

Three days passed in a haze of funeral preparations and growing tension.

Frigga was laid to rest with all the honor due a Queen of Asgard, her body placed on a golden ship that sailed into the void beyond the palace, lighting up like a star as it reached the edge of the realm's atmosphere.

Thor, Odin, and the entire court stood in silent tribute, but the grief felt hollow — incomplete without the resolution that should come after such ceremonies.

Odin's decree to seal Asgard had been implemented with ruthless efficiency. The rainbow bridge remained offline, dimensional barriers had been reinforced to unprecedented levels, and even magical communication with other realms had been severed. They were truly isolated, trapped in their golden prison while Malekith consolidated his power somewhere in the void between worlds.

Diana and Clark had been assigned a comfortable but clearly monitored guest chamber. Their requests to speak with Odin about coordinating a response to the Dark Elf threat had been politely but firmly declined. They were effectively prisoners, albeit well-treated ones.

Jane's condition was deteriorating. The Aether's power was growing stronger, and her body was struggling to contain forces that weren't meant for human physiology. The palace healers could slow the process but couldn't stop it, and everyone knew they were racing against a clock that was invisible but inevitable.

Thor found himself caught between his duties as a prince and his growing certainty that his father's approach would doom them all. He attended council meetings where defensive strategies were discussed, visited Jane to monitor her condition, and spent his evenings with Sif, drawing strength from her steady presence.

Underneath it all, a plan was forming — dangerous, possibly treasonous, but increasingly necessary.

On the morning of the fourth day, he made his decision.

"I need to see them," he told Sif as they shared breakfast in her chambers. "Loki and Sylvie."

"Your father's forbidden any contact with the prisoners."

"My father's making decisions based on grief, not strategy. And I think those two might be the key to solving this."

Sif set down her cup, studying his expression. "What're you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that Malekith's gonna find a way into Asgard regardless of our barriers. When he does, we'll need every advantage we can get. Loki and Sylvie are the most powerful sorcerers on Asgard after Mother was..." He couldn't finish it.

"They're also war criminals who've been rightfully imprisoned."

"They're also family. And they loved her too."

It was the simple truth. Whatever crimes Loki and Sylvie had committed, their grief over Frigga's death had been genuine. That grief might be the motivation needed to secure their cooperation.

"What exactly are you planning?"

Thor was quiet for a moment, aware that what he was about to say would cross a line he couldn't uncross.

"I'm planning to get Jane and the Aether away from Asgard. Take the fight to Malekith instead of waiting for him to bring it to us."

"That's direct violation of your father's orders."

"Yeah."

"It could be considered treason."

"Yeah."

"You could be exiled or imprisoned."

"Probably."

Sif stared at him across the breakfast table, seeing the firm look in his eyes. "You're serious about this."

"Completely serious. Sif, staying here's a slow death. Jane won't survive much longer, and when she dies, Malekith gets the Aether anyway. At least if we take the initiative, we can control when and where the confrontation happens."

"And you think Loki and Sylvie'll help?"

"I think they want revenge for Mother's death as much as we do. I also think they're smart enough to realize that universal annihilation includes them."

Sif considered the plan for several minutes, weighing the risks against the potential outcomes. Finally, she nodded slowly.

"If you're doing this, you'll need help. Real help, not just from prisoners with questionable motivations."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean Diana and Kal-El are sitting in guest quarters, probably planning something similar. They didn't come all this way just to be politely detained while the universe burns."

Thor felt a spark of hope. He'd been so focused on family dynamics that he'd almost forgotten about their allies.

"You think they'd be willing to violate Asgardian sovereignty?"

"I think they'd be willing to save billions of lives, regardless of the political complications."

"That's a big risk for them. If this goes wrong, it could damage relations between their worlds and Asgard for centuries."

"Thor, if this goes wrong, there won't be any worlds left to have relations."

The blunt assessment solidified his resolve even more. They were indeed past the point where diplomatic niceties mattered. This was about survival on a cosmic scale.

"Will you help me?"

Sif smiled lovingly. "Do you really need to ask?"

He reached across the table to take her hand. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. Thank me if we all survive this insane plan of yours."

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The dungeons felt different this time. Thor walked through the corridors, past cells that had held some of Asgard's most dangerous criminals. But now they also held his siblings. He didn't like that they'd been reduced to mere prisoners, but that was the reality.

The guard contingent was smaller than usual – most of the palace's security was focused on perimeter defense and monitoring their "guests" from other worlds. Thor had timed his visit carefully, during the shift change when attention would be at its minimum.

He found Loki and Sylvie in adjacent cells, their barriers restored but flickering irregularly. The damage from the Dark Elf assault hadn't been completely repaired, and the magical containment systems were still unstable.

Loki looked up from a book as Thor approached, his expression carefully neutral. "Brother. Come to gloat about our recapture?"

"I've come to talk."

"How refreshing. Usually our conversations involve you lecturing me about responsibility while I plot your downfall."

Sylvie rose from where she'd been sitting against the far wall of her cell. "What d'you want, Thor?"

"I wanna know if you meant what you said about Mother."

The twins went very still, their carefully maintained facades cracking slightly.

"What we said when?" Loki asked carefully.

"When you were kneeling beside her body. When you called her your mother too."

Sylvie's eyes flashed with pain and anger. "She was our mother. In every way that mattered."

"Then help me honor her memory."

"By doing what?"

Thor moved closer to the barriers, lowering his voice even though they were alone. "By making sure Malekith pays for killing her."

Loki set down his book, giving Thor his full attention. "I'm listening."

"Malekith's gonna find a way into Asgard eventually. Father's barriers won't hold him forever – he has access to Dark Elf technology that predates our defenses. When he comes back, it'll be with overwhelming force."

"So far you're just stating the obvious."

"So I wanna take the fight to him instead. Get Jane and the Aether away from Asgard, force a confrontation on our terms instead of his."

Sylvie laughed, but there was no humor in it. "You wanna commit treason."

"I wanna save the universe."

"By violating every order your father's given, abandoning your duties as a prince, and probably getting yourself killed in the process."

"Yes."

Loki stared at Thor for a long moment, looking for signs of deception or hidden motives. He found none.

"You're serious."

"Completely serious."

"And you want our help because...?"

"Because you're the only ones who might be able to get us past Asgard's barriers undetected. Because you understand magic in ways the rest of us don't. And because I think you want Malekith dead almost as much as I do."

The twins exchanged a look, communicating silently. Finally, Sylvie spoke.

"What's the plan?"

"Get out of Asgard. Find Malekith before he can mount another assault. End this before he gets strong enough to carry out his plan."

"That's not a plan, that's a suicide mission with delusions of grandeur."

"Maybe. But it's better than sitting here waiting to die."

Loki stood and walked to the barrier between his cell and the corridor. "You realize that if we help you, there's no going back. Odin will consider us enemies of the realm."

"He already considers you enemies of the realm."

"Fair point." Loki turned to Sylvie. "What d'you think?"

"I think we owe it to Mother to try," she said quietly.

"I agree, but I also think this entire plan is insane," Loki replied. "I'm in."

Thor felt relief flood through him.

"There are conditions," Sylvie said before he could thank them.

"Name them."

"First, if we do this, we do it as equals. No more treating us like junior partners or reformed villains on probation."

"Agreed."

"Second, we get full pardons for our previous crimes. Clean slate."

Thor hesitated. That wasn't his decision to make, and his father would never agree to it.

"I can't promise you father'll honor that."

"Then promise that you will. When you're king, we get our freedom."

"When I'm king, assuming we all survive, you'll have earned it."

"Third," Loki added, "we do this our way. No moral restrictions on methods, no squeamishness about necessary sacrifices."

"I'm not asking you to become saints. I'm asking you to help save the universe."

"And we're agreeing, as long as you understand that saving the universe might require getting our hands dirty."

Thor nodded slowly. He'd known this alliance would require compromises he wasn't comfortable with, but the alternative was accepting defeat.

"How do we get past the barriers?"

Sylvie smiled for the first time since he'd arrived. "Leave that to us. But we'll need help from your dear friends."

"Diana and Kal-El?"

"They have abilities we don't," Loki said begrudgingly in regards to Kal-El, his expression calculating. "Plus, having off-world witnesses might protect us from accusations of purely selfish motivations."

"You've been thinking about this."

"We've been thinking about escape since the moment they locked us up again. Mother's death just gave us a better reason than simple freedom."

Thor looked between them, seeing something he'd missed for years – genuine grief over their mother's loss, mixed with a determination that matched his own.

"When?"

"Tonight," Sylvie said without hesitation. "The longer we wait, the more likely someone'll discover your visits or Odin will tighten security further."

"Tonight doesn't give us much time to plan."

"The best plans are often the simplest ones. We get out, we find Malekith, we kill him. Everything else is just details."

Loki nodded his agreement. "Elaborate schemes have a tendency to collapse when they encounter reality. Better to improvise as we go."

"That's a terrible strategy."

"It's the only strategy that's ever worked for us," Sylvie pointed out. "Remember, we're chaos agents by nature. Trying to impose order on our methods is usually counterproductive."

Thor realized they were right. Every time he'd tried to reform them through structure and rules, it had backfired. But when he'd trusted them to use their natural inclinations toward noble purposes...

"What do you need from me?"

"You get over to your two friends and find a way to reach the mortal without triggering every alarm in the palace. And us? About four hours to prepare some very illegal magic."

"I can handle the first two. What kind of illegal magic?"

"The kind that'll get us past barriers designed to keep gods contained," Loki said cheerfully. "Don't worry about the specifics. The less you know, the less you can be blamed for."

"Plausible deniability?"

"Something like that."

Thor stood to leave, then paused. "For what it's worth, I think Mother would approve."

"She always did have a soft spot for lost causes," Sylvie said softly.

"You're not lost yet."

"No," Loki agreed, magic already beginning to shimmer around his hands as he started whatever preparations were necessary. "But we're definitely a cause."

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Diana was meditating in her quarters when Thor arrived. She opened her eyes as he entered, immediately reading the tension in his posture. Meanwhile, Clark pushed off the wall and turned to regard him.

"You look like someone who's made a difficult decision."

"I have. And I need to know if you two are willing to make one too."

"We're listening."

"My father's strategy will get us all killed. Staying here's suicide by slow motion."

"I've reached the same conclusion. Clark has too, though he's been more diplomatic about expressing it."

"Good. Because I'm planning to leave Asgard tonight, with Jane and the Aether. I'm gonna find Malekith and end this before he can mount another attack."

Diana's eyes sharpened. "That's essentially a declaration of war against your own father."

"Yes."

"It could destabilize Asgard's government," Clark warned.

"Probably."

They were quiet for several moments, weighing the implications. Finally, they exchanged a glance and nodded.

"What's the plan?"

"Get past Asgard's barriers, locate Malekith, force a confrontation before he's ready for one."

"That's not a plan, that's a general objective. What're the specifics?"

"I'm working with Loki and Sylvie on the magical aspects. They think they can get us out undetected."

Diana's eyebrows rose. "You're trusting war criminals with everyone's lives?"

"I'm trusting family members who loved my mother and want her killer brought to justice."

"And if their primary motivation's escape rather than justice?" Clark asked, not trusting Loki at all.

"Then they'll still help us reach Malekith, because universal annihilation includes them too."

They considered this reasoning and found it sound. "Okay. When do we leave?"

"A few hours after sunset. Can you be ready?"

"We're ready now." Diana turned toward her weapons, beginning to gather her equipment. "Thor, you should know – if we do this, there's no going back. Win or lose, this changes everything."

"I know."

"Your relationship with your father may never recover."

"I know that too."

"And you're willing to accept those consequences?"

Thor thought about his mother's body laid out in the healing chamber, about Jane slowly dying from the Aether's influence, and about billions of innocent lives threatened by Malekith's vision of universal restoration.

"Some things are worth any consequence."

Diana smiled grimly.

"What's the extraction plan?" Clark asked. "We can't just walk out the front door."

"No, but Loki and Sylvie know ways through the palace that most people don't. Secret passages, maintenance tunnels, that sort of thing."

"And they know this how?"

"Because they spent their entire childhood finding ways to sneak around unsupervised," a new voice said from the doorway.

They all spun to find Sif standing there, her arms crossed. She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. "I'm coming with you."

"Sif – "

"Don't. You'll need someone who actually knows how to plan a military operation, not just charge headfirst into danger."

Diana smiled slightly. "I like her."

"The feeling's mutual." Sif moved to the center of the room. "Here's what we know: the palace has forty-seven guard rotations throughout the day. The shift change between evening and night watch happens at sunset, which gives us about a fifteen-minute window where coverage is weakest."

"Fifteen minutes isn't much," Clark observed.

"It's what we have. Now, the dungeons are in the lower levels, which means Loki and Sylvie'll need to get from there to the exterior without being seen. That's three levels up and across two major corridors."

"Can they use illusions?" Diana asked.

"Probably, but illusions don't hide you from magical sensors or magical alarms. They'll need a distraction."

"What kind of distraction?"

Sif's smile turned dangerous. "Leave that to me. I've got some favors I can call in from the Einherjar."

Thor looked at her with concern. "Sif, if you help us, you'll be implicated too."

"I know. I don't care." Her voice softened slightly. "Frigga was like a mother to me too, Thor. And she wouldn't want us sitting here while the universe burns."

The group stood in silence for a moment, all reminiscing the woman who meant so much to everyone.

"Alright," Thor said finally. "Here's what we do. Sif, you arrange your distraction. Diana, Clark, you get Jane ready to move. I'll coordinate with Loki and Sylvie on the escape route."

"What about transportation?" Clark asked. "Even if we get out of the palace, how do we get off Asgard?"

"That's already handled," Thor said. "The Dark Elves who attacked during the assault – their ship crashed in the palace gardens. It's been moved to a secure storage facility, but Loki and Sylvie think they can get to it."

"A damaged Dark Elf ship?" Diana's tone was skeptical. "That's our escape plan?"

"It's cloaked, fast, and designed to slip through dimensional barriers. If we can get it working, it's perfect."

"Big if," Clark muttered.

"You got any better ideas?" Sif challenged.

"Not really, no."

"Then we work with what we have. Thor, you need to meet with Loki and Sylvie again before tonight. Make sure they understand the timing."

"I can't go back to the dungeons. Too suspicious."

"Then I'll go," Sif said. "I can claim I'm doing a security inspection. Guards won't question me."

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The afternoon crawled by with agonizing slowness. Thor attended a council meeting where his father discussed defensive preparations, nodding in all the right places while his mind raced through contingency plans. Odin seemed tired, aged by grief and stress, and for a moment Thor almost reconsidered his plan.

Then he thought of Jane, weakening by the hour, and his resolve hardened.

After the meeting, he found Jane in her chambers, being attended by healers who looked increasingly worried.

"How're you feeling?" he asked after they'd left.

"Like I'm carrying a star inside my chest," she said, trying to smile. "It's getting harder to breathe. Harder to think."

The Aether's energy was more visible now, red tendrils moving beneath her skin like living things. Thor took her hand carefully, aware that even touch was becoming painful for her.

"We're leaving tonight."

Jane looked up sharply. "What?"

"I've got a plan. We're getting you out of here, away from Asgard. Gonna find Malekith and end this."

"Thor, that's —"

"Treason. I know. But staying here's gonna kill you, and I'm not letting that happen."

"Your father —"

"Will understand or he won't. Right now, I care more about keeping you alive than about politics."

Jane was quiet for a long moment. "You're giving up everything. Your crown, your relationship with your father, your place in Asgard's succession. All for someone who might not even survive the journey."

"I'm giving up things that don't matter to save things that do."

"Your birthright matters, Thor."

"My birthright's to protect people. That's what I'm doing."

She looked at him with a mixture of love and sorrow, understanding that this was who he'd always been underneath the royal titles and divine heritage – someone who would sacrifice anything to protect others.

"What happens if we succeed? If Malekith's defeated and the universe is saved?"

"Then we deal with whatever comes next."

"And if we fail?"

"Then at least we fail trying to do the right thing."

She nodded slowly, accepting both the plan and its risks. "When do we leave?"

"Sunset. Can you be ready?"

"I'm ready now. Have been for days."

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Sif's distraction turned out to be a training accident in the eastern barracks – a small explosion in the armory that wasn't dangerous but required immediate attention from palace security. She'd timed it perfectly, pulling guards from the western corridors just as Loki and Sylvie made their move.

The twins emerged from the dungeons like shadows, their magic warping the air around them in ways that made them difficult to focus on. They'd refined the technique during their imprisonment, turning their cells into laboratories for developing exactly these kinds of escape methods.

"Phase one complete," Loki murmured as they slipped into a maintenance corridor. "Guards think we're still locked up."

"How long till they realize?" Sylvie asked.

"Optimistically? Two hours. Realistically? Maybe one."

"Then we better move fast."

They navigated through passages that most Asgardians didn't know existed – the palace's hidden infrastructure, built centuries ago and largely forgotten. They had spent years mapping these routes, always planning for the day they might need them.

They reached Jane's chambers just as Thor was helping her into traveling clothes.

"Cutting it close," Thor observed.

"Fashionably late's our specialty," Loki replied. He looked at Jane, taking in her deteriorating condition. "How bad?"

"Bad enough that we need to move now," Jane said, her voice strained.

Sylvie stepped forward, magical energy gathering around her hands. "This'll help with the pain. Won't fix anything, but it'll make the journey easier."

She touched Jane's forehead, and some of the tension eased from the mortal's face.

"Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet. We've still gotta get off this rock without being vaporized."

Diana and Clark arrived moments later.

"Everyone ready?" Diana asked.

"As ready as we're gonna be," Thor replied.

"Then let's move. Sif said the distraction'll only last another thirty minutes."

They moved through the palace in two groups – Thor, Jane, and Sif taking the main route while Loki, Sylvie, Diana, and Clark used the service passages.

Thor kept his pace slow, mindful of Jane's condition. She was struggling now, each step requiring visible effort. The Aether was burning through her reserves, consuming her from within.

"Almost there," Sif murmured. "Just another corridor."

They turned a corner and nearly ran into a patrol.

"Prince Thor," the guard captain said, surprised. "We didn't expect –"

"I'm taking Lady Jane for some air," Thor interrupted smoothly.

The captain looked at Jane's obvious distress and nodded. "Of course, my lord. Do you need an escort?"

"That won't be necessary."

The patrol moved on, and Thor released a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

"That was close," Jane whispered.

"Too close," Sif agreed. "We need to move faster."

They reached the western service tunnel just as the sun began to set. The others were already there, clustered in the shadows near an access hatch that led to the lower levels.

"Any problems?" Diana asked.

"One patrol," Thor said. "Talked our way through it."

"Good. Loki, you're sure about the route from here?"

"Positive. This tunnel connects to the old aqueduct system. From there we can reach the storage facilities without going through any monitored areas."

"And the ship?"

"Should be exactly where I remember." Loki paused. "Key word being 'should.'"

"Comforting," Clark muttered, earning a sour look from Loki.

They descended into the aqueduct – ancient stonework that predated the current palace by centuries. Water trickled along channels cut into the floor, and the air smelled.

"How far?" Thor asked after they'd been walking for ten minutes.

"Another quarter mile," Sylvie replied. "Then up through –"

Jane stumbled, gasping in pain. The Aether's energy flared visibly, red light bleeding through her skin.

"Jane!" Thor caught her before she fell.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she managed, but she clearly wasn't.

Diana stepped forward, taking Jane's other arm. "Let me help."

Together, they supported Jane as the group pressed on. The aqueduct seemed to stretch forever, and every echoing footstep felt too loud.

Finally, Loki stopped at what looked like a solid wall.

"Here."

"That's a wall," Clark observed.

"A simpleton's observation. That's what it's supposed to look like." Loki pressed his hand against the stone, and magic rippled outward. A section of wall faded, revealing a ladder leading upward.

"After you," he said with a sarcastic bow. Clark's jaw tightened but he said nothing.

They climbed in single file, emerging into what appeared to be an abandoned storage area. Crates and equipment lay covered in dust, clearly untouched for years.

"Where are we?" Diana asked.

"Old military storage," Sif answered. "From before the current security protocols were implemented."

"And the ship?"

Loki pointed toward a dark shape at the far end of the room. "There."

They approached cautiously, and Sylvie threw up a bolt of light to reveal the Dark Elf ship.

"Oh," Clark said after a moment. "That's... that's really damaged."

He wasn't wrong. The ship's hull was cracked in multiple places, its landing struts were bent, and what looked like important components were either missing or hanging loose.

"You said it was moved here for storage," Diana said, her tone accusing.

"I said it was moved here," Loki corrected. "I didn't say it was in perfect condition."

"This thing's not gonna fly," Clark said, walking around it slowly. "Not without serious repairs."

"Then we repair it," Thor said. "We've got time."

"We've got maybe an hour before the alarm goes up," Sif corrected. "And that's if we're lucky."

Clark was already examining the ship's engine housing, his knowledge from the Kryptonian ship giving him insights into alien technology that would have taken human engineers years to develop.

"The core's intact," he said after a moment. "That's good. But the power coupling's fried, the navigation system's offline, and there's a hull breach that'll kill us all if we try to enter dimensional space."

"Can you fix it?" Thor asked.

"Maybe. If I had parts and about three days."

"We don't have three days."

"I know." Clark straightened, his expression thoughtful. "But I might have an idea. Loki, Sylvie—can you stabilize the hull breach with magic? Not permanently, just long enough to get us clear of Asgard?"

"Maybe," Sylvie said, moving to examine the damage. "If we layer reinforcement spells and bind them to the ship's existing structure."

"And the power coupling?"

"I can rebuild that," Clark said. "The Fortress of Solitude's database has schematics for similar systems. It's not identical, but close enough that I can improvise."

"What about navigation?" Diana asked.

"That's trickier." Clark pulled open an access panel, revealing a tangle of alien circuitry. "These systems are based on different principles than what I'm used to. More organic, almost biological in their structure."

"Dark Elf technology incorporates living components," Loki said, joining him at the panel. "The ship grows as much as it's built."

"Can you interface with it?"

"Maybe. If I can figure out the control syntax." Loki's hands began to glow with magical energy as he reached into the circuitry. "Give me a minute."

"We don't have a minute," Sif said, her enhanced hearing picking up sounds from the corridor outside. "Someone's coming."

"Patrol?"

"Worse. Einherjar. Full combat unit."

"They can't know we're here," Thor said. "Can they?"

The answer came in the form of alarms beginning to sound throughout the palace—a deep, resonant tone that meant one thing: escape attempt detected.

"They know," Diana said, drawing her sword. "How long do we have?"

"Minutes," Sif estimated. "Maybe less."

"Then we hold them off while Clark and the twins fix the ship," Thor decided. "Diana, Sif, you're with me. We need to secure this area."

"Thor, there's gonna be fifty Einherjar coming through that door," Sif protested. "We can't hold them indefinitely. Not without..."

The rest was left unsaid.

"We don't need indefinitely. We just need long enough."

Clark was already working frantically on the power coupling, his hands moving with superhuman speed as he rerouted systems and bypassed damaged components. Beside him, Loki and Sylvie worked in perfect synchronization, their magic flowing through the ship's systems like water finding channels.

"Jane, stay with them," Thor said. "Keep low and stay out of sight."

Jane nodded, too exhausted to argue. The Aether's energy was burning brighter now, responding to her stress and fear.

The door at the far end of the storage area burst open, and Einherjar poured through—elite warriors in full battle armor, weapons charged and ready.

"Prince Thor!" their commander called out. "Stand down! You're under arrest for treason and attempted escape!"

"Can't do that!" Thor called back, summoning Mjolnir to his hand. "Got places to be!"

"We don't wanna hurt you, my lord!"

"Then don't try to stop me!"

The Einherjar advanced in formation, shields locked and weapons raised. These weren't palace guards who could be talked past—they were professional soldiers following orders.

Diana stepped forward, her lasso already glowing. "Last warning! Back off!"

The commander's response was to order his troops to charge.

What followed was sheer chaos. Thor fought with desperation, using Mjolnir to deflect attacks rather than strike lethal blows. These were his people, his comrades, and he wouldn't kill them to make his escape.

Diana showed similar restraint, using her lasso to disarm and entangle rather than her sword to cut. But even restrained, they were devastating—two warriors of godlike power against soldiers, no matter how well-trained.

Sif fought grimly, her blade dancing through the formations. She knew these warriors, had trained with many of them, and she used that knowledge to predict their movements and counter them before they could land hits.

"How're we doing?" Thor shouted over the sounds of combat, using Mjolnir to create a shockwave that sent a group of warriors flying backward.

"Getting there!" Clark shouted back, his hands deep in the ship's power system. "Five minutes!"

"We don't have five minutes!" Sif parried a spear thrust and kicked the warrior away. "They're calling for reinforcements!"

More Einherjar were arriving now, and these came with heavier weapons—energy cannons designed to take down ships, not personnel.

"They're not playing around anymore," Diana grunted, deflecting an energy blast with her bracers. "Thor, we need to leave now!"

"Almost there!" Loki's voice was strained with concentration as he worked through the navigation system's control structure. "The ship's mind is resisting me—it thinks we're enemies!"

"Convince it otherwise!"

"I'm trying! Dark Elf ships are keyed to their original owners—we need to override its basic recognition patterns!"

Sylvie was chanting, her magic weaving through the hull breach in complex patterns. "Hull integrity at seventy percent. I can get it to eighty, maybe eighty-five, but no higher. Not without more time."

"Eighty-five'll have to be enough," Clark said. He pulled his hands out of the power system, which was now glowing with restored energy. "Power's back online. Navigation?"

"Working on it!" Loki's entire body was shimmering with magical energy now, his consciousness partially merged with the ship's alien systems. "Got it! Navigation's online!"

"Then let's go!" Thor deflected another energy blast and began backing toward the ship. "Everyone aboard! Now!"

Diana and Sif retreated in controlled stages, maintaining a defensive perimeter as the others scrambled into the ship. The interior was cramped and alien, all angular surfaces and bioluminescent controls that pulsed with sickly light.

"Strap in!" Clark called out, taking what looked like the co-pilot's position. "This is gonna be rough!"

Loki slid into the pilot's seat, his hands already moving across controls that seemed to respond to thought as much as touch. "Sylvie, I need you maintaining the hull integrity spell the entire time we're in flight. If it drops below seventy percent, we're done for."

"Understood." Sylvie positioned herself near the center of the cabin, her hands already glowing with sustained magic.

Thor was the last one aboard, Mjolnir sending one final shockwave through the pursuing Einherjar before he leapt through the closing hatch.

"Go!"

The ship lurched upward, its engines screaming as Loki pushed them beyond safe parameters. The storage facility's roof shattered as they punched through it, debris raining down on the warriors below.

"We've got pursuit!" Sif called out, pointing at the viewscreen. "Multiple vessels, coming in fast!"

"I see them." Loki's hands danced across the controls, and the ship banked hard to port. "Hold on to something!"

They accelerated through Asgard's streets, flying low and fast through the city. Citizens scattered as the Dark Elf ship roared overhead, its damaged hull trailing sparks.

"Palace defenses are coming up!" Clark reported, reading displays that were partially in languages he didn't understand. "They're targeting us!"

"Of course they are," Loki muttered. "Can't make this easy."

Energy cannons opened fire from the palace walls, filling the air with deadly light. Loki threw the ship into evasive maneuvers that should have torn it apart, but Sylvie's magic held the structure together through sheer force of will. A drop of blood trickled down her nose, but she paid it no heed, her expression strained.

"How do we get past the dimensional barriers?" Diana shouted over the sound of weapons fire impacting their shields.

"There's a passage," Loki shouted back. "Old smuggler's route that Mother showed me when I was young. It's not on any official maps."

"Your mother knew smuggler routes?"

"You'd be surprised what Mother knew!"

They were approaching the edge of the city now, the golden buildings giving way to the crystalline structures that marked Asgard's outer boundaries. Beyond that lay the barriers – massive walls of pure energy that separated the realm from the void beyond.

"There!" Loki pointed at what looked like solid barrier. "That's our exit!"

"That's a wall!" Thor protested.

"You will always remain a simpleton! It's supposed to look like a wall! That's the point!"

Loki pushed the engines to maximum, and the ship screamed forward. Behind them, pursuit vessels were closing in, their weapons charging for more powerful shots.

"Sylvie, I need everything you've got!" Loki called out.

"Already giving it!" Sylvie's face was pale with effort, sweat beading on her forehead and blood oozing out of her nose. "Hull's at seventy-three percent and dropping!"

"Just hold it together for thirty more seconds!"

They hit the barrier at full force.

For a moment, there was nothing but light and pain and the sensation of reality bending around them. The ship groaned like a living thing, its structure threatening to come apart at the molecular level.

Then they were through, emerging into the void between realms with alarms screaming and half the ship's systems failing.

"We made it," Diana said, sounding surprised.

"Don't celebrate yet," Clark warned. "We've got damage reports lighting up across the board."

"How bad?" Thor asked.

"Bad. Life support's at sixty percent. Shields are gone. And the engines are running on emergency power."

"But we're clear of Asgard?"

"Yeah. We're clear."

Thor moved to where Jane was strapped into an acceleration couch, her face pale and drawn. "How're you holding up?"

"Been better." She managed a weak smile. "Been worse too. That time in New Mexico with the Destroyer, remember?"

"This is slightly different."

"Only slightly." Her smile faded. "Thor, the Aether's getting worse. I can feel it trying to take control."

"We'll find Malekith soon. End this before —"

"Before it kills me. You can say it."

He took her hand carefully. "Before it gets that far."

Loki was running diagnostics at the pilot's station, his expression growing increasingly concerned. "We've got another problem."

"What now?" Sif asked.

"The dimensional navigation system's damaged worse than the simpleton thought. I can get us to Svartalfheim, but I can't guarantee we'll arrive in one piece."

"What're our options?" Diana asked.

"We risk the jump and hope the ship holds together, or we drift in dimensional space until someone finds us. Given that Asgard's gonna be looking for us with everything they've got, option two's basically suicide."

"Then we risk the jump," Thor decided.

"Could tear the ship apart."

"Could. But it's our best shot."

Loki looked around at the others, seeing the same determination in their faces.  
"Alright. Everyone strap in. This is gonna be bad."

"Worse than punching through Asgard's barriers?" Clark asked.

"So much worse."

They secured themselves as best they could while Loki plotted the course. The ship's systems were barely functioning, and several sections of the hull were held together by nothing but Sylvie's increasingly strained magic.

"Coordinates locked," Loki announced. "Initiating dimensional shift in three... two... one..."

To be continued...