow space. Mostly everyone was very grateful to be outside. It had been months since their last stop.

They kept Loki’s glamour firmly in place and no one seemed suspicious or questioned him. He had ingratiated himself with several government officials while working to negotiate, which probably helped.

After a few days of getting settled and arranging for food and other supplies to be brought to them, Thor announced the architecture contest, open to any architects or builders in Norway.

Plans came in fairly quickly, and varying degrees of feasibility, cost, and timing. They spent a lot of time going through them. Thor wanted it narrowed to three, to be put up for a ship-wide vote.

“I still like the one with all the roof gardens,” Syn said, nudging the portfolio to the center of the paper strewn table. “Eco-friendly.”

“I’m concerned the build time is too long,” Thor said. “Given how short the building season is up here.”

“You’d have us living in shipping containers,” Loki muttered.

“Okay, they’re ugly, granted, but very efficient.”

“We’ve been living in the equivalent of a shipping container for two years,” Syn said. “I, for one, would be willing to wait a bit longer to live somewhere attractive and green.”

He sighed. “Fine, we’ll short list it.”

“Where’s the one with the brightly colored houses with very steep roofs,” Brun asked. “That’s my favorite.”

They rummaged a moment before finding that file. “Those are nice,” Syn said.

“And the roofs are practical in the snow.”

“I like that they’re wood,” Brun said. “A lot of these are all metal and concrete. It’s cold.”

“Wasn’t most of Asgard metal and stone?” Syn asked.

“Yes, and it was cold.”

“Thor do you have a favorite?” Loki asked.

He frowned at the pile of files for a moment. “I assume I can’t do the storage containers?”
“No,” they all replied in unison.

“Unless we put it in there like a gimme clause,” Loki said. “Two good options and one bad one.”

Thor made a face. “There was one that included a couple long houses in the center of town. Like the old Viking villages.”

Syn had just seen that one and rummaged a moment to pull a file out to hand to him. “This?”

“Yes. There’s nothing terribly special about the houses. But I like the idea of meeting houses and lots of green space.”

Loki leaned back in his chair. Syn could see the wheels turning. He was making his plotting face, though his thoughts were out of reach. “I noticed I did not get to pick a favorite.”

“I assumed you and Syn spoke with one mind,” Thor replied.

“We do still think independently, thank you.”

“Do you want to pick something? Four choices isn’t any harder than three.”

“How about we just do all three?”

They all turned to look at him. “How?” Thor asked.

He reached for the one with the longhouses. “The buildings in this are bland, but it’s the best street layout. The longhouses for public buildings are a good idea. They want to use synthetic materials to replicate the old thatch roofs. Put the roof gardens up there instead. Use the landscaping from the eco-plan, too. And build the old-fashioned a-frame houses—which if you read the proposal, you may notice are actually pre-fab and will go up very quickly.”

Syn smiled. She really did love the way his mind worked. “Who would win the contest, then? All of them?”

“Pretty much. They’ll need to work together to get the town built.”

“They might not like that,” Thor said, but Syn could tell from his tone he was warming to the idea.

“Tell them they’ll each get the full fee and they’ll like it plenty.”

Thor studied the three files a moment. “All right then. Anyone have an argument?” Syn and Brun shook their heads.

“Perhaps we can let people choose which house is theirs, and where it goes,” Brun added.

“Yes, we’ll need to figure out plot size and arrangement and allow families certain choices.”

“It would be nice if all the houses weren’t entirely identical,” Syn agreed.

“That’s why I like that one,” Brun said.

“All right,” Thor said. “I’ll make the announcement and start working with the builders. Does anyone have any other issues to bring to the table?”

A table of heads shook.
“Excellent.” He smiled. “We’re getting there.”

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The houses went up with surprising speed, and people moved out of the ship with equally surprising speed, making more space for those who were waiting. Korg and the other aliens had decided not to come to Earth, for reasons that Brun completely understood. She’d loaded them up with credits and wished them luck. Now it was just Asgardians—and Syn, but they didn’t try to explain Alfheim to the humans.

There were still ongoing negotiations with the UN over who had to sign their “superhero accords”. Thor had signed it, because he wanted to be able to continue to work with the Avengers. Brun had signed it, so she could go with him. Syn and Loki hadn’t because everyone was pretending there was no magic. Privately she wasn’t sure how long a thousand people could keep that kind of secret, but they only had to last a human generation.

As for the rest of the Asgardians, the Norwegian government was having a dispute with the UN over them, as they wanted an exception to ask the Asgardians to come to their defense if they ever needed it.

Politics was not Brun’s cup of tea, so mostly she left that for others to worry about.

One of the long houses was fully built and had been turned into a day care. Syn worked there a few days a week, to keep busy while Loki helped Thor with negotiations and oversaw the last of the building. The twins were now both confidently walking and Syn appreciated having other people around to help watch them, even if it meant she watched more kids.

Brun went by with Magni to visit. A couple of the fathers had rigged up some play structures and Syn had braved a Midgardian toy store to purchase some infant swings and play mats. Magni was fascinated by a particular one with fish on it.

“Maybe he’ll be a sailor,” Syn commented.

Brun laughed. “He likes anything that’s brightly colored.”

“Well, he is a newborn. I suppose we’ll wait till his birthday to plan his entire future.”

“He gets to be anything he want to be.”

“Yes. All of them can.” She picked up the little girl that had just wandered over and plopped her in her lap. “In their brand new world.”

“Is it just me, or does Sakaar seem like it was 400 years ago?”

“Somedays Sakaar seems like a terrible dream I had. I wonder if that will get worse.” She took a breath and looked up at the high ceiling of the long house. “That place had an old sort of magic to it, the way it hung outside of normal time. It’s possible that the longer we’re in normal time the more our memories of it will fade.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Neither do I. On the one hand, I don’t have a tremendous amount of happy memories there. On the other hand, our experiences shape who we are.”

“I feel like I’ve had three different lives. Been three different people.”
Syn nodded, in understanding. “I hope we get to stay on this one.”

“Me too.” She looked over at her son, who was trying to shove his entire fist in his mouth. “There was a time that if you’d told me I’d ever be happy with a spouse and a child and a house by the sea, I’d have laughed you out of the room.”

“To a son of Odin, no less,” Syn added, laughing. “Our lives have never been predictable.”

“Turned out pretty good in the end, though, didn’t it?”

“Better than I ever hoped. I’m happy. Content. Looking forward to the future.”

“So am I. More than I think I ever have.” She fiddled absently with her necklace. She’d long had little interest in the trappings and strings of domesticity. But they had turned out to matter a great deal to Thor. She supposed it was part of his processing what he’d lost. But Brun had come to like it, even the ritual and ceremony. When they’d had Magni’s naming ceremony, Loki had recreated the ceremonial room in the palace where royal babies had been christened for generations. It was perhaps the closest she ever seen her husband come to crying in public. (He’d cried the day Magni was born, too, but only Syn had seen that.)

“And we will get to become cranky old ladies together,” Syn said. “Which had long been a dream of mine.”

Brun laughed. “I’m glad you never voiced it because I probably would have laughed. I’ve never thought I’d grow old. No Valkyrie ever does.”

Syn spread her hands. “And yet here we are. In our quiet seaside village.”

She grinned. “Glad I didn’t sell you to the Grandmaster.”

“It seems to have worked out for the best for you.”

“Yeah. For all of us.”

End Notes

If you’ve read Rebuild All Our Ruins, our other Ragnarok fic, you’ll have noticed we called her Valkyrie there and Brunhilde here. I liked the idea of her using Valkyrie as an honor to her fallen sisters after such a long time being known as 142, but it didn't make sense in this universe because she met Syn very soon after and would have just used her given name, who called her that no matter what the Grandmaster labeled her.

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