

# FRIGID IMMORTALS



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JENNIFER RUTHERFORD

THE FRIGID IMMORTALS TRILOGY

PART 1:

# FRIGID IMMORTALS

BY JENNIFER RUTHERFORD

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## GLOSSARY OF UNUSUAL PHRASES/TERMS IN THE FRIGID IMMORTALS TRILOGY:

~**ÆSIR**: people and/or gods and goddesses from Asgard. Often referred to as Asgardians.

~**HEL**: shortened from Helheim, realm of the dead. “Hel” is “hell” and used as such. Ex: “By Hel!” “What the Hel?” “Go to Hel!” Immortal characters always use “Hel” as opposed to the typical spelling. Human/mortal dialogue is written as “hell” to reflect the English spelling.

~**NORNS**: witch-like beings from the realm Nornheim, much like oracles. Use ex: “By the Norns!” “Norns help us.” “Norns!” similar to “oh my god!”

~**EIR WILLING**: The chief healer in Asgard is Eir. Her name is used in place of “god willing”

~**GODS (PLURAL)**: Due to Æsir polytheism, they use “GODS” in everyday speech rather than the more common singular “GOD”. Ex: “Dear godS!” “GodSdamn!” “Oh my godS” etc. (the extra “s” is only highlighted in this glossary, NOT in the actual text.)

~**SEIÐR**: magic/sorcery/spellcasting (variation “seiður” is the sorcer/ess casting spells)

~**THE NINE**: Refers to “the nine realms” of Norse mythology. Often used as part of an exclamation. Ex: Asgardians and/or immortals might say “What in the nine?” rather than the typical “What in the world?”

## FRIGID IMMORTALS PLAYLIST:

Chapter 1: [“You Found Me”](#) by Sublab & Azaleh

Chapter 2: [“Us”](#) by Tiny Deaths

Chapter 3: [“Heavier”](#) by Slaves

Chapter 4: [“So High”](#) by Ghost Loft

Chapter 5: [“Artifice”](#) by SOHN

Chapter 6: [“Bottom of the Deep Blue Sea”](#) by MISSIO

Chapter 7: [“Days to Come”](#) by Seven Lions

Chapter 8: [“Play With Fire”](#) by Sam Tinnesz (feat. Yacht Money)

Chapter 9: [“Slow Motion”](#) by Charlotte Lawrence

Chapter 10: [“Who Do You Love”](#) by of Verona

Chapter 11: [“Up Down”](#) by Boy Epic

Chapter 12: [“Tornado Warning”](#) by Hammock

Chapter 13: [“Rush Over Me”](#) by Seven Lions, Illenium, Said the Sky & HALIENE

Chapter 14: [“Starlight”](#) by STARSET

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# FRIGID IMMORTALS

## ~PROLOGUE~

*Asgard, the realm eternal, first home of the gods, stands at the heart of the nine realms, in the world tree of our known universe. Two moons hover in our night sky. Our seasons are five human decades long. King Odin Allfather rules alongside his queen, with whom I am infinitely familiar.*

*These strangely beloved monarchs have two sons, with whom you are quite familiar, though not as thoroughly as one from our family tree. Now, say their names with me: Princes of Asgard, Thor and Loki.*

*The former, and older of the two, earned his "Golden Son" title in a century long since passed, little more than three months after he first walked. A child stepping into the shining light of the brightest days, he lived in sun-drenched hours, soaking in breezy wins and quickly forgiven sins.*

*Not to be outdone by his (perhaps) unjustly adored brother, the younger son chose, unsurprising to his mother, a different road—one free from the noble smother. It was a whispering road, a dark road, a road quite fitting for a mischief-lover.*

*I know not the exact day, certainly not the exact hour, of his decision, but rather than fight a centuries-long battle to win the hearts of the masses, in all their fickle foolery, which long ago allowed gold, not green, to become their savior, this younger prince spun on his heel and bade good riddance to their fair-weather cruelty. With his back to the wind, he flew (some might say "fell"), landing on the dark sides of our moons on the coldest of nights. It was then, that the "Dark Son" moniker was bestowed upon him.*

*Now, do not mistake my words, young one. This is not a prelude to a simple fairytale with two princes, one gold and one dark. This tale will not paint the canvas with broad, sweeping strokes of white or black, good or bad, hero or*

*villain, win or lose, live or die. Oh Valhalla, no, my dear one. Do not blindly believe such folly told to the children of the generation who bore them, and theirs before them, stretching backward thousands upon thousands of years. No, my dears, believe ME this (for I do not lie as THEY do), that we live not in black and white, but in the endlessly shifting storm cloud grey between. Hiding inside tints of nearly white warm gold and black-shadowed cold, HERE our days unfold.*

*Now, heed this warning: Though its beauty is hypnotizing, in time, this glittering gold spreads too thin. Lake-cloaking piers join the heavenly tiers, enshrouding our home in suffocating foam, and in an undefined span of time, push us toward a netherworld catacomb.*

*The toiling, living dead, awakened by the blinding light, shield their eyes, for now they see the lies. It is here that gold loses its power; more so, it loses its WORTH. Tell me, who should desire what has become repetitious and duller than apron strings? What is to be sought after now, if not our once-shimmering things, fought for by envious order of ivory tower queens and kings, stolen from conquered lands and working hands stripped of fine rings?*

*“Care not for the green beneath your feet,” they lied, “for it breaks backs, bloodies hands, and bruises knees, yet bears little fruit; that which it fares, be tasteless and stale.”*

*“But green is for LIFE,” some objected; incredulous, the new masters hammered the final nail: “Twenty lashings for speaking so WILDLY beyond the pale!”*

*These lovers of green were mocked. Down from their strong, ashen branches, knocked. Bound at the wrists, thrown in cells, doors locked. Forced from the forest court, yet no onlooker’s boat rocked?*

*My oh my, color me dreadfully shocked.*

*“Your precious green will bring only death,” they lied again, swearing on their lives that the enemy was the dark roots within. “No evil shadow shall remain in this, our golden dominion!”*

*Nay, this, our golden cage, our cosmopolitan PRISON.*



*After nine centuries of waste, courage grew among these caged birds of prey, and off they bravely flew as lovers of green into the fray. Not lords or ladies with weapons of untold decay, but only the darkest night should conquer the gold-obsessed day. Hands aching and hearts breaking, trapped in the dog days of never-ending summers, in the stifling heat of our meaningless finery, betrayed by philanthropic plunderers, we beg for icy winter to sweep across our lands and gun down the grim-reaping gunners. Now let them watch us burn their heaven-seeking towers, spinning the fruitless gold into airy thinness in search of the green below, and let them freeze to death in the icy wind and snow while we seek our own heaven in the seeds that we sow.*

*You think US heartless for this? Ha! ABSOLUTELY NOT. For their palettes do not crave the “tasteless and stale” fruits of our labor, but they only water for the buck, for the doe, and for their still-spotted fawn! They crave the starvation of millions for the gluttony of a few. Their thirst is for blood and war—for the capture of ice and fire, which flow through the veins of the Dark Son and that equally dark Vanir one. After all, DARK magic would so cast these “peace-keeping” warmongers in a rather poor light. How unfortunate for them that green, not gold, still glows in moonlight.*

*Then, at long last, unwilling to die on a golden hill, the few standing frigid immortals, of their genuinely free will, sing hymns for the changing of the guard, for the changing of seasons, for our finally setting sun, and for the fallen leaves of our beloved ash trees among our fallen brethren. But more than all these things, we sing for two sharp, DARK beings, bonded as one with SILVER rings. And with their ageless, true love brings, the strength to mend what broke under foolish kings. This, we sing, for the magic ones who offer more than brawn. This, we sing, for our FEARLESS NEW DARK DAWN.*

— “The Hundred Year Confession of an Æsir Royal” by Frigga of Asgard

# CHAPTER 1: YOU MIGHT LIKE HER, LOKI.

## ~THE PALACE OF ASGARD~

Thor spotted his younger sibling in the queen's garden, manhandling a golden-haired girl, perhaps a few years his junior. Leaning over the ledge of the balcony, he called out to him.

"Brother!"

He'd been mindlessly roaming the aged bronze halls of the palace, reduced to boredom, whilst his warrior friends sparred down at the training arena without him. His reputation for usurping a fight, for brandishing his famed hammer, a weapon called Mjolnir, and leaving no room for the other soldiers to partake in the battle as he slayed the enemy, had him suspended from training for a week. His close friend and sister in arms, Sif, had warned him of his arrogance and how it would gain him such a suspension.

Yet he had not heeded her words and found himself spending much of his time searching out his brother who trained more with hefty books than with metal weaponry. The younger of the two was known for his mischievous ways and the trickery amused Thor to no end, despite his claiming to be above it. Watching his brother pull pranks was the best medicine for a week of drollery without practiced battles.

He pulled his blood red cloak tighter around his broad intimidating frame as a cold wind shot through the pillared hall. His long thick blond waves whipped around his bearded face, piercing aqua eyes shutting hastily to avoid the burning sensation from the frozen gust. The torches were nearly snuffed out from the effect, and he rubbed his hands together and blew his hot breath into them.

He favored his royal blue and silver breastplate and heavy armor over the crimson tunic, navy leather jacket, breeches, and black boots that he was currently sporting, but the armor was rather pointless if he wasn't joining the others in their fake fight. He scowled at the thought of surviving a week doing anything other than spending the daylight hours slamming fists and showing the Asgardian army just how mighty he truly was.

The sound of girlish giggling and squeals of delight from the icy garden a story below the open balcony had caught his attention and curiosity took over. He stepped as gingerly as was possible to the ledge and peered over. Refusing to admit that he was a *touch* jealous, Thor frowned at the sight of his brother wrapped up in the arms of an attractive young woman, hands roaming underneath her thick yellow cloak while she pulled at his fur covered shoulders and straight raven locks.

The second prince of Asgard was not as tall as Thor but his six-foot two body still towered over many of the citizens. His frame was athletic but thinner than that of his older brother. He was acclaimed as a master sorcerer, and his intellect was far beyond that of their peers. Like Thor, he was also a fully capable fighter, able to hold his own in any battle, and both brothers had already seen their fair share of fights, often with each other, as is typical with siblings.

However, rather than throwing himself into the middle of the fight and swinging punches and risking deadly blows to himself, the second son preferred his throwing knives or a small silver dagger. His aim was impeccable, every shot landing with precision. He moved with grace, twisting and contorting his body with the physical prowess of a cat, rather than roaring and stomping and head-butting as a bear would. His magic had proven useful many times, casting illusions of himself and confusing his adversaries. He was lithe and intimidating, but it was never enough to best Thor. The golden prince was the warrior. The dark prince was the trickster. The warrior would always win, in the end, and the darker son was supremely envious for it.

“Brother!” Thor called again and was ignored *again*.

At the sound of Thor's booming voice, the girl finally made to pull away from his brother, but he pulled her back against his tall frame, shrouding her in his black leather and fur shouldered coat.

Thor rolled his eyes. “Loki! Have you gone deaf?”

Loki released the girl, and with a wink and charming smile, he kissed her hand and waved her off. Shooting a glare at Thor, the girl sauntered away, and Loki tilted his head to the side ever so slightly, hair ruffling with the icy breeze, as he watched her before spinning on his heel to face Thor, a smirk spreading across his face.

Loki's skin was fair, pale even, and it was made more so by the contrast to his black just below chin length hair and emerald green eyes framed by long dark lashes. He was certainly attractive, all symmetrical high, sharp cheekbones and angular jaw connecting to a long gracefully veined throat.

“My apologies. I could not hear you over the sound of that lovely young thing's pounding heart and utterly devastating moans of pleasure,” he deadpanned.

Thor laughed. “Is that so? She was so much louder in my chambers last night!”

Loki rolled his eyes. He knew it was meant as a jest, but it irritated him, nonetheless. He wanted to shout that the girl had been busy removing his breeches in *his* chambers the night before but decided it wasn't worth the effort. The girl was of no great import. Just another

bedmate, one of many in a long line for hundreds of years. Another attractive face to satiate one of the more carnal desires of his body. Something to pass the time, really.

Eyes narrowing, he raised a dark eyebrow. “Just how much ale did you drink last night? You must be confusing her with one of those over-stuffed whores you love so much.”

Hearing Thor's heavy footsteps backing away from the ledge, he turned to look at the bifrost which still shimmered as a prism despite the low frozen grey clouds. The cold felt natural to Loki, and he closed his eyes as an icy gust tossed his hair about his neck. Since he could remember, Asgard's constant warmth seemed to suffocate him. It never seemed to bother anyone else. The bright gleaming golden city was usually blooming with flowers and exotic plant life because of the pleasant weather. A warm breeze would float through the air, and despite the heavy leather attire and long dresses which seemed to cause a sheen of sweat on most everyone, they seemed content with the heat. It confounded him. Footsteps behind him took him from his musings.

Thor softened his tone. “I didn’t mean to speak ill of her truly, Loki. I only *jest*, brother.”

Loki continued to stare at the cosmos. “Yes, I'm well aware of your comedic *prowess*.”

Bitter envy aside, he loved his brother. Love and hate were two sides of the same coin, after all. Sighing heavily, he slumped his shoulders.

Scratching his chin, Loki muttered, “Doesn’t matter anyhow. I already forgot her name.”

Thor clapped his hand on his baby brother's shoulder. “Cease your brooding, Loki. I am painfully bored. Is it not your greatest desire to entertain me in my doldrums?”

His words pulled a low chuckle from Loki. “Thor, as much as your *painful* boredom injures me to the very core, I'm afraid I have been called to the training ground this evening. It seems that Father wants to spare you from my corruption. His words, not mine. Do accept my most sincere apologies.”

He gave a shallow bow, and backing away with a frown and clasped hands, he left Thor standing in the frosty garden. Thor watched him walk away until he could no longer see him, then finally turned with heavy steps back into the warmth of the palace.

\*\*\*

Loki strolled to his chambers to change into his armor. He didn't care to train with Thor's friends. Stunningly beautiful Sif had been given the title “Goddess of War” by the Allfather a century prior and had become, despite said beauty, ruthlessly obnoxious with arrogance since. Her double-bladed sword was impressive and intimidating to the other soldiers. All

Loki saw when he watched her fight was the female version of his big brother—beautiful, favored, and loved by all.

Their skills were limited to fighting and binge drinking and slurring poorly thought-out insults during both. Volstagg, Hogun, and Fandral were Thor's other friends who had arrogantly named themselves the “Warriors Three”. As though there were only three great warriors in all of Asgard. Preposterous. Famous for their many victories in battle, they, along with Sif, created a bloodthirsty and intellectually stunted foursome. They were skilled Warriors, thus their name, but they seemed to think that each argument could and should only be won by who had the bigger weapon. Everything was a pissing contest to them. Loki hated training with them.

### ~THE TRAINING FIELDS~

“Look!” Volstagg's thick voice echoed so that all the soldiers turned to look at Loki descending the stone steps from the upper level to the training grounds. “Silvertongue has come for a fight! Try lifting a sword this time, Loki! I know they're heavier than those little daggers but give it a try!”

Thor's friends laughed boisterously, but the rest of the men resumed their fighting. It was well-known that Loki had a dangerous temper, and with a flick of his wrist, his sorcery could produce as much and more pain than the four warriors' weapons combined. Thor's friends only mocked him because they could hide behind Thor.

*Idiots.*

Try lifting a sword? Little daggers? Really? *Please*. With only *one* dagger, Loki had bested Volstagg and that stupid ax the brute loved to swing around just yesterday. Loki rolled his eyes. That was why Volstagg was throwing jabs at him. Bruised ego. Honestly, their insults *did* bother him, but he usually didn't bother much with retaliation. Water off a duck's back and all that.

However, he was in no mood for it today. He launched *one of his little daggers* at Volstagg's nearly seven-foot body, and it sliced through the thin skin of his cheek. Dark crimson blood streamed out of the wound, and Volstagg looked genuinely stunned as he touched his face and drew his hand away, fingers smeared with red. Loki smirked at the shocked faces of his brother's friends. Oh, come now, that wound would be healed within ten minutes. Barely a scratch.

He squinted to see it better and pursed his lips. Alright, well, a very bloody scratch. To be fair, he hadn't meant to resort to actual violence, but Volstagg's comment had been the

straw that broke the camel's back. He'd been feeling on edge for a while now. Shrugging, he turned away from the warrior. Maybe Loki was just unbelievably *bored*. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Álfar, the head trainer, approaching him with reserve as the training continued.

Mumbling "*oh for Hel's sake*" under his breath, Loki looked down, pretending to adjust his vambraces.

"Your Highness," Álfar paused to clear his throat as Loki swiped his hair out of his still clean face. "You are spot on with your dagger skills. I honestly don't know how you do it. It's impressive, to say the least."

"What of it, Álfar?" Loki asked, shifting his gaze away from the instructor to smirk at Sif who was watching him carefully with steely eyes.

The head trainer continued. "However, I see that tonight you are perhaps a bit more war hungry than usual. We are only training, Your Highness. We do not seek to wound our fellow countryman. They are our brothers in arms, after all."

Loki smiled, seeing a convenient escape from the uninteresting and pointless sparring that his father was forcing him into.

"I fear I may have lost my composure due to an earlier conflict. I believe it is best that I take my leave." He bowed his head slightly to the head trainer who returned the gesture, covering his heart with his right fist.

"Prince Loki."

Winking at Sif, he kissed the air in her direction. Grinning, thankful to leave the arena, he gracefully ascended the stairs taking three steps at a time. His presence had been requested in the throne room later anyhow, so he would have found an excuse to leave one way or another. Supposedly a foreign guest was to arrive that night, and his mother had said Loki might like her. *Like her*. Whatever that meant. His mother could be annoyingly cryptic at times. She was also usually right. About *everything*.

## ~THE THRONE ROOM~

Odin's voice bounced off the walls as he stood from his throne. "What does Freya of our sister realm, Vanaheim, call for?"

Queen Frigga descended the throne steps, and upon meeting her *many* times removed relative at the base of the dais, she opened her arms wide and embraced her.

“Frigga, dearest!” Freya chimed, her tone rather melodramatic.

The women held each other as though they had not seen the other for an age. Freya was the Goddess of Fertility and was as beautiful and golden as Frigga. She resided in Vanaheim, the only other realm that housed gods and goddesses. Her nine daughters lived with her, and she did not call often.

Stepping down a few stairs, Odin sighed, clearly impatient. “Ladies, you can visit later. Freya, state your business with Asgard.”

The women approached him, and Frigga looked to her sons standing on either side of Odin. Thor gave a charming smile to the young woman who trailed behind his mother and Freya. Loki merely lifted his chin and looked on curiously. Freya bowed low, displaying a ridiculous amount of cleavage to which Odin looked away, shaking his head.

“Greetings, Allfather! Princes Thor and Loki! My goodness how you've grown into such *handsome* young men!”

Frigga cleared her throat, rolling her eyes as she climbed the dais to stand near her youngest. Loki sighed and followed suit, eyes rolling as well at Freya's blatant flirting with men less than half her age. The young woman behind Freya let out a clearly exasperated huff, and the older woman turned to glare at her. Odin stood taller, peering at her out of his one good eye, the other having been lost during a great war with Jotunheim many centuries ago now covered with a golden metal patch.

“Freya, state your business.”

“Allfather, I come to make a formal request to Queen Frigga concerning the studies of my youngest. I present to you my daughter, Sigyn of Vanaheim.”

Hearing her name spoken, Sigyn stepped forward and bowed respectfully. “Your majesty.”

She was not as tall as Asgardian women, smaller with little wrists and hands, nails painted black, which were clasped in front of her. Long, shining dark hair hung in waves, framing a heart shaped face with grey green eyes like a storm blown sea. She seemed relaxed, not remotely intimidated to stand before the throne. Unlike golden Freya, Sigyn was all fair skin, with rose tinted cheeks. Her dress was the color of charcoal, slightly iridescent, turning black as she shifted her stance.

Thor was staring, and when he realized she was glaring at him in response to his ogling, he turned bright red, looking away quickly. Lips pursed, hollowing her cheekbones, she returned her attention to Odin. Loki bit the insides of his cheeks to keep from laughing at the annoyed look she'd aimed at his brother. While her attention was elsewhere, Loki took

in her entire form, petite but strong. To him, everything about her was just, well, *perfect*. Feeling entirely too warm in his leather attire now, he sighed.

Gods *damn*.

His mother had been right... again. *Sigyn*. He loved her name instantly. He hoped she would love his name equally. He wanted to hear her say it. Interest piqued, he tilted his head to the side and spread his legs a touch wider. She turned her gaze toward him at the movement, and this time she didn't glare. Odin was talking, but Loki couldn't hear the words. He was too busy listening to her thoughts, which was rather invasive and unfair of him, he knew, but he couldn't help it. He watched her out of his periphery while supposedly watching his father, her thoughts slithering across his mind while she looked at him.

*Wow*—her eyes moved from his boots slowly up his long legs, hovering a bit longer than strictly necessary at the top of them, and followed the line from his narrow hips to his broad shoulders and lingered at his neck which was exposed by the open collar of his jacket. Finally, her eyes landed on his face.

*Damn, he's beautiful. My god his eyes. So green. Wait... have I met him before? No, I'd remember HIM, for sure. How tall is he? I want a closer look. When will I get to talk to him? Can I stay in HIS room? Right. Good luck with that. He's a damn prince, what am I? I want to kiss him. I bet he's a good kisser. His hair looks so soft. I hope he likes girls. Oh shit... what if he doesn't? It would be JUST my luck if he didn't. Maybe he could make an exception for the sad little foreign exchange student? Ugh, I'm in so much trouble.*

Loki had to fight to keep a straight face. He was damn near about to jump down the stairs, swear that *yes*, he liked girls, and give her the kiss she wanted, but her thoughts stopped abruptly. She seemed to wake from hypnosis and returned her eyes to Odin, who had apparently been asking her questions. She furrowed her brow and squeezed the bridge of her nose before letting out a heavy sigh.

“Forgive me, Your Majesties. It seems my journey took a toll on my head. What was asked of me?”

Loki had been an unexpected and *gorgeous* distraction for her, and it was nearly impossible to pay attention to anything other than him.

Thor scoffed, annoyed with her *extremely* clear preference for his brother. First that girl in the garden and now this woman?

“The Bifrost is rather body blowing, isn't it, Lady Sigyn? The Vanir are not known for their strong stomachs.” He hadn't meant to speak so rudely, and the resulting guilt brought a deep scowl across his face.



Loki's eyes widened substantially. It wasn't often that his brother threw insults, less so when the object of said insults was a pretty little thing he might have persuaded into his bed. Loki opened his mouth but closed it upon seeing her reaction. She looked positively *murderous*. He quickly changed his earlier judgment of her. No, she was, without question, *not* a “pretty little thing”. Pretty? Without a doubt. Little thing? Absolutely *not*. It was clear that this woman could not be *persuaded* to do anything.

Closing her eyes, jaw clenched, chest heaving, she blew out a long breath as though she was attempting to control a knee jerk reaction, a treacherous word aimed at the golden son or a hidden dagger spun artfully in his direction. Freya's eyes blew wide in poorly veiled *terror* as she stared at her daughter.

Sigyn fisted her hands at her sides, and Loki noticed a shift in the air, thick and heavy, smelling of ashes. Like smoke billowing up from the hottest flames, a faint black swirling mass pooled around the hem of her dress. Just as soon as he saw it, however, it disappeared, and sighing, she uncurled her fists, a look of relief smoothing her features. He peered at the others questioningly. Other than Freya, and maybe his mother, none of them seemed to have noticed anything. His father, brother, and the guards were all oblivious. He shook his head. He must have imagined it.

Odin's voice echoed in the great hall, his impatience growing, the flames in the sconces flickering with the sound.

“I asked when you wished to start your studies with my queen.”

Voice low but feminine and silky smooth, Sigyn answered firmly. “Immediately, Your Majesty.”

The king looked to his wife, who nodded and smiled at the daring young Vanir.

“The guest quarters are already prepared,” Frigga said, “and the guards will escort you and see that your belongings are brought there. I expect you to arrive at my quarters immediately after the morning meal tomorrow. I do not tolerate tardiness, dear girl. Your lessons will conclude midday. Night meal is served at first dark. The rest of the time is yours to command. I think you will find there is much to entertain you in Asgard.”

The queen glanced sideways at her youngest at the word *entertain*, and snapping her fingers, a woman in a simple blue dress with high neck and long sleeves—a servant, Sigyn assumed—appeared at her side.

“Lady Sigyn, this is Kyaer, your handmaiden. Kyaer, the lady has traveled from Vanaheim and will reside at the palace for the unforeseen future while she studies Sorcery as my pupil.”

Loki's head snapped up. Sigyn was a *sorceress*? He'd not been paying any great attention to the reason for her residency. So, he *had* seen billowy black clouds move about her. As though he hadn't already found her unbelievably enticing, the dark beauty now pulsed with *magic*. It was an invisible and dangerous black cloak of power encircling her small frame. His breath caught in his chest as she turned to walk back down the long path to the doors of the regal room, not before sparing him a positively ravishing smile over her shoulder.

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## CHAPTER 2: YOU ARE NO MATCH FOR ME, SIGYN.

The room that Kyaer led Sigyn to was, in a word, *huge*. Fresh evergreen garland hung from the aged bronze posters of the bed, which could have given sleep to six full-grown Asgardians comfortably. Plush copper hued silk adorned its surface. Idly, she ran her fingers over the silk. If it were black, it would be perfect.

She rolled her eyes.

*Really, Sigyn?*

Asgard's royal family was giving her an entire suite of rooms, and she was complaining about the color scheme? She continued her curious roaming as Kyaer swung open a set of doors on the other side of the room.

"I'll draw you a bath to prepare you for dinner," the young servant said.

Sigyn frowned. She had already bathed not three hours prior and smelled good enough; she would have preferred to peruse the shelves of the massive bookcase, but she followed the girl into the washroom, nonetheless. Eyes wide, her jaw dropped.

*For the love....*

The bath that had been built into the gleaming tiled floor was the size of a swimming pool for heaven's sake. Never in her nine hundred years had she seen such an audacious display of wealth. But what had she expected? This was the palace of *Asgard*, for Hel's sake. Once Kyaer had given her some privacy, Sigyn stripped and washed herself quickly, avoiding getting her hair wet. She grabbed a towel to cover herself up and walked back into the bedroom looking for a wardrobe. Spotting a large cherry armoire, she opened its massive doors and frowned at the rainbow glaring back at her.

Disheartened, she turned to Kyaer. "Is there nothing darker? I might rather put on the dress I wore earlier."

She did not relish looking like some delicate little flower waiting to be plucked for she was most certainly nothing of the sort. Shaking her head, Kyaer pulled a slightly darker green gown from the rod.

"I'm sorry, milady, but I've already sent your dress off for a cleaning. Will this do? If you're looking for something darker than the lovely wardrobe that has been provided so generously to you, this is your best option, I'm afraid."

Clearing her throat, Sigyn ignored the insinuation that she was ungrateful, which to be fair, she was, and took the dress.

"I'll just put this on in the washroom," she said with a half-hearted smile.

"No, no, ma'am, let me help you," Kyaer said, following her.

Sigyn waved her off and closed the door.

"It's fine, I've got it. It's just a bit more lowcut than I'm used to," she said, frowning at the low neckline of the bodice once she pulled it on.

"That's the back, miss," Kyaer said, concern (and amusement) lacing her tone when Sigyn walked out.

"Ohhhhh," she said, cheeks burning as she attempted to twist the fabric around her body and failing miserably.

"Would you please let me help you?"

Sighing heavily, Sigyn stopped fussing with the fabric and nodded, allowing Kyaer to readjust the dress. Once it was fastened properly, she gave herself a once over in the floor length bronze gilt mirror leaning against the opposite wall. Well, at least the actual neckline wasn't as low as the back, but it was still lower than she typically wore. It wasn't *all* bad, though.

There were no constricting ties like there were on Vanir dresses to inhibit her breathing, and if she had to pick a color, a shade of green would have been her first choice. Thankfully, the hemline was shorter in the front so at least she didn't have to fear tripping over the skirt. Gods, how humiliating that would have been. She could see it now, falling flat on her face in front of... oh... what was his name again? Oh, right.

*Loki.*

His face flashed across her vision, and she bit into smile, zoning out entirely, imagining what his voice sounded like, how it would feel to tangle her fingers in his hair, how his hands would feel in hers, what his neck smelled like, how big his-

"Oh, and do not fear wearing green, ma'am," Kyaer said suddenly, "I'm sure Prince Loki won't be offended if you wear his color since you are a guest. Are you alright?"

Taking a deep breath, Sigyn held her chest, and forced a smile and nodded. She'd been so lost in her own head that she'd clean forgotten Kyaer was even there, and the woman's abrupt voice had scared the living daylights out of her. Not to mention the fact that the

woman had broken into her thoughts about the younger prince by *talking about the younger prince*.

“You startled me, that's all,” she said, waving a hand. “And I didn't know green was *his* color. Is that bad?”

What did that even mean? His color? What, did he have some claim to green? Was no one allowed to wear green except him?

“No, it's not *bad*,” Kyaer shrugged. “It's just, well, usually when a noblewoman attends a royal dinner, she only wears either of the princes' colors if she means to .... um .... tempt him.”

Sigyn blew out a breath and rolled her eyes. Well, wasn't that just wonderful. Certainly, if there was anyone that she wanted attention from, it would be Loki, but she didn't want to be *obvious* about it. She chewed her lip. Maybe she should wear blue or something. Oh, this was just ridiculous. She liked the green. She wasn't wearing it for *his* benefit. If she switched dresses, then she *would* be doing it for him. Just .... in a reverse type of way.

“I'm sure he won't read into it if I don't make a fuss over it,” she said with a shrug.

The shrug was a good call. She was the picture of nonchalance. Loki who?

“Would you like me to help you put up your hair?” Kyaer offered.

“No, no thank you. I only pull it away from my face when I'm riding or in the training arena at home, or *here* now, I guess. If they'll let me use it,” she said, unconsciously running a hand through her hair.

“Training arena? Are you a warrior then?”

“Yes, I guess you could say that.” Sigyn smiled brightly, glad to have something to talk about rather than moon over some prince. “I'm fairly good with swords and daggers, but the bow is my favorite.”

Kyaer looked genuinely interested. “I have some experience with swords.”

“You do? Do they let you use the arena? Or is there somewhere else?”

Before Kyaer could answer, someone knocked on the door.

“That'll be your escort, ma'am,” the girl said, looking somewhat disappointed as she opened the door where a yellow caped guard stood waiting.

“Lady Sigyn, I am to escort you to the night meal,” he said.

Smiling apologetically at Kyaer, Sigyn gave her a little wave as she followed the guard into the hall.

Walking through the corridor, Sigyn smiled at the still as statues royal guards that stood at attention every other pillar. They didn't smile back. What an incredibly dull life they must have led.

She came to the end of the hall where the sounds of dishes clanking and howling laughter grew steadily louder, and two guards moved from their posts in front of another pair of lavish and lofty doors to allow her to join the nobles and royal family in the dining hall. Unsurprisingly, the sheer mass of the hall was more akin to a ballroom.

The waxed black marble floor was a work of art with an inlaid mosaic in the shape of Yggdrasil, perfect in its likeness to the great tree that was home to the nine realms. An open-air semicircular balcony extended from the end of the room, displaying Asgard's snow covered beauty. Smoothly sanded circular pillars etched with gold and silver filigree scrollwork rose to the fifty-foot heights where cherry stained rafters supported the vaulted ceiling. Low hanging bronze pendants descended from the towering ceiling, bathing the great hall in dim golden candlelight. The finest Vanir cathedrals would be green with envy.

*Green with envy.*

*GREEN.*

She looked down at her dress and rolled her eyes. Just when she'd blissfully forgotten about the color, now it was back at the forefront of her mind. Head up, shoulders back, she looked from stranger to stranger as the guard led her to wherever she would be sitting, which once she was there, turned out to be *right next to* Loki. He was clad in the same body-hugging black leather from earlier and was (oh thank heavens) talking to his mother on his *other side*.

She wasn't ready to utter one word to the man yet. Yet, at the same time, she really wanted to just get it over with. Break the ice. Rip off the bandage...

...and his clothes.

She nodded her thanks to the guard as he pulled her chair out, wincing as it scraped across the floor loudly. Predictably, Loki turned at the sound and made instant eye contact with her. Honestly, she didn't know whether to laugh or cry when his eyes dropped to her dress, a smirk appearing on his face. She pulled her hair out from behind her ear, so it could form something of a curtain to hide her ridiculous blush and offered a small "*hello*" to him as she gracefully sat down next to him.

“Hello,” he said back with a smile, leaning forward a bit, as though trying to see around her hair.

Swallowing nervously, she blew out a slow breath. Her heart rate was through the roof.

*Oh, I might melt into a puddle at his feet right here because apparently his voice is perfect, too.*

His smile grew at the sound of her thoughts. So, she liked his voice. That was a good start. Dammit. He needed to stop reading her mind. It really was rude.

*But oh, so fun.*

He cut into the roasted pheasant on his plate and took the politest bite she'd seen from a man, his chewing slow and silent. She discreetly watched the lean muscles of his jaw and Adam's apple as he swallowed. For the love, he even made *eating* look sexy.

He threw his head back and laughed out loud, which earned him quite a few odd looks in his direction. The laugh was devolving into shoulder shaking giggles, and if he hadn't been so focused on her thoughts, he would have been genuinely embarrassed. He needed her to stop thinking about him so *loudly*. She was making it near impossible for him to be respectful of her mental privacy, what with her currently screaming that his laugh made her want to climb into his lap and yank his head back by his hair.

Clearing his throat, he shifted in his seat as her thoughts became more.... *graphic*. Truly, he needed to put a stop to this. He placed his hand on her right knee, green eyes burning into hers, which had blown wide at the sudden movement.

“Your name is Sigyn, yes?”

Dropping her eyes to look at his hand then back up to his face, she swallowed and nodded. The way he said her name, so deep and smooth and absurdly enticing, was sending shivers down her spine. In fact, she might just be stupid enough to let him have her right there on the table if he asked.

He looked sideways, wondering how bad it would be if he *did* ask to have her on the table. Better not. Blinking rapidly, he shook the images from his head and looked at her from underneath his brow. Shit, he was probably about to ruin everything.

“I think it is only fair that I inform you of my ability to read minds.”

The shift in the air was palpable, and it made his insides twist nervously. In one instant she went from aroused to angry.

Face burning with embarrassment, she blinked back tears. The blood rushing through her ears was positively deafening. He had been listening to her thoughts, all of which had involved his mouth and hands and tongue and all his other *parts*, and despite her fervent desire to slap him hard for his cruel trick, she still wanted to grab his face and shove her tongue in his mouth. Now that she knew he was listening, she felt like an absolute idiot. Really, it was so obvious now. She could *see* him reacting to her thoughts. After that last one about wanting to slap him and kiss him, he bit his lip so hard she thought it might bleed. Fine. There was no getting her dignity back at this point, so maybe she could have a little fun, too.

Eyes flashing, she thought long and hard about the awful (amazing) things she would do to him and snapped, "Forgive me for my *lurid* thoughts."

Smirking at the little groan that he couldn't quite suppress, she looked away from him and took the goblet of mead a servant offered to her. She took a sip and cringed at the sickeningly sweet beverage. Was there no wine made from *grapes*? She gulped it down quickly, gagging at the taste, in hopes of easing her nerves. Setting down the drink, and turning back to him, she lifted her eyes to his again, though his gaze wandered to her mouth.

"I think you are perhaps as dark in nature as I am, Sigyn," he said quietly.

It took a great deal of effort for him to tear his eyes away from her bottom lip, so plump, so red, so perfect, but he managed to look back at her eyes, which deserved their own praise as well. Grey green storm clouds wished they were as awe-inducing as her eyes. He wanted to see those eyes slide close, those lips part, that gorgeous hair knotted in his hand as he-

*Norns.*

He bit the insides of his cheeks. It was a good thing she couldn't read *his* mind. Swallowing hard, he allowed himself a moment of weakness and dropped his gaze to the low neckline of her dress, and his grip on her thigh tightened.

"I have to ask, was that lovely dress for *my* benefit?"

His eyes came back up to hers, and she set her jaw. She felt weak and powerless under his gaze, and for the first time that night, she became truly angry, with no hint of lust to color it. No one who knew her would have called her *weak*, and they most certainly knew she wasn't *powerless*. Quite the opposite truthfully. Gathering her wits, with no small amount of effort, she narrowed her eyes and pushed his hand back to his own lap.

"No," she said curtly. "The green is only a coincidence." That was the truth, and she was damn glad for it. "It was not my intention to bewitch you, Your Highness," she continued. "For your sake, I shall avoid green in the future."



Happy with herself for not allowing him to get the better of her with those ridiculously green eyes, or his voice, or his smile, or anything else of his, she grabbed an apple from a servant's tray as he passed. She turned away from him and sat back casually in her chair, one elbow resting on the back. She wasn't weak. She wasn't powerless.

He wanted to scoff at being rebuffed, but he didn't. She was *genuinely* angry at him. He didn't need to listen to her thoughts to figure out that one. He'd been honest, had he not? He could have just listened and used her mind against her, but he *didn't* now, did he. Why would she get him all worked up, and then just stop? *She'd* been the one thinking of being taken by him on the damn table, and now *this*? Angry rejection? No, she may have lost her *dignity* earlier, but he hadn't lost his. He moved his mouth to her ear, enjoying the shiver his breath pulled from her.

"You think yourself capable of bewitching *me*?" he asked, not kindly.

Eyes narrowing, he shook his head.

"You are no match for me, Sigyn. Set your sights lower," he warned, then put as much distance between them as their seats would allow and returned his focus to his plate.

Pulling her hair back out from behind her ear again, she blinked back humiliating tears. *Set her sights lower?* It was like being kicked in the chest, and her heart dropped into her stomach.

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Throughout the rest of the dinner, the *mismatched* pair picked at the food on their plates in silence, not sparing each other a second's glance. No warmth radiated from his body, strangely enough, and it bothered her greatly. He made no sound other than the slight rustle of his leather clad arms as he sparingly lifted minuscule bites to his mouth.

Her newfound knowledge of his telepathic abilities had her on edge. She was unable to allow her mind to wander, and by the end of the meal, she was completely exhausted. The task of controlling those thoughts, the force required to focus on anything other than the one thing that she desperately wanted to, had given her a terrible headache. She started at the sudden movement to her right, taking her from her focus.

Loki had tossed his napkin on the plate, letting out an annoyed and exasperated sigh, and she risked turning her head to look at him. He did not acknowledge her presence and downright ignored her by turning his body away and starting a quiet conversation with his mother. Was he truly that *childish*? She allowed her mind to wander freely then. It was

liberating and relieving to do so, as though breaching the surface of the sea after nearly drowning. He suddenly sat up straighter and turned his head sharply, his profile now visible to her.

*I suppose reading minds isn't always flattering,* she thought as *loudly* as possible just for his sake.

She'd made a bet with herself that he'd been attuned to her every strand of thought. Perhaps that was why he sounded so annoyed— listening desperately, trying to find himself within those thoughts, and coming up completely empty. Hm... maybe *he* should set *his* sights lower. She didn't need him. Just then, a new voice pulled her from her frustrated musings.

"Lady Sigyn, is it?" The question came from behind her left shoulder, and she turned to see a dashing smile displayed across a handsome face.

She grinned, one corner of her mouth raising slightly higher than the other, then arched a black eyebrow at the blond man who was bent down on one knee.

"Yes, it is. And how may I address you, good sir?"

Ugh— "*good sir?*" She only said it because other women here spoke like that, and it sounded all kinds of ridiculous coming out of *her* mouth. Lesson learned.

He pulled her hand to his mouth for a quick kiss. "You may call me Fandral, my lady. I am one of the Warriors Three, close friends with Thor and Sif and...um..." he cleared his throat "...Loki...when he allows such sentiment. I must admit, I have been unable to focus on anything other than you, and I desire your attention, if only for a bit. Would you give it?"

The confident smile fell slightly as his eyebrows raised in question, and she noticed the flick of his eyes for a half second in Loki's direction, who had turned his head back to the queen, giving an award-winning performance of nonchalance. She could literally *hear* Loki bristle at the man's romantic efforts.

*So that's how we're going to play this, prince boy? FINE.*

Smiling widely, she pushed her chair back, and rising to her feet, she grabbed Fandral's hand, pulling him back to his seat further down the table. Volstagg stood, offering her his chair, which she took gladly, flirting openly with Fandral while sneaking glances at Loki. He was talented in his act, supposedly ignoring the exchange between the blond warrior and the dark beauty.

Eventually however, he dared to look at the bold Vanir and caught her gaze at one point when Fandral turned to address Sif. Loki listened to their utterly boring words about who had bested who in the training grounds earlier, and with a clenched jaw, he stood abruptly

and excused himself. He bent and kissed his mother's hair before strutting across the hall, purposefully behind the Warriors Three where he *accidentally* shoved Fandral with his shoulder. The four friends glared at him as he shot Sigyn a searing glance before exiting the hall. He'd said she was no match for him. *Damn*. He hated being wrong.

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## CHAPTER 3: ARE WE BLOOD BROTHERS?

### ~LOKI'S CHAMBERS~

**B**lood boiling in his veins as he stormed into his chambers, Loki twisted his wrist and the enchanted black doors slammed behind him.

He barely touched his food at dinner thanks to that aggravatingly gorgeous woman. What had he been thinking when he requested that his mother seat Sigyn next to him? He certainly hadn't been using his *head* when he made that decision.

His nearly empty stomach growled as he grabbed a kelly green apple from an aged brass bowl atop the black wrought iron sofa table and bit into it, his jaws sending a loud *crack* through the dark room. He grimaced at the tart taste and threw the rest of the fruit across the room with such force that it smashed the mirror it collided with. At the sound of shattering glass, the large sleeping black wolf that was sprawled across the fireplace rug lifted his huge head to glare at his master. He glared right back, lips pressed into a thin line, jaws clenched.

“Sorry, Fenrir,” he mumbled, the words so low that even the beast, with his superior ears, leaned closer to hear the apology, cocking his head to the side and blinking at him, as though asking *what happened?*

He squatted next to his beloved wolf and hung his head. If there was anyone that he felt he could speak to, completely uninhibited, it was Fen, who understood and empathized, wordless though he was. The fact that he couldn't spill Loki's secrets didn't hurt either. Even Frigga, in all her gentle motherly love and leadership, had proven to be an unworthy confidante at times.

*\*\*\*Nothing more than a boy, Loki was playing tag with Thor and his friends in the palace halls. Concerning himself with not getting tagged, he found his way to the servants' wing. Atop a plain wooden table sat a beautiful bouquet of flowers. They smelled as sweet as they looked. Reds, oranges, purples created a fiery sunset blooming. Stealing them for his mother, he quickly ran in the direction of the queen's chambers.*

*Thor charging around the corner, of course, caught him. “I thought we were playing tag? And here you are collecting flowers like a girl! You’re it now, little girl!” Thor laughed and made to run away but Loki grabbed him by his sleeve, and when it ripped, the older brother turned red with anger.*

*“I didn’t mean to, Thor!” Loki cried as the blond boy punched him hard in his gut causing him to drop the flowers and double over in pain. Thor was powerfully built even as a child, and Loki bore the brunt of his, mostly, playful violence.*

*“What are you doing with these stupid stems anyway?” Thor reached a hand to Loki and helped him to his feet, regretting his actions at the sight of his little brother’s skinny frame hunched over.*

*“They’re for Mother. I found them, and she will love them.” Loki smiled proudly as he swiped the buds back up and held his stomach, wincing slightly.*

*“She won’t want them if you stole them.” Thor sniffed at a blossom and scrunched his nose. “They stink.”*

*“They do not! And she won’t know where they came from anyway.” Loki turned and skipped in the direction of the queen’s chambers with Thor hot on his heels.*

*“I’m going to tell her that you took them.” With that, Thor grabbed the bouquet and ran to their mother’s rooms.*

*When Loki caught up to his brother, Thor was already handing the flowers to Frigga. “He stole them! I saw him!”*

*Frigga looked at Loki, a disappointed expression spreading across her elegant features, as he held his head low. He only wanted to give her something pretty. Who cared where it had come from? What did servants need them for anyway? In his mind, he did nothing terribly wrong. His mother dismissed her eldest and called Loki to sit with her, discussing the usual “don’t take what isn’t yours” and “the ends don’t justify the means” lectures that he’d been given before.*

*“Do you not like them at all, Mother? I thought you would because they are so pretty...like you.” His eyes glistened, waiting for her response, hoping for some semblance of affirmation, of appreciation.*

*“I do, my love,” Frigga said, hugging him tightly.*

*He left feeling whole, complete, loved, but when he received the same lecture, albeit in a far sterner manner, from Odin at the night meal, Loki looked at his mother. She kept her eyes on her husband as he fought back tears. \*\*\**

Loki stopped the memory dead in its tracks. It was, perhaps, a silly thing to feel betrayed over, but it was just one of countless others he kept pushed at the back of his mind. He loved his mother, and she loved him, even if she'd shared some things with his father that he wished she hadn't. His mother wasn't perfect, but she was still the anchor in his constantly storming sea every time he was reminded of his strained relationship with, well, everyone.

His unseeing gaze wandered from the flames to the ceiling, mouthing “why” as he shook his head. He'd hoped that Sigyn would be a new confidante, a true companion. He rolled his eyes. Obviously, he wanted her in his bed, too. Looking around his room, he chewed his lip. He also wanted her on his desk.

...and bent over the back of that chaise lounge.

...and up against his shower wall.

*Damn. It.*

The line between his brows deepened as he scratched the back of his neck. It seemed he'd lost those options already. Fenrir laid his heavy head on his leather clad thighs. How had he let this night go to Hel? Her once wanton thoughts had become anger-filled within the span of a few seconds. Why had he been so arrogant? Just how fragile was his ego? All because the green dress wasn't for him. Really? What was it he'd said to her, in all his idiocy?

*You're no match for me.*

What an incredible lie. She absolutely was his match, and he could not lose her over something so unbelievably petty. For pity's sake, she was a sorceress, and a dark one at that. He didn't just want her, he needed her.

His mother's voice sounded in his head— *“There's a young Vanir woman arriving today, Loki, and I think you will like her very much.”*

He snorted, unamused. Hadn't that been the understatement of the century. Was it possible that she didn't feel the same? He shook his head. No, he was certain she wanted him. Running a hand through his hair, he closed his eyes. Did he really care how she felt? With the way he was responding to this situation, clearly all that mattered was that he still wanted her, desperately so. Hel, he was already losing his mind over her, and he'd only known she even existed for about five hours.

*What in Odin's name is WRONG with me?*

He stroked Fenrir's head before pulling himself to his feet. The glowing green flames in the fireplace mocked him with their dancing, and he snuffed them out with another flick of his wrist. His usually comforting dark chambers were suddenly stifling as an odd sense of claustrophobia settled over him.

Sigyn had a magnetic effect on him, an effect which he was not prepared to handle. Never in his nine hundred years had he wanted a woman so.... obsessively. Again, after only a measly five hours. He knew he was being beyond petulant—a child given a toy during Yule only to have his mother take it away the same night for not playing with it nicely.

Not that he considered Sigyn a toy, but he did want to *play* with her. From the second she shot a glare at his brother in the throne room, Loki saw how dangerous she was, and that (combined with obvious physical appeal) made him want to drag her away with him and live up to his mischievous reputation. Removing his black topcoat and armored breastplate, leaving only his black and green leather tunic, he left to lose himself in the only place no one would bother him.

### ~THE ROYAL LIBRARY~

So much for no one bothering him. He'd not had fifteen minutes to himself before he heard the familiar heavy footfalls of his brother.

"Loki?" Thor used his best version of a library voice. Not that there was anyone else within the hall to scold him. "Brother, please? I barely saw you in the dining hall. Father spoke of politics at me the entire meal, and when he finally released me, I saw my brother storming out early."

Sadness enveloped his tone, and Loki could not continue in his favorite hiding spot among the rafters. His brother's pain was his pain, and he would not endure it willingly. He suffered enough on his own.

"I'm up here." He spoke from his makeshift seat atop the cherry plank, his long legs stretched out, crossed at the ankles, his back leaning on the vaulted ceiling.

He closed the book he'd pulled from the shelf. Midgardian poetry was oddly beautiful despite his lack of respect for the humans. That said, it was foolish to read such romantic words in his current despairing mood. Closing his eyes, he recited a passage from memory.

"I have known the arms already, known them all— Arms that are braceleted and white and bare. (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!) Is it perfume from a dress? That makes me so digress?"<sup>1</sup>

Sigyn's face (and that gorgeous not-for-his-benefit dress) came to mind. He wanted to feel her arms and be close enough to smell her neck. He had been so close at dinner, then he of course screwed it up. Reading this romantic shit was not helping his mood.

"Doing a little light reading for the evening, I see," Thor said with a small smile, his voice softening further as he stared up at the musing black-haired prince.

Loki shot a glare at him, quoting another line from the poem. "I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps he truly would have been better off if he'd been born as a lobster. Hanging his head, he sighed. His brother climbed gracefully, impressive for his size, up to the same perch and hurled himself over the rafter. Straddling the thin plank, boots hanging off the edge, Thor swung his legs slightly as he peered at his dark brother.

Loki stared daggers. "Don't ask."

"I wasn't going to." Thor put his hands up as though admitting defeat.

Leaning his head back, Loki sighed heavily. "That woman."

Those two words were all he could manage as he pulled his hand down his face. This woman rendered him speechless. It baffled him. No one rendered him speechless. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his brother throw his hands up and hang his head.

"Really, Loki? Now that Vanir girl is on the receiving end of your scorn as well? You just met her!"

Turning his head sharply, Loki snapped, "I know that!"

Balancing the book on his thighs, he looked sideways and crossed his arms. Thor played with the fabric of his cloak, pulling at an imaginary thread. He worried for his younger brother. Loki needed to get a hold of his over-the-top emotions if he were to be Thor's highest advisor when the throne passed to him.

After all, how could he rule Asgard without his brother at his side? He was cunning and far superior in his intellect. Even if he could find a way to bring and sustain peace within the realms without Loki's diplomatic skills, it wasn't what he wanted. He didn't want to do this alone. His love for the man brooding across from him was enough to break him. He would die for his brother, not a second's consideration needed.

Loki slid the book just inside the waistband of his breeches and jumped down with ease, feet landing squarely beneath him. He barely noticed Thor's boots thudding softly on the floor behind him. Walking in circles around one of the many fire pits in the hall, he ran a hand through his raven black hair and groaned.

"Sigyn is not responding as I'd hoped," he admitted, then rolled his eyes. "Well, she had been until..."

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<sup>1</sup> Loki is quoting stanza 11, line 73 of poem "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot



He let the sentence trail off as the memory of that horrible display with Fandral, of all people, flashed across his vision. Gods, she all but stuck a knife in him and twisted the blade within the wound when she walked off with that vapid blond cretin.

He rolled his eyes again. This was ridiculous. What sort of god of mischief didn't like a sharp tongue? A clever retort? Seriously, what was wrong with him? Maybe he'd been pursued so often himself that he'd forgotten how to pursue. More likely, he so often shielded his heart that he'd forgotten he had one. Well, tonight Sigyn proved that it still beat within his chest. He was not the cat, and she was most certainly not the mouse.

Sighing, Thor ran a hand through his blond locks. "What did you expect her to do? Should she have just crawled into your lap on the spot? I know you asked mother to place the girl next to you."

He put his hand on Loki's shoulder only to have it shrugged off. His jaw clenched at the hostility rolling off his brother. It mattered not who or what had upset him. Thor was always on the receiving end of the man's wrath. Perhaps it was because, as brothers, they had no need for pretense between them, thus giving their emotions free rein because of that same blood that flowed through their veins. However, that shared blood slithered black through Loki. Something was off within him that Thor never could pin down, and he sometimes thought they were not brothers at all.

Voice dripping with sarcasm, Loki rubbed the back of his neck. "Ah, did Mother tell you, then? Or did the mighty Thor seek out the seating chart himself? She can't keep anything from you."

He had to rid himself of this incessant unworthy feeling. It was killing him. He'd felt it throughout his childhood. His father had given his brother preference in everything. Thor had the better tutors, the more skilled trainers, the benefit of the doubt even when the so-called "golden" prince hadn't deserved it, the shorter lectures.... the fucking hammer.

Teeth clenched and eyes pinched together at the thought of Mjölfnir, his seiðr rushed out of his extremities in a glowing green light, and he kicked powerfully at a plush reading lounge, its heavy brass frame flying into a nearby bookshelf. Beautiful leather-bound pages scattered across the floor along with the feathers that had been encased in the now shredded fabric of the seat.

Thor's voice cracked imperceptibly. "Mother adores you, Loki, and you know it. Remember that Midgardian bard? She used to recite his sonnets to us at bedtime. 'Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks but bears it out even to the edge of doom.'<sup>2</sup> She taught you that, and you'd do well to remember it." Loki's despair was his Achilles's heel. Keeping his wits about him became damn near impossible when his little brother behaved so hopelessly.

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<sup>2</sup> Lines 11 and 12 from "Sonnet 116" by William Shakespeare.

Exasperated, Loki dragged both hands down his face. “Why must you always come after me in the manner of a shepherd on the trail of his lost little lamb? Just leave me be, Thor!”

He bent down, removing the shining silver dagger that he kept faithfully sheathed in his right foot, and slammed it point down onto the closest cherry wood reading table, one of hundreds scattered throughout the hall.

Lips in a thin line, Thor crossed his arms. “I can't imagine that Lady Sigyn did anything so horrific to deserve this kind of response.”

Steadying himself in preparation for the coming onslaught of piss and hate, Thor squatted low, barely escaping the body bending pain of his brother's magic, as the green light shot out from Loki's hand. Thor pulled Mjölfnir from his belt, and seeing the hammer, Loki closed his eyes and sheathed his knife. Returning to his full height, Loki swallowed back the frustrated growl that wanted to escape from his throat. Why was he letting her get to his head like this?

“You've no idea what took place in that hall.”

Thor hung the hammer once more on his belt and rubbed his eyes, exasperated.

“She was toying with you, Loki.” His baby brother was exhausting him with his sarcasm and bitterness, and for all his intelligence, was also being impossibly dense. “Can you not see that? You will lose her, that is, if you haven't lost her already.”

He didn't wait for Loki to respond, only sparing him one last look of concern before turning away from the seething glare etched into his brother's features and exited the library silently. Loki climbed back to his rafter perch. Sighing, he slumped over and pulled the book from his waistband. It was a relief no one was there to see his pathetic display of emotion. He would have been humiliated. Remembering the words on the page, having put them to memory long ago, his lids fell shut as he whispered them to himself.

“I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me. I have seen them riding seaward on the waves. Combing the white hair of the waves blown back. When the wind blows the water white and black. We have lingered in the chambers of the sea. By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown. Til human voices wake us, and we drown.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Loki quotes stanzas 17-20, lines 124-131 of “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot (1920)

## ~TWO HOURS LATER, THE TRAINING FIELDS~

Head down, Thor stomped across the wide snow-laden path that led to the arena. His attempt to comfort or understand his brother had failed, once again, miserably. Anger was brewing within him steadily, starting at the middle of his chest and moving outward in all directions. He'd *tried* to brush it off, and just go to bed, but his sheets had been absolutely *stifling*, so, now here he was, desperate to push the extreme ire out of his body and into dozens of training dummies with thousands of punches. Brooding tended to make him more than a little hot under the collar, which most likely explained why he didn't mind the frigid air currently stinging his eyes.

The moons were mere slivers of light, but when he looked up, he could still make out the shape of something straight, thin, and black zipping through the air on the other end of the arena. The thing, which as his eyes adjusted to the dark, was an arrow (was that smoke trailing behind it?) embedding itself into one of many practice-dummies the warriors used for archery practice. Within the span of five seconds, ten more followed, each splitting the previous one in two.

Amazed and in awe of such skill, he turned his gaze to the small shadowy figure wielding a longbow, that was clearly not of Asgardian make. Eyes widened in shock, he ducked at the sudden change in posture of the small dark warrior, and with an audible whoosh, an arrow slammed into a pole only three inches in diameter of the fence that formed the boundaries between the four separate fields right at his back. The wood splintered just as his chest would have if he'd remained standing. He resumed his posture cautiously as the figure grew closer, running directly at him.

Who else would be out here at this either extremely late (or extremely early) hour? He had no time to guess as the figure came clearly into his vision and stopped short. Storm cloud eyes bore into him as she lowered the lithe and gracefully curved longbow so that it hung to her side, brushing against the dark green silk of her skirt.

Sigyn? She wore no cloak, no coat, no outer protection from the icy wind that whipped about them. Her dress swished about her, and her long black hair spun around her face as a gust blew across the expansive field. Seeing her now, in all her wild, dark, dangerous beauty, he could see why Loki was so deeply affected by her, even within a ridiculously short period of time. He'd never known his brother to have a type, but if Thor could have imagined Loki's dream girl, it would have been this woman. The dark clouds above seemed to descend upon them as they glared at each other, and a soft layer of snow formed on the dead grass under their feet. Thor broke the silence that overwhelmed the ten feet separating them, a deep chasm that he had no intention of falling into.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

Deep frown clouding her lovely features, she shrugged.

“I’ve always found violence to be the best remedy for sleeplessness.” She turned her gaze to the hammer in his fist and back up to his face. “I think perhaps you believe the same.”

A genuine smile broke across his face, and he held up a finger.

“Violence that doesn't hurt anyone,” he clarified, to which she shrugged and nodded. “I think perhaps our sleeplessness stems from the same root,” he added.

The black smoke that had first shown in the throne room, formed at the hem of her dress, and she once again fisted her hands. Thor gave her an empathetic half smile. Loki had hurt her. Badly, from the looks of it. What had that idiot brother of his said to the poor girl?

“Whatever he said,” Thor whispered, daring a step forward as she stood still, eyes not leaving his, “I promise you, Lady Sigyn, he did not mean it.”

She merely shook her head, still staring at him, but not seeing him. Her eyes glazed over as a pair of emerald eyes set in a sharply carved pale face framed with the blackest hair flashed across her vision. The angry tears on her cheeks froze as the temperature dropped further, and her face crumpled shamefully.

“I should hate him,” she said and ran a thumb under her eye then offered him a weak shrug. “But I can't.”

Thor’s heart broke in mutual understanding, and he crossed the distance between them in two steps, wrapping his strong arms around her. She started at the sudden physical contact, but he did not release her. The dislike she’d had for the golden prince from the moment he’d hurled that insult at her in the throne room faded somewhat under his kind embrace.

Thor stepped back to look her in the eyes. “It’s as exhausting as it is impossible to hate him. Believe me. I know that better than anyone.”

### ~SAME TIME, THE ROYAL LIBRARY~

Loki awoke on his library perch. He had fallen asleep with his head bent to the side, resting on his shoulder, and it had left a terrible pain in his neck. Rubbing the ache, he stood from the rafter. It was still dark out, and the torches in the room had been snuffed out, he guessed by palace servants, while he'd been asleep.

The moons cast a silvery glow through the arch window, and he crossed the wooden plank to admire them. The moons had a way of reminding him how small he was in this universe, and thus how small his problems were, which was incredibly comforting when he was

overwhelmed. And if ever he'd been overwhelmed, it was now. The library stood at one end of the palace and faced west. There was little to see from the window other than the training arena which was currently unoccupied and covered in a new layer of snow.

*Wait...*

Cocking his head to the side, he jumped to the window ledge and squinted his eyes for a better look. At least, at this hour, it should have been unoccupied. The dim light from the hazy moons fell, showing very clearly, a tall broad figure with a blond head and a hammer swinging at its side, but the figure was not alone. No. No. No. He had to be hallucinating. He wished he were hallucinating.

Walking next to the man, shoulders covered with his brother's red cape, was a woman, a good head shorter than him, with long black hair. Heart sinking, angry tears building, Loki's stomach churned as he watched the scene in horror. The blond man was draping his arm around her waist and pulling her close. Pulling Sigyn close.

Jaw clenching, Loki's eyes blew wide. What was this? Had not an hour passed since the man walking across the field below had been in the library, seemingly so concerned for the happiness of his younger brother? And now Thor was taking the one thing that Loki wanted and claiming her for himself?

He went numb. He wanted to look away, but apparently, he was a masochist, and he continued to stare in shock at what appeared to be a love scene playing out before his eyes. He didn't want to *truly* destroy anything, but his magic had a mind of its own, swarming around him, bathing him in the eerie neon green light of his powerful seiðr, and sharp deep cracks wove a jagged web across the plate glass window, twenty feet wide and twice as tall at the tip of the arch, before exploding violently, heavy shards of the glass crashing loudly in the garden below. The pair in the arena heard the sound (who wouldn't have?) and parted, staring at the empty space where the window had been.

Loki watched as Thor shook his head and finished the trek across the arena in solitude. The other figure removed the red cloak and stilled herself, facing him, her moon lit eyes meeting his as the wind whipped his hair about his face. Unable to hold her gaze any longer, he turned away, jumping back to his rafter and down into the dark hall where his magic had left nothing, but broken fragments of furniture and pages of books hurled in all directions across the massive space, all the while hearing her quietly saying his name into the frozen wind.

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## CHAPTER 4: BLACK FLAME, SILVER DAGGER

~NEXT DAY, SIGYN'S CHAMBERS~

**B**urning yellow blazed across the inside of her eyelids, and scrunching up her face, Sigyn pulled the soft copper silk over her face, a low gravelly growl coming from under the covers at the sound of happy whistling.

“Must you do that, Kyaer?” she mumbled as she threw the bedcover down and sat up, a deep scowl wrinkling her brow.

The balcony's drapes had been pulled back, revealing Asgard's blazing dawn. She had not slept enough, not even *close*. After Loki's seething exit from the night meal, to her great shame, she'd sulked and excused herself from the company of Thor's friends and had rushed to her chambers to fetch her longbow and arrows. Firing the weapons into the burlap covered dummy had been soothing, but then Thor had shown up.

Despite his unexpected brotherly affections somewhat soothing the sting of Loki's bite, she'd wanted him to leave. Something deep within her soul had told her *this is wrong*. Despite their quarrel, and despite having only just met him, she'd felt oddly loyal to Loki, and allowing his beefy brother to wrap her in his cloak had felt treacherous. When the glass of the library window shattered, the look of betrayal on Loki's face had been heartbreaking. She felt sick to her stomach at the thought of Loki thinking even for a second that she had entertained the possibility of a romance with his brother. She cringed. *Nothing* about Thor was romantically appealing.

Kyaer gave her an apologetic smile. “Forgive me, Lady Sigyn, but I could only let you sleep in so long. The queen expects you in less than half an hour.”

Sigyn's eyes blew wide. *Oh shit*. She threw her feet over the side of the bed and ran to the washroom. She relieved herself, splashed water on her face, and finger combed her hair. Kyaer held a silk gown out to her when she hurried back into the bedroom. Oh, this dress was *so* pretty, and she thanked her before realizing that the dress was.... *Black?* Oh, so *now* they give her something black. She spoke through her teeth.

“Where was *this* last night?”

How utterly frustrating! She really could have used anything other than the green she'd sported, but everything else had been so horribly *pastel*. That horrid dress had been her downfall with Loki. Distracted momentarily at the thought of his beautiful face, she played with the neckline of the dark garment while Kyaer tied the fastenings on the straps.

"I informed the queen that perhaps you preferred dark fabrics, and she had this, along with a dozen similar dresses, sent here after the night meal. You can check the armoire later, if you like. I replaced the old ones." Kyaer's cheeks were pink when she bowed her head as she backed away from Sigyn. "I'm so sorry that it wasn't available for last meal."

Feeling terrible for having snapped at her, Sigyn gave her a quick hug.

"It's fine. I'm fine. *We're* fine. But I am late. I'll see you later this evening, Kyaer," she said as she stepped into her shoes and slung a charcoal-colored leather satchel containing her spell books across her body and then dashed out the door.

Kyaer let out a nervous breath and began making the bed. She yelped, a hand flying to her mouth when Sigyn came running back into the room.

"Forgot breakfast," Sigyn said, out of breath as she grabbed an apple from the tray of food Kyaer had put on her dressing table and turned on her heel to run back out. She stuck her head back in, scaring Kyaer again, and shouted, "And thank you for the dress!"

Chomping into the fruit, she waved bye to Kyaer who gave her a nod, and she took back off into the hall, not bothering with an apology as several servants dodged her to keep from being knocked over.

## ~THE QUEEN'S BUSINESS QUARTERS~

Hearing a light knock on her door, Frigga flicked her wrist, a light golden mist shimmering around it, and the doors swung open, bidding a frazzled Sigyn to step in.

"You are not late, dearest. Do not fret. But," Frigga smirked, "you almost were."

Sigyn let out a little chuckle and smiled at the queen. She could see a hint of Loki in the woman's smirk, and it made her chest ache a little.

"How are you this morning?" Sigyn asked.

"I am well, my dear. Now, let's get straight to it, shall we?" Frigga gestured to a plush steel blue armchair. "Tell me which magical gifts you possess. Freya was so secretive."

Taking the seat, relieved that the queen was not upset, Sigyn relaxed, speaking plainly.

“I think it's called *elder flutningsmaður*? Is that right? Fire magic. I can manipulate fire, but I cannot conjure it.” She lowered her eyes, suddenly self-conscious in the company of the mightiest sorceress in the nine.

The queen raised an eyebrow in question. “What is wrong, dearest?”

Shaking her head, Sigyn chuckled nervously. “It's just.... I'm a bit embarrassed. I call myself a sorceress, and yet I can barely remember magic terminology.”

Frigga nodded her head and flipped to the introduction of the book she'd been holding. “I sent this same book to your chambers last night. I assume you brought it?”

Nodding, Sigyn reached into her satchel and retrieved the thick black velvet bound book, opening it to the same page.

“You need to know the ancestral language for spell casting. I will translate. You write.”

Smiling warmly, Frigga handed her an endless ink quill. “*Seiðr*, *Seiður*. Sorcery, sorcerer, or in my case, and yours, sorceress. And you were correct. One who has fire magic is called ‘*eldur flutningsmaður*’. You are incorrect, however, when you say that you can only *manipulate* fire. Fire magic is, in a sense, mind magic, which is called ‘*huga Seiðr*’. And if you can command fire to do your will with only your thoughts, then you are certainly able to *create* it with your thoughts, as well. It's just a more advanced skill. It might be helpful to speak with my son. Loki is quite talented in all forms of mind magic.”

“Is that so?” Sigyn feigned ignorance, forcing her eyes to stay open, despite wanting to close them and just daydream about him.

Even the mention of his damn name made her warm. The queen eyed her, and Sigyn wondered if she could also read minds. Is that where Loki learned it from?

*Oh gods....*

Clearing her throat, she looked down at her notebook so her hair could fall forward and hide the deep blush spreading from her cheeks and down her neck. After the previous night, she was well acquainted with Loki's talent for mind magic. If Frigga *could* read minds, she at least spared her from the embarrassment of further discussing her gods damn *gorgeous* son.

“You do realize that fire magic can be quite dangerous?”

All too familiar with the dangerous properties of her own magic, Sigyn slowly raised her eyes to meet Frigga's and half smiled.

“I'm aware, yes.”



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Three hours went by in the queen's presence and Sigyn still hadn't successfully conjured even a *tiny* flame. Frigga, of all people, should have been able to teach her, should she not? Surely, she was just distracted by *you know who*. She couldn't even *think* of his name. Seriously. This was going to be a problem. Utterly humiliated (and *almost* positive that Frigga *could* read minds) she gathered her things and excused herself when the lesson ended, thanking the queen for her time. What a pathetic excuse for a sorceress she was. Returning to her chambers, she fell face first on the bed, pounding her palms into the fabric angrily. He had returned to the forefront of her mind. In truth, he'd never *left* the forefront. He refused to leave her thoughts for even a moment's sanity.

It was shameful how much she thought of him after the way he'd treated her. Had she no respect for herself at all? Rolling to her back, she sighed heavily and threw her arm over her eyes. *Set your sights lower*. She'd been damn near close to retrieving the tiny black dagger she kept strapped near the top of her thigh and slamming it into his hand, the very one that had provocatively squeezed said thigh, when he said that to her. Yet she still wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and feel his mouth on hers. She hated the mix of emotions. She couldn't decide if she wanted to run away from or toward him, and if she ran toward him, would she kiss him or *stab* him? The more she thought of him, the angrier she became, and as her anger grew, the dying embers in the fireplace roared to life, moving out from the hearth, and spreading across the rug.

“Shit!” As heat and smoke filled the space, painful hacking coughs ripped from her throat.

Calling on her seiðr, which had failed her miserably that morning, she held her hand out, palm down, over the nearing flames. Dark mist dripped from her fingers, hovering above the flames, drenching, and snuffing them out instantly; soft black tendrils of smoke coiled up gracefully at the loss of their source.

This was not good. No, this was terrible. Her eyes swept across the ash covered and smoke-filled room. Asgard was full of candles, torches, fire pits, and hearths. If she continued losing control of her magic every time she was angered, the entire palace would go up in flames. She pushed her hair back from her face and grabbed her longbow and arrows. Violence was the best medicine for her rage, right? *Right*. Leaving her quarters, she made way for the training arena.

### ~LOKI'S CHAMBERS~

If Loki spent every night tossing about like he had last night, he would have permanent black circles under his eyes. Seeing Sigyn with his brother took his rage to new heights. Honestly, from the library window, it looked like Thor was romancing her, but

then her eyes had met Loki's, and there was no doubt in his mind that his brother was unsuccessful in his attempts, if that was indeed what the man had been doing.

He slept not a wink, lying there on the black sheets of his huge wrought iron bed, staring at the posters fashioned as serpents with jade eyes coiling up ten feet. He hadn't wanted to snuff out the green candlelight glowing dimly from the emerald crystal chandelier because the flames reminded him of Sigyn for some reason. He'd hoped the flames would persuade his brain to dream about her. So much for that theory.

When he arose mid-afternoon, his hair was thoroughly tangled, matted with the cold sweat that covered his naked body. He'd been so hot with rage after breaking the library window that he'd barely closed the doors behind him before stripping nude and throwing himself on the bed, pale skin turned fever red. He didn't bother with a bath now, but instead washed quickly under the glass encased shower in his bathroom. Turning off the water, he yanked his towel from the shelf and dried himself before grabbing his armor.

Once he was dressed, he went to his balcony and breathed in the cold air, letting it wash over him and bring his temperature down. Normally, he awoke with the dawn so he could get to his magic studies as early as possible before the responsibilities of the day took over, but he'd been lazy today. Well, not lazy. Just overwhelmed to the point of not knowing the point of getting up at all. Looking out across the palace gardens, he was thrown off by the shadows. They were in all the wrong places, and he could hear the clanging of swords on shields from the arena. Speaking of the arena, he needed to have a little talk with his brother.

Turning on his heel, he walked straight to his desk and grabbed his weapons. He sheathed his dagger in his boot along with his set of throwing knives which he hid snugly within the leather of his outer tunic. He wasn't sure what his plans were for Thor, but he needed to be prepared for a fight.

## ~THE TRAINING FIELDS~

Volstagg brought his heavy ax down on his hay filled enemy and frowned at the lack of resistance. Fighting with practice dummies was as exciting as it was bloody— thoroughly and disappointingly *not*. Sif gripped her sword, swinging at Hogun with a huge smile plastered on her face. Offensive, defensive, and evasive.... every technique had been burned into the inside of her skull long ago. Fighting was her first love. Well, that wasn't true. Thor had won her heart long before she'd held her first weapon.

Volstagg laughed as Hogun came at him. “Yes, Hogun, spar with me! You've outdone Sif! And these sack adversaries do not fight back!”

Annoyed, Sif blew her hair out of her face. Her favorite sparring partner, Fandral, was busy with another soldier, so she turned in a circle, looking for a challenger. Spotting Loki descending the stairs, she smiled. Honestly, the dark prince was her true favorite, more so than Fandral. His fighting technique was unlike any other she'd met, and his clever and sarcastic retorts during a fight were entertaining.

As he drew closer, though, she frowned. Something was off with him. He looked positively murderous. She followed the direction of his eyes. He was focused on his brother. Thor was engaged in a battle without the aid of Mjölfnir. She looked back to Loki. He was picking up speed. She didn't see a weapon, but she knew he had a dagger sheathed in his boot, and her chest tightened, her tear ducts filling quickly.

He often looked as though he would kill Thor, but this was different. She'd never thought he really would *kill* his brother before, but he had *murder* in his eyes now, and without Thor's hammer in his way, Loki stood a chance of being successful. There was no way in Hel that she would let him get any closer to his target. She ran toward him, her sword at the ready and stopped directly in front of him.

“Loki.”

Coming to a sudden halt, he glared. “Sif.”

What the Hel did she want? Did he look like he was in the mood for sparring? Seeing the pleading look in her eyes, he guessed it had something to do with his brother. Coming to the oaf's defense again? Good *gods*, that woman had the worst taste in men.

She inched closer to him, feeling small next to his long frame. “It's not worth it, Loki. Whatever it is. He's your *brother* for Valhalla's sake. When will you two stop this?”

He tilted his head to the side and pursed his lips, seemingly considering her words, but she knew better. He listened to no one. Even less so when he was pissed off. He closed the gap between them in one step, one hand wrapped around her throat, his grip just tight enough to suggest the seriousness of the situation, but not tight enough to cut off her air supply.

He spoke through his teeth. “Let. Me. Pass.”

Holding her sword steady with one hand, she grabbed his wrist and twisted it off her throat. He tried to shove past her then (truly he had no wish to fight *her*) but she put a hand on his chest and shook her head. Blowing out a hot breath, he swiped his hair from his eyes. Did she really think to stand in the gap for Thor? Was she really that idiotic? Did this insipid woman really think she could best *him*?

Side eyeing her, he unsheathed his dagger and reminded himself to not use his magic because that really would *kill* her. Despite her best efforts to hide it, he knew she feared him at that moment. He could literally *hear* her heart pounding.

“You can still back out of this, Sif,” he warned, watching her through narrowed eyes as she steadied herself for a fight against someone who she knew could do some serious damage to her.

“As can you,” she countered, trying to control her shaking voice.

“I can,” he said, his voice low and threatening, “but I won't.”

She responded with a cry of anger and then lunged at him.

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Sigyn ignored the soldiers staring at her as she ran down the steps into the training arena. The Crimson Hawks, Odin's finest warriors, were a burly crew of huge intimidating men, and she probably looked tiny and completely out of place to them. *Whatever*. She didn't care what anyone thought of her right then. No, all that mattered was the anger ripping her apart from the inside. She needed to shoot some arrows, or all the torches around the arena would explode.

Her quiver, delicate evergreens carved into the painted black wood, hung at her back. Twelve razor sharp black arrows, jade and silver feathers molded carefully into the ends, peaked out the top. The curved longbow was slung across her body, left shoulder to right hip. She hiked up the long black skirt as she crossed the uneven terrain to spare it from the wet field as best as she could. Dammit, she should have changed into her armored leggings instead. Ridiculous dress.

She heard a woman cry out suddenly, and it drew her eyes away from her original destination. Searching for the source of the sound, her eyes blew wide, and her jaw dropped upon seeing the man who caused her fitful and sleepless night locked in a fight with Sif, and they were most certainly *not* sparring. No, this was a true battle, and she knew that Sif hadn't acquired the title *Goddess of War* without merit.

Gripping her bow strap tighter, her eyes stung as she watched Loki drop to the ground, just barely avoiding the tip of Sif's sword.

*Um... Hel no.*

If he were injured or worse, she would *end* that woman herself. Despite her better intentions, she felt the deadly heat flowing through her veins and the accompanying black coils of smoke appeared at the hem of her dress.

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Loki moved to a low squat, one arm outstretched in front of his body, the other across his face, just below his eyes, and had a reverse grip on his dagger, pointed at Sif.

“You cannot best me, Sif. You never have.”

Sif held her sword as a staff, close to her body, as she rocked from one foot to another.

“The blade I wield has bested many men twice my size.”

“Perhaps, but you know well that there are no men like me, Sif, so take care with your words. My magic hurts far more than my dagger. Don't make me use it.”

Spoken through clenched teeth, his words were as sharp as his knife. Sure, he'd told himself he wouldn't use his magic, but Sif had chosen the worst time (testosterone was clearly at peak level) to pick a fight with him. Not to mention, he was convinced that she was trying to *kill* him, not just hurt him, what with the blows she was attempting.

Which was *insane*. Did she have any idea what Thor would do if she killed his only brother? Every hope she'd ever had of being that idiot paramour would be shattered. He was going to end this childish game, and in that moment, he didn't care if she was seriously injured in the process. He was done *caring*. Everyone always came to the defense of his golden brother, and Loki was far beyond just sick of it. As though *Thor* of all people needed a champion for Hel's sake.

He kicked forward, the sole of his foot nearly colliding with her chest, but she dodged the blow by falling to the side, one hand on the ground. She quickly corrected her vulnerable position, placing her other hand over her head, sword still in her hands, and flipped herself over sideways, returning to her original low stance. She tried to pierce his side with the end of her sword, but he bent, his hands balancing on the ground, twisted his torso and brought a long leg down on her weapon, knocking it out of her grasp.

Eyes blown wide, she arched back to retrieve her only defense, but he didn't allow it, flipping his body, back facing her front, pulling his knee back, his foot making painful contact with her face. She heard the crack before the blood spewed from her nose. Stars appeared behind her eyelids in her temporarily stunned state, and she planted her feet firmly on the ground.

She didn't see how it happened, but the blade with the serpent handle was now between her ribs with Loki's hand wrapped tightly around its end. She heard her own scream— glass shattering, ear piercing, and saw him tear the dagger away, drenched in the same blood that was now pouring out of her open wound.

Even wounded, she still tried to strike back, and he had to give her credit for it, but this was just ridiculous. He was *done* with this. He dropped below the swing of her sword, and

balancing on his hands, his body hovering parallel to the ground, he swung both legs behind her knees, kicking her legs out from underneath her, and she crashed onto the hard ground. He sighed heavily at the sound of her bones (hopefully just a few ribs) cracking under the weight of her heavy armor and pushed to his feet.

Only then did he realize that all around him, soldiers had stopped sparring to watch Loki and Sif. Had the men been afraid to break up their fight? For the life of him, he couldn't understand why they had just stood there and watched as their sister in arms got her ass handed to her. Swiping his hair out of his face, he dusted off his sleeves and peered at her. She wasn't getting up. She also didn't appear to be breathing. His eyes blew wide. No, no, no he had not just killed one of Thor's best friends. That had not happened.

*Oh shit.*

Far on the other end of the arena, he heard his brother's gut-wrenching cry, and Loki ducked instinctively, thinking Mjölfnir would collide with his chest at any moment. When that didn't happen, he stood to his full height and turned to face his brother, who was running toward him faster than he had ever seen. Knowing his dagger wouldn't be enough, he sheathed it and forced the magic in his veins to flow faster, green light sparking at his fingertips. A different voice sounded from across the field, then, pulling him from his "*how do I get out of this alive*" thoughts.

*"LOKI!"*

It was the voice he heard when the window shattered last night, the voice that sent shivers down his spine. He turned to see Sigyn running toward him, faster than Thor even, and black smoke was trailing behind her. As she neared, the smoke whipped around in front of her, and he felt the heat. It came upon him painfully quick, and his skin suddenly felt aflame beneath the heavy leather of his garments. Equal parts horrified and amazed, he gaped as Sif's body lit on fire.

*What the fuck...*

Sigyn's usually light eyes turned black as she continued toward him, and he heard her scream "*NO!*" angrily as her hand flew out in front of her face. Black mist shot out from her fingers, flying twenty feet through the air as fast as Mjölfnir and enveloped the flames overtaking Sif's torn and broken body, snuffing out the fire in an instant.

Loki was stunned. He'd never seen such a powerful display of magic in his nine hundred years. She had created and commanded fire right before his eyes. Chest heaving with some odd mix of fear and arousal, he gazed darkly at her.

Lips parted, she was breathing hard, one hand clutching her chest, the other holding her hair up off her neck, damp with sweat. Her skirt was torn all the way up her right leg, exposing her knee-high black boots and a black dagger strapped to an *oh so defined and smooth* thigh

as the wind tossed the fabric aside. When his eyes came back from her thigh to her face, he realized she was staring at him, too.

He was poised to run to her, to drop to his knees in front of her and slide his hands up her legs (yes, with everyone watching because he *did not care*), but before that little fantasy could play itself out, his brother was upon him. Blessedly, the man wasn't trying to rip out his throat but rather just push him out of the way to get to Sif. Thor fell to the ground pulling her wounded body up into a tight embrace and calling for the healers.

“What have you done, Loki?! How could you?! How could you?!”

He barely heard Thor's words because he was far too focused on the woman standing not ten feet from him. His brother turned toward her then, his blond hair whipping into his face, and shot her a searing glare when she looked at him.

“When Sif wakes, *if* she wakes— Eir willing! —I will send both of you so far into the depths of Helheim that Odin himself won't be able to drag you back!” Arm extended, gripping Mjöltnir, he flew, disappearing from their sight, Sif wrapped in his free arm.

Sigyn froze, staring at his red cape as it disappeared from her sight. His words were a broken record in her mind. What *had* she done? She recalled seeing Loki and Sif engaged in deadly battle, the silver of their sharp enchanted blades glinting in the sun. Fear had sprung up within her as a mountain top exploding, fiery lava spewing from its broken dome. Her imagination had run wild.

She'd envisioned the end of a sword skewering Loki's gut. When her vision had, thankfully, not come to fruition and instead his dagger tore into Sif's flesh as easily as a letter opener through paper, she'd praised Odin, silently hating herself for doing so. It was the sight of a certain thunder god coming at Loki, death in his eyes, that she had realized her worst fear.

*Loki dying.*

She knew of that man's love for Sif, and his younger brother had left his friend bloodied and gasping for breath in the dirt at his feet. The thought of losing Loki, just when she'd found him, had nearly paralyzed her. It was fear that caused her heart to drop into her stomach, and the magic had taken over.

She hadn't *aimed* for Sif. She hadn't aimed at all! Shit, it had just *happened!* She didn't have control of it. *Yet.*

Sif was just within the damage zone and didn't have the ability to escape. Sigyn slammed her eyes shut to keep her tears from streaming down her face. She was going to Hel for sure. Guilt wracked her body, and she shook uncontrollably from the mixture of magic and adrenaline. She felt the presence of someone behind her. She didn't need to see him to know who it was.

Slowly turning on her heel, she looked up into emerald eyes that instantly hypnotized her into an unnatural calm. Reaching a hand up, she pushed a loose strand of raven hair behind his ear.

Loki closed his eyes at the contact, relishing in the heat of her fingers grazing the cold skin of his cheekbone. She grasped the back of his neck and took a step forward, not a pebble's width between them, and he bent his head toward her face.

She felt his hand, fingers splayed, flat against the small of her back, and her heart raced at his proximity. He was a magnet pulling her to him, bending her to his will. Resistance was futile, and she exhaled heavily as their foreheads touched.

*Just breathe*, she thought, and she knew he heard it when he smiled in response. His hand moved up to the space between her shoulder blades as his other arm wrapped around her waist, molding her to his *much* taller, lean body. Her eyelids closed; the last sight having been his parted lips moving achingly slowly to her own mouth.

They ignored the soldiers scattered throughout the arena, gawking at their open display. Lost in the moment, they did not hear the cawing of two ravens circling over them momentarily before flying to the palace.

“Prince Loki! Lady Sigyn!”

His head shot up, eyes wide, pulling away from what would have surely been the most passionate kiss of his life thus far, when the guards approached. She groaned at the loss before realizing the voice had been that of one of Odin's personal guards. Cautiously turning to face the yellow caped warrior addressing them, she willed herself to stand tall.

Those ravens, of whom she'd been vaguely aware, were Huginn and Muninn, the Allfather's personal seers and messengers. For certain, they'd seen Sif's mangled body, Loki standing over her with a dagger in his hand, and her blood on his leather armor. They'd seen her body burst into flames, after the smoke shot out of Sigyn's hand. They'd seen all of it. They were the king's eyes when his body was not present.

“His majesty demands your presence in the throne room.”

Loki and Sigyn separated from each other and followed the soldier who'd spoken. Two more flanked their sides and four followed behind, swords at the ready. She watched as this raven-haired prince stepped gracefully across the rocky terrain, head held high. Either he was not afraid, or he was an extremely good actor. Probably both. He was the God of *Mischief*, after all. He'd probably been scolded by his father thousands of times.

Well, *she* had never been scolded by *Odin*, and she'd never been more terrified in her life. Focusing on holding the ripped skirt together so as not to give everyone a show, she did not see him looking at her, his eyes suddenly moist. He reached for her hand curled into a fist at her side, his fingers grazing her knuckles. She looked up at him, and seeing fear



written on his pale face, she uncurled her fingers and grasped his hand tightly. Huh... maybe he *was* afraid of his father.

Dark clouds collided, and an icy torrent of wind whipped about them as a wretched cry pierced through the storm. Looking toward the sound, they saw a red caped figure bent over, hands covering his face, on the balcony of the healing rooms.

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## CHAPTER 5: FOR THE PRICE OF NAUGHT

### ~ONE HOUR LATER, THE PALACE HEALING ROOMS~

Pacing across the balcony, thunder clouds twisting viciously over his head, Thor turned when he heard footsteps approaching him from behind.

He was certain it was Eir, the chief healer, coming to deliver him the horrific news of Sif's death, and he turned to face the calm and peaceful woman, her head pulled into a loose and low bun, the lines of time drawn across her features. When she smiled warmly at him, he gaped, hopeful.

"She breathes. And she will live."

His heart not only warmed at her words but set itself on fire with relief. He loved Sif far more deeply than he'd realized. Shameless, he let the tears spill over, sobbing openly, and grabbing Eir in a tight hug, he whispered *thank you* into her hair. He ran into Sif's healing room and stood over her.

She was awake, but her body was most certainly still broken. Her skin was still black and bleeding and paper thin from the flames that had engulfed her, but she managed to smile for him, grimacing as her burnt skin stretched across her face.

"I'm so glad, so *relieved* that you are still with me," he said, swallowing back a sob. The words were only a whisper in her ear as he leaned over her, careful not to put any of his weight on the bed or touch her.

She didn't speak, but her eyes glistened with angry tears. Sif had been in love with him since they were children but had never allowed herself to hope for reciprocation. However, his words, his tone, and the look he was giving her suggested that he might return her feelings after all. She blinked at him, wishing it didn't hurt so damn much to move her mouth so she could scream at him.

*Why now?! I'm practically on my deathbed! A near corpse! And now you decide that you love me, you huge brute?!*

He stepped back and turned to Eir. "How long will she need?"

"A fortnight, perhaps? It's hard to tell, but she is extraordinarily strong of both body and will. Such a combination will bring the healing about much sooner. She will be right as rain in no time."

Eir's peaceful face turned down a fraction as she continued, "However, I'm afraid that her golden locks will not return. The follicles on her scalp have been damaged beyond repair. I assure you that she will still be most fair."

She turned to Sif. "Take heart, young one."

Sif ignored the pain in her face as it crumpled with the news of her hair. What a stupid thing to be sad about! She was alive and would return to battle, to life, to that gorgeous daft man leaning over her! But never again would she have need of a brush nor braids. Thor's fingers would never graze her cheek to tuck it behind her ear. She may have prided herself for being as strong as a man, but she was still a woman, and her hair had been her crowning glory. She'd loved it. It had been flaxen.... Stunning!

*And now it is gone.*

At her hacking sobs, Thor reached for her before remembering how badly he would hurt her if he touched her, and looking into her eyes, his own full of love, as though he'd never seen the beautiful blue hue of them before, he spoke assuredly.

"They will pay for what they have done to you, dearest. I swear it. I will return soon. I must go to my father. They are receiving their judgment as I speak." He smiled at her and left the room as she continued to sob.

### ~SAME TIME, THE THRONE ROOM~

"Explain yourself!" Odin growled at Loki who stood at the base of the dais, Sigyn at his side.

Arms out, palms up, Loki opened his mouth to respond but was cut off by Thor's booming voice echoing through the golden hall.

"You coward!" Thor jabbed Loki in the elbow before ascending the stairs.

Loki glared at him while rubbing the sore joint furiously, and Thor bowed his head, hiding the tears.

"Thank Eir, she will live, Father," he said.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Odin's shoulders slumped. "I am greatly relieved to hear--"

"Her body will mend itself," Thor interrupted, and turning to sneer at Loki and Sigyn, he added, "but her hair is forever lost."

Thor's glower turned to a frown, and Loki rolled his eyes, looking away from his brother.

*Oh dear, how will she EVER go on now.*

She'd be as bald as those Midgardian birds. What were they called? Oh, that's right.

*Eagles.* Sif would be as bald as an eagle. He would have chuckled at the joke if he wouldn't get clocked in the jaw by his brother's massive fist for doing so.

Point was, he didn't kill anyone, yet he was still standing here in this useless tribunal as though he *had*. More importantly, it was Sif who attacked *him!* He really didn't see what all the fuss was about. It was just fucking *hair*. She was *alive*, was she not? Sigyn's quiet voice interrupted the silence then, saying exactly what he'd been thinking, and he winced even as she said it.

"At least she's alive," she said so low that her words were barely audible. Her eyes blew wide then.

*Oh my gods, did I say that out loud?*

Odin's head snapped up, his eyes aimed sharply at Sigyn, and he stomped Gungnir angrily.

"Silence, little *witch*."

Jaw clenching, Loki stepped in front of her instinctively. He'd be damned if he let that old prick do *anything* to her. His back to her front, he reached behind them and clutched the small of her back, pulling her into him.

She shivered in response. Was he using *his own body* as a living shield for *her*? It was a good thing he was holding her, because he was making her knees too weak to keep her standing. The only thing that could possibly distract her from the feel of his large hands on her was the look Odin was giving her, and the fact that he'd just called her a little witch. Okay, so "witch" wasn't *that* far of a stretch, but *little*? Just because she wasn't a damn *giant* like the rest of them? She wanted to scream that she wasn't little, only *normal*. She rolled her eyes.

*Asgardians.*

Swallowing back an ill-advised insult at his father for calling her a witch (he was nearly positive Odin meant *bitch*), Loki looked back and forth between the Allfather's face and his grip on the spear, silently willing that he would just dismiss them to their rooms without dinner or something. Fingers itching, he tightened his hold on her. The magic in his veins was screaming at him, begging to be used to protect her. He inhaled through his nose and out his mouth, trying to keep his emotions under control.

The king shifted his attention back to his youngest. "I will have my son explain his actions."

Setting his lips in a thin line, Loki lifted his eyes to meet Odin's.

“Father,” he paused, considering the best way to phrase it, “the only defense I have is that Sif attacked me first, and we all know of her military prowess.”

“You lie!” Thor growled and jumped down the steps, ready to punch the living daylights out of his brother.

*“Enough!”* the king shouted, stomping the spear again, the gesture halting the blow.

Loki stepped back to avoid the hit, and Sigyn grabbed his shoulders from behind to avoid tripping over the hem of her skirt. Fingers digging into the rough leather, she pressed her lips together to stop the embarrassing moan rising in her throat. Norns, he had more muscle tone under that armor than she'd realized.

Righting himself, Loki hissed, “Thor, was there ever a man who fought her and came out with naught but a scratch? I think not, brother. She misinterpreted my intentions, accusing me of trying to kill you! Her sword was at the ready before I even spoke to her. I only meant to protect myself, to deliver a blow that would end the fight!”

“Oh, you ended it alright!” Thor spat, his hands curling into fists at his sides.

With a frustrated sigh, Loki leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and grit his teeth.

“Gods *damn*, Thor, I wasn't trying to *kill* her! My aim was just off!”

“Oh, come *off* it,” his brother scoffed. “Your aim is impeccable. You are never *off*.”

Loki almost thanked him for the compliment but thought better of it. Now was not the time for quips. Bringing his head back down, he stared daggers at his brother.

“What would you have Father do to me, Thor? What justice is great enough for you?”

His hands were still on Sigyn's waist behind him, his grip tightening. She winced at the movement. Her sides would have finger shaped bruises by morning.

While he and Thor had a staring contest, Odin addressed her. “Stop hiding behind my son, girl. Are you a coward? What have you to say for your actions?”

Glaring, she bit the insides of her cheek.

*I'm not HIDING, he's HOLDING me here, you geriatric monster!*

She had the good sense not to say that out loud. Stepping around her protector who released her reluctantly, she held her head high.

“I feared Thor would kill Loki and simply lost control of my magic. I would never have *willingly* done that to Sif.”

As shameful and horrific as her actions had been, she didn't think she deserved this kind of treatment. She'd lost control momentarily. Sif. Was. Alive.

*Are we done now?*

She wanted to leave and get back to that *almost* kiss. Her eyes glazed over as she imagined his tongue in her mouth, and much to her horror, she moaned at the thought. He shifted somewhat, and she wondered if he was responding to the sound. Or maybe he could see the images in her head.

Thor shook his head. He wasn't sure what punishment fit the crime, but it looked as though his father was going to allow his little brother to get off with no more than a slap on the wrist. He hadn't seen what had transpired between Loki and Sif in the arena, but he refused to believe that *she* had provoked *him*.

*Surely*, she had a reason to fight him, though what the Hel would anger her to *that* extent, he had yet to find out. Just as he was about to remind his father that Sif was nearly killed at the hands of his brother and that Vanir witch, Odin's staff came to the ground.

"Loki, my son, you nearly killed a woman I love as a daughter. What justice would *you* have?" His eyebrow rose in question as he looked upon his youngest.

Loki hung his head to hide the roll of his eyes. This was ridiculous. Was this truly all because of Sif's stupid *hair*? Fine, then. If his father wanted to know how to discipline his own son, then he would tell him. Pursing his lips, he considered the options.

Banishment was out of the question. Sif had thrown the first punch, and he did not wish to leave Asgard *again*. He'd already been banished for three weeks (maybe two, he couldn't remember) earlier that year for positively *idiotic* reasons. Apparently, his father had a serious problem with snakes in his food. He didn't think that should have warranted three (ish) weeks in dull as fuck Alfheim. Honestly, he would have preferred Midgard. So, what could he do to return to his father's good graces?

*Wait...*

Was this punishment for Sigyn, too? What if Odin banished her from Asgard? Gods, please *no*. He racked his brain for something, *anything* that didn't involve separation from her. Then Thor's words ran through his mind.

*Her hair is forever lost.*

Smiling wide, his head snapped up.

"I would give her shining new tresses," he said plainly, as though it was that simple.

Thor scoffed. "What sort of *justice* is that? You restore her hair, and that's it? *All forgiven?!*"

Odin sighed and hung his head. His sons' incessant bickering would send him back into Odinsleep. At the sound of their father's exasperation, they clamped their mouths shut.

"Eir herself said it could not be done," the king reminded Loki. "How would my son do what Eir cannot?"

Eyebrows raising, Loki held his hands up. "Who fashioned Gungnir? Who wrought Mjölfnir? Can the same hands that crafted such weapons not weave a few locks of hair? The dwarves shall make the hair, and I shall travel to Niðavellir to retrieve it. All will be made right as rain." He ended his explanation with a shrug and a smirk.

Granted, even if his father agreed, it wouldn't be an *easy* journey by any means. Nomadic rock trolls roamed freely in Niðavellir, and they were fully capable of breaking even a prince of Asgard. That, and he was loath to beg Eitri, king of the dwarves, for a favor since they did not hold Loki in high regard, but it was his only option. Anything was preferable to banishment. Well, living out his days separated from Sigyn anywhere, even in Asgard, would be Hel. Was it rash to feel that way?

*Yes.*

And he cared not.

Odin seemed satisfied by the offer and nodded at him. "You will do this with four conditions." The king set his jaw, and his voice seemed to drop an octave. "You and this girl shall be stripped of your magic."

Never having heard of such a thing, Sigyn gaped at the old man. Her magic? Gone? *How?* She looked at Loki, hoping for some sort of clarification.

He groaned and ran a hand down his face. He hadn't thought of having their magic removed. Cringing, he eyed her with sympathy, wishing he could spare her from the experience. Having magic removed was like peeling off a layer of skin. Slow and *agonizing*.

She frowned back at him, and instinctively shrank into herself. Fear was written all over his face, as though he'd been through this before. Oh, this was going to *hurt*.

Odin snapped his fingers, and a servant came forward, setting down two gold chalices at his feet. The king then thrust his hand forward, and green light oozed from Loki's fingers, his eyes, his mouth, shimmering around him, bathing him in an eerie green glow, resistant to the departure from his body.

Nausea twisted his stomach painfully, and he retched dryly. Every joint screamed, bone against bone rubbing together without the seiðr filling the void between. He hitched forward, hands gripping his head, beads of sweat appearing on his brow as his insides writhed in pain. Sigyn, too, dropped to her knees as the black smoke was pulled from her body, dry hacking coughs escaping her throat.

The Allfather's fingers closed into a tight fist, and wrenching his arm back, the green and black mists shot forward into the two chalices. The servant immediately covered them with lids, and everyone could hear the muffled shrieking under the lids, as though their magic was tortured by the loss of their hosts.

Loki and Sigyn gathered their weakened bodies off the floor, and she had to stop herself from swearing at the king. She hated him in that moment but shouting "*fuck you!*" would have been positively idiotic.

"My second condition is that you shall be unarmed," Odin said.

Loki grit his teeth as a Crimson Hawk stepped forward and *stole* the dagger from his boot as well as the throwing knives from his waist.

The king groaned. Disciplining either of his sons was not his favorite task, even if his youngest thought it was.

"Thirdly, I will not provide payment for Eitri's services. You shall have to procure resources elsewhere. The final condition..."

He paused, turning his gaze on Sigyn, and her eyes widened, fearing his next words. What more was he going to do to her? All this for a *mistake*? It wasn't as though she'd laughed and tossed a lighted torch on Sif's body!

"The final condition," he continued, "is that, since you are so fond of this girl, my son, she shall accompany you on this quest, also unarmed."

Mouth falling open, Loki watched as the same soldier removed her quiver and bow. WHAT? No no no no no no, his father could not do this to him...to *her!*

She considered keeping her hidden dagger, but the soldier cleared his throat and pointed to her leg. The skirt had unfortunately fallen open again after she stood back up after having her magic taken. Grimacing from the pain caused by the lack of her magic, she bent down and unsheathed the knife and set it in his open hand, none too gently.

Loki held himself back from choking the soldier for staring at her leg. He settled for just glaring at the Hawk before returning his eyes to his father. Risking a step forward, now genuinely afraid after seeing her weapons seized from her, he held his hands out to the king.

"Please, Father, with no magic and no weapons, how are we to defend ourselves? How am I to protect her, if need be? What of the rock trolls? We will be outnumbered!"

His insides were positively boiling. Odin was sending them to their deaths! If she was lost to him, he would destroy *everything* in the nine. His father's voice echoed angrily throughout the room.



“Perhaps I should instead send her to Muspelheim. She does seem to love playing with *fire*.”

Sigyn felt the bile rise in her throat then. Muspelheim was home to fire demons and their king, Surtur. With their scorching fingers, she would know *true* torture. If anyone had told her that she could turn into a godsdamn damsel in distress from fear alone, she would have laughed in their faces, but sadly, that’s exactly what happened. Her vision blurred to black, eyes rolling back, and Loki caught her as she fell, pulling her limp body to him, one hand at her neck, the other wrapping around her waist.

He seethed, thankful, for the moment, that his magic had been stripped from him, lest he send out a burst toward the Protector of the Nine Realms. That would have most certainly earned him exile, and the term certainly wouldn’t have been as short as it had been previously.

He was nearly as frightened of his *reaction* to Odin’s threat to kill her as he was to the threat itself. What hold did this woman have on him that he should think to destroy the nine for her? And indeed, that was his intention as he held her unconscious body against his chest. His instinctive response was that, well, *yes*, he would. Nothing terrified him more.

Thor’s voice broke through the stunned silence. “Father, *no*.”

His earlier words, laced so with revenge, fled from his mind as he looked upon Loki holding Sigyn desperately, his green eyes glistening with tears. Voice softening, attuned to his brother’s pain, he spoke carefully, wary of Odin’s reaction.

“Surtur would surely kill her. Muspelheim is too harsh, Father. Niðavellir and having their magic stripped of them and rock trolls are enough.”

At his first son’s words, Odin relaxed, and Loki looked between his father and brother. He envied whatever it was that flowed between the two that allowed Thor to have such an effect on the Allfather. Was there so much love amongst them that he could honestly say anything to the old man and not fear the response? It would never be so for Loki. Pulling himself together, he nodded at his brother and bit back an angry sob. At least he had Frigga. He still had Frigga. His *mother* loved him.

*My mother loves me. My mother loves me. My mother loves me.*

He repeated the incantation in his mind until he was no longer aware of his surroundings, so lost in his musings he was.

Odin spoke firmly. “Make haste, my son. Your dwarves await you and your *maiden fair*.”

Waving them off, he frowned as his youngest bowed *slightly*, barely lowering his head. Sweeping her up, one arm under her knees, the other under her shoulders, Loki turned on his heels making his exit, head held high, the hawks in tow.

## ~JOURNEY TO NIÐAVELLIR~

“Prepare Sinir!” Loki growled as he neared the stables.

The hawks were still at his heels, watching him for any sudden move. Glaring at them, he set his jaw. As though he was foolish enough to further aggravate his father!

Stripped of his magic. Sigyn stripped of hers. No tangible weapons to aid them in a highly likely fight. Genuine fear crept in at the edges of his mind. She still lay limp and unconscious in his arms. He placed his ear to her lips, relaxing at the feel of her breath. A young stable hand approached him, the dark chocolate horse that had been gifted to him as a boy followed, pulled by the bit.

The boy bowed as he caught up to them. “Sinir, for you, Your Highness.”

Loki nodded as he lifted her, dead weight that she was, onto the saddle, and placing his boot in the stirrup, pulled himself up behind her. He gripped the reins and pulled them, silently commanding his horse to turn in the direction of the Bifrost, and at the click of his master’s tongue and the barely-there kick of his legs, Sinir neighed and took off at a full gallop, not slowing until they were upon Heimdall. Loki jumped down pulling his “maiden fair” (gods, his father was such a *dick* to call her that) with him, placing her feet on the ground but still holding on to her. Would she *ever* wake?

“Niðavellir.” It was curt and unkind, but he had no time to exchange pleasantries with Asgard's gatekeeper.

Loki stood at the eye of the bridge as it spun to life, and as the familiar gravity built quickly, pulling at his body, which was still wrapped around Sigyn, beams of light shot into space, dragging them with it. Twenty seconds later, when they landed in the dark and barren dwarf land, she clutched at his neck, gagging, and coughing. Somewhere along the gut-wrenching ride, she came to.

*...and NOT pleasantly.*

Doubling over, she spit out the extra saliva flooding her mouth. She hated vomiting (*who didn't?*) and doing it in front of Loki would be utterly humiliating.

Between retches, she shrieked, “No, no, no!”

Clamping his hand over her mouth (clearly not concerned that she might spew her guts right into it) and holding the back of her neck with the other, Loki shushed her, his eyes wide and nostrils flaring. He shook his head, and she nodded in silent understanding. How ironic that she trusted a trickster god with her life. There was not a doubt in her mind that he would not only kill for her but that he would die for her just as easily, no hesitation.

He released her, pushing a hand through his hair nervously. No magic, no daggers, no bow, no arrows. He wracked his brain for the solutions for all the “*what ifs*” running through his mind. The rock trolls had most certainly heard the Bifrost and her overly dramatic cries (*really? that upset over a little nausea?*) and would arrive soon. In other words, they needed to *run*.

Words were unnecessary, and Sigyn, comprehending their dire situation, grabbed his hand, their feet hitting the ground silent as the grave as they ran across the wild grass field. They switched places, him leading her in the direction of King Eitri’s dwelling when the earth suddenly quaked beneath them.

On all sides, trolls appeared, their thick towering bodies thundering toward the pair. He cursed as he pushed her behind him once again, and she spun so that her back was pushed up against his, his large hands gripping her waist, her hands clutching his. The trolls looked as though they would roast them on a spit over an open fire and eat them for supper.

His death grip on her did not loosen as the biggest of them, their leader, he assumed, circled them. He was caught in a staring contest with the mud-colored creature as he turned her slowly so that he continued to face the troll. Cringing at the nausea that was creeping back in at the sight of their revolting appearances, she turned around, crushing her face in between his shoulder blades. She felt weak and powerless, and it was unbearable.

Showing its teeth, the leader roared. “The dark prince of Asgard! The second son has come to visit us! Oh, but he’s brought us a gift, a very *enticing* gift.”

They all howled and laughed at his words. Glaring from underneath his brow, Loki sneered at the thing. He had no powers, *dammit*. What could he do? If he had his daggers, they’d all be dead within seconds. Only one option remained- his words. They didn’t call him Silvertongue for nothing.

“Don’t flatter yourself, troll. I do not *holiday* in Niðavellir,” he droned. “I desire only to speak with Eitri.”

The leader bared sharp pointed teeth at Loki and raised his axe. “I have a name, lesser one!”

Rolling his eyes, Loki scoffed. Lesser one? Really?

*Cretins.*

Talented actor (it was kind of like *lying*, right?) that he was, he not even so much as blinked at the threat. He smirked, one eyebrow rising imperceptibly, and bowing his head mockingly, he removed one hand from Sigyn’s waist and put it across his heart.

“My apologies.” After a beat of silence, he continued. “Perhaps you would like to share it with me. I very much love knowing the names of my victims.”

She shouldn't have been shocked when the creature inched back, shifting his weight from the front foot to the back foot. She shouldn't have been shocked that the thing lowered its weapon just that much. She shouldn't have been, but she was, and she silently marveled at his ability to manipulate and cause fear using only his words. Outnumbered he may have been, but he was hardly *outmatched*.

"I am called Hallsteinn, and you are trespassing," the leader growled, glaring at Loki before turning its perverse gaze on her, "and I will have that pretty thing behind you as your payment for sparing your life."

Sigyn cringed as Loki, seething, pulled her further into him.

*Like Hel you'll HAVE her, filthy mongrel.*

He gave an impressively convincing laugh and taunted the troll. "Great Hallsteinn, she would not go willingly, and you would most assuredly lose your head if you attempted force because she also possesses the magic that flows through my veins. And if she didn't kill you first, the hundred Crimson Hawks cloaked in shadow surrounding you surely would."

Her eyes widened, and she looked behind her for the Hawks. Rolling her eyes, she remembered they were alone. Goodness, he was so *convincing*. She pushed her face further into his back, reveling in the smell of leather and peppermint and woodsmoke.

*Master of Lies, indeed.*

If they made it out of that dreadful realm, she was going to show him a great deal more than just her fire magic. She listened, amazed, as the trolls' cautiously retreating steps rumbled the ground.

Not Hallsteinn, but one of its minions spoke. "You lie."

The leader shot an angry glare at it, and the other troll shrank into itself, lowering its head. Daggers continued to fly from Loki's eyes as the crooked grin played at the corner of his mouth.

"Try me," he said, then raised a finger and looked up and around as though listening for a pin to drop. "Can you not hear them? The seiðr-laced Asgardian steel of their blades being unsheathed? Can you not feel their steps behind you?"

His words were a knife, dipped in poison, held at the ready, waiting. The trolls looked behind them nervously. They may have been bigger than the famed soldiers, but they had neither the training nor the hawks' magical weapons. Hallsteinn looked questioningly at Loki, desperately wanting the confidence to call his bluff, but he merely raised an eyebrow, and the finger that he had raised, he pointed directly at the creature.

*"You'll be the first lamb to the slaughter."*

“Stand down!” Hallsteinn commanded and they obeyed, lowering their weapons.

Without any further words, they backed away until Loki and Sigyn were only specks in their eyes. Trusting no threat remained, the trolls turned their backs and ran to their caves. Rubbing her temples- oh, a *wretched* headache was brewing -she kept her voice low.

“I was sure we were done for. They were going to kill you and do gods only know *what* with me.”

She’d never felt so angry in all her life, not at the trolls, but Odin. He had removed her only weapons and sent her to a land of monsters. Her skin crawled at the memory of Hallsteinn’s gaze. She lurched forward, and Loki snaked a hand around her waist as she gagged *again*. How many times would she feel the urge to throw up in this wretched realm?

“You must think very little of me, Sigyn,” he whispered close to her ear, and *oh* how she wanted to forget their mission and just *do* things to him. Her gaze hovered over the length of his neck as he continued.

“Do you think me only capable of protecting you with magic and daggers? They would not have laid a finger on you,” he said, pulling her by the hand along the foot trail to King Eitri's mountain home.

He leaned down and whispered, “It’s not much further. See that arch at the base of the mountain about a hundred yards hence? That’s it. Come. The trolls won’t after us now.”

They separated and ran at full speed, crossing the distance in five seconds, and halted at the door of the dwarves’ home. Since they had been on the receiving end of his tricks before, the dwarves did not like him in the *slightest*, but the short creatures were his only option. He had to be on his best behavior. There was no going back now.

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Sigyn wished for her cloak as they were escorted down winding stone stairs. Under the mountain was cold, not Jotunheim cold, but most definitely colder than Vanaheim. She wondered how Loki, being Æsir, could breeze through the blustery cavern with not a hint of discomfort. Asgard was so *warm*. Well, usually it was. Was not the cold unpleasant to him? Leather layers aside, an Asgardian should feel at least a shiver, but he was acting as though he’d been raised on a *glacier*.

A pair of heavy stone doors opened before them, and he grabbed her hand as they were led down a long aisle. Dwarves lined the sides peering eerily at them. King Eitri and his wife

Egvanda sat, patiently waiting as the two foreigners came to the base of the thrones. Loki bowed slightly and Sigyn, following his example, gave a shallow curtsy.

“What business does Loki of Asgard have with the dwarves? Has your brother lost Mjölfnir? Surely Gungnir is not broken?”

He snorted at Eitri's sarcasm. “King Eitri, I’ve come to ask your craftsmen to fashion an entirely different treasure.”

He kept his tone respectful. He needed to get back to Asgard, and Heimdall wouldn’t open the Bifrost until that hair was in his hands. Eitri was his only option. He thought it over and over to remind himself to keep the trickster in him at bay. The king looked from Loki to Sigyn, questioning as to the purpose of her presence. The smile left Loki’s face and was replaced by a look of contrition. His pleading soulful green eyes would melt even a frost giant.

“We cannot return to Asgard without it. Lady Sigyn of Vanaheim and I request that you weave a crown of golden tresses for a beloved warrior, for she was severely burnt in a fight, and her hair will not grow back. The Allfather gave his express command. Either we give her new hair or face banishment.”

The dwarf king seemed to ponder over it as he stroked his long beard. “Golden tresses. Golden tresses. Hmm.”

He looked across his court questioningly and received a multitude of nods. “It shall be done.”

Relief flooded Sigyn’s body, but she retracted in an instant at his next words.

“For the price of two hundred gold pieces.”

Loki turned to her and whispered, grinning wryly. “Don’t suppose you’ve two hundred gold pieces hidden under those skirts somewhere. I’d *gladly* search for them.”

She pressed her lips together.

*Oh. Don’t. I. Wish,* she thought, imagining his hands roaming beneath her gown before returning to the moment at hand. They had to use their own means to pay for the locks, and the royal's endlessly deep pockets had been sewn shut temporarily. When the answer came to her, she could have face palmed right there. It was so *obvious*.

She smiled warmly at the King. “I believe my mother might be of help. Freya is in Vanaheim currently. Is there a way to communicate with her somehow?”

At her words, Queen Egvanda stood and turned to a smaller female. “Kindra? Daughter, would you fetch the looking glass, please? I shall have words with this Freya.”

The girl nodded, vanished, and returned within half a tick, holding a small piece of jagged cut glass, no bigger than a palm. Sigyn and Loki watched curiously (and impatiently) as the queen spoke inaudibly at the mirror. The queen paced behind the throne, shrugging and un-shrugging her shoulders and shaking and nodding her head.

Finally, after a small eternity, Egvanda returned to her throne and sat. Wondering what Freya had said, that same ridiculous nausea twisted Sigyn's stomach. She and her mother weren't exactly on good terms, and she feared that the woman had refused to pay the price.

"I've spoken with Freya. She will pay."

Loki relaxed the shoulders that had tensed during the mirror conversation and gave a reassuring squeeze to Sigyn's hand.

Queen Egvanda added, "In silver."

Eyes rolling, feet all but stomping the ground as a child throwing a temper tantrum, he cursed. Damn that daft fertility goddess! Did she wish to never set eyes on her daughter again?

Sigyn looked confused. "I do not understand. She will pay the same amount, but in silver?" This was not good.

Egvanda nodded. "Yes." Then, she turned to her husband who was glaring at the floor, a scowl written on his face. "What think you, my love?"

Looking up finally, he gave a nod. "Hair you've come for, hair you shall have, but for the price of naught, you shall have strands of *naught*."

King Eitri waved them off saying, "We require the night sky to craft the tresses. The night sky of a fortnight."

### ~LEAVING NIÐAVELLIR, TWO WEEKS LATER~

Much to their dismay, while waiting for the dwarves to work their magic, Loki and Sigyn were confined to separate guest chambers. That is, if one thought a dungeon-like cavern was comparable to chambers.

At some point during their sentence, a guard informed her that her mother's payment had been received. Since she was underground and had no reference for the time of day, she had scratched the days off on the wall with a small rock like some sort of medieval prisoner of war. On day fourteen, the door to her guest dungeon opened, and she jumped as Loki walked in.

Long shining raven black tresses were fanned out across his long fingers. Staring at him dazed, barely noticing the beautiful work of the dwarves in his hands, she fought the urge to run to him and jump in his arms after not seeing him for two weeks. Tying a silver ribbon around the strands, he placed them gently in a black wool satchel that was slung across his body. Looking back up at her, his usually sleek hair disheveled now and hanging in his eyes, he held his hand out to her. They climbed the winding stairs and upon reaching the world outside the mountain, she let out a series of heavy breaths and laughed, relieved.

“It was terribly suffocating down there.”

He said nothing, only nodding as he led her back to the Bifrost site. It was the long walk she remembered, though not fraught with rock trolls this time, thankfully. They came to the intricately burned pattern in the dirt, and showing the black strands, he looked up at the invisible Heimdall. As the rush of wind and light rained down on them, he wrapped his arms around her. He put his chin on her head, and she inhaled the cool scent of his neck before he whispered in her ear.

“Hold on to me.... and please don't retch on me.”

Deposited safely in the observatory twenty seconds later, he pulled her toward Sinir who stood underneath the arch of the doorway, his chocolate coat shining in the light of the rainbow bridge. Having been out cold during her first ride, she was pleased when he lifted her onto the saddle first, and then seated himself behind her, his arms reaching under hers to grip the reins. Her eyes blew wide. Dear gods...

*What. A. Man.*

With a click of his tongue and his heels into Sinir's hide, the horse galloped, full speed, to the palace.

### ~A PRIVATE HEALING ROOM IN ASGARD'S PALACE~

“I assure you, Sif, you are even more beautiful now. The *black*,” Thor paused, breathing heavily, admiring the dark locks in contrast to her fair skin, “it really suits you.”

His low whisper combined with the stroke of his hand across his friend's now fully healed face made her head spin. When Loki and that witch woman returned only seconds ago, Sif had, much to her embarrassment, wept with joy. She would have hair again! But then he pulled the horrid *ebony* mane from the satchel that hung from his body, and her happy tears were replaced with painful sobs when Eir placed the locks on her head, rooting themselves magically in the once destroyed follicles.



She touched the new strands hesitantly, shooting a glare at the pair of *evil* magic-wielders. The hair was as soft as feathers and just as shiny in appearance, but it looked wrong. However, the way Thor was looking at her, his eyes gleaming with desire, she concurred that they were, at least.... *Complimentary*.

The captain of the hawks and his lieutenant, the ones who escorted Loki and Sigyn to and from the bifrost, appeared at the door while Thor openly drooled over Sif. They spoke in unison.

“The Allfather will see Prince Loki and Lady Sigyn in the throne room.”

He rolled his eyes and placed a protective arm around her. Sighing heavily, she hung her head. Odin was the last person she wanted to see right then.

### ~THE THRONE ROOM~

Standing from his throne, the Allfather spoke plainly. “Huginn and Muninn have shown me your success in Niðavellir. Your weapons await you in your chambers. However, you were to obtain *golden* tresses. For the slight that has occurred against the Lady Sif, you will wait two fortnights before regaining your magic.”

Jaw dropping, Loki took a deep breath to calm the anger building beneath his skin. Other than a slight eye roll, Sigyn didn't even react. This old man being a complete dick was no surprise to her at this point.

Loki stepped forward. “Father, Sif is far more beautiful than she was before. Thor said it *himself*.”

“As I said,” his father raised a hand, cutting his son's defense off, “you shall regain your magic in two fortnights.”

Loki scoffed at the dismissal but said no more. Grabbing her hand, he turned to leave, dragging her with him.

As Odin watched them go, he wondered if perhaps an extra stipulation should be added. He imagined that they would easily find other ways to occupy themselves without magic. Why, what were two fortnights, when they could spend the time in the other's beds?

“In addition,” he said, and Loki turned slightly to eye his father over his shoulder.

*Good gods, what NOW?*

“In order to show your respect for your fellow warrior’s loss,” he continued, “during the remainder of your sentence, you and Lady Sigyn will have no contact with each other. This is the express command of your king. If you hold to these conditions, I will grant you the return of seiðr after that time. You have my word.” His spear hit the ground, then he returned to his throne.

Exchanging angry glances with her, Loki pulled away from Sigyn and stepped closer to his father.

“Why?! Father, we went to Niðavellir, did we not?! We faced *hundreds* of rock trolls! We spent a *fortnight* in the cold *dungeons* of the dwarf king’s home, and, might I add, we were *separated* from each other the entire time! And we returned with tresses that were-” he abruptly stopped speaking when the king pointed Gungnir at him.

Would the Allfather, *his* father, use the fatal weapon against his own flesh and blood? His heart ached within his chest, eyes glistening with fresh tears. Thor would never have found himself in such a position.

“*NO!*” It was his mother’s voice, ringing out from the pillar she’d concealed herself behind, that dared to scream at the king.

Odin spun to see his wife charging toward him and placing herself in front of her son.

“How dare you threaten our son with that!” she shouted. “Would you make good on it? Has he not done enough? Have they not done enough?!”

Loki suddenly feared for his mother. He’d never seen her speak to his father in such a manner, and he knew not what the king might do to her. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he pulled her into a hug, looking up at Odin accusingly as Frigga buried her face in his neck.

“I am *king*, and I will not tolerate such insolent words.” The old man’s eyes flashed with anger, but he sat down. No, he would never strike his son, even if he was so unlike him. He chided himself for the use of such empty threats.

Loki shook uncontrollably, barely controlled anger humming in his veins. Only his mother, because of her proximity, could have known it was there. There was no point in arguing with his father further. The old man had made up his mind, and there was nothing he could do to change it. He needed his magic back, and if this was the only way to get it back without further conflict, he would do it. He didn’t want to, but he could handle two additional fortnights.

“Father, we will submit to your ruling. Two fortnights apart, and then our magic shall be our own again.” He paused, and closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. “I ask only that you allow me one brief moment with her.” No way in Hel would his father allow it, but why not ask?

Frowning deeply, Odin just glared at him, and Loki set his jaw, nodded once and turned to get the Hel out of there.

Then his father spoke. *“One moment.”*

Loki's eyes blew wide in shock. He didn't know why his father was allowing it after all, but it didn't matter.

*Don't need to tell me twice.*

He descended the steps in one bound, closing the distance between himself and Sigyn in two seconds. Not giving a damn about his audience, his hands flew to her hair, pulling at the thick strands as he brought his mouth down on hers. Never had he felt so much heat in one kiss as she pulled on his collar, her mouth opening for him easily when his tongue grazed her bottom lip.

Moaning into his mouth, she let go of his collar and pushed up onto her toes, winding both arms around his neck. He dragged one hand down her back and wrapped his arm tightly around her ribs, holding her flush against him. She was floating, seeing stars, melting into him, completely oblivious to the onlookers who no doubt either wished they would get a room or, more disturbingly, were *enjoying* the view, when suddenly two hands gripped her shoulders and yanked her, rather painfully, away from him. He growled softly at the man who had pulled her away as she was ushered down the hall, looking back at him, lips swollen and bruised from their kiss.

Tears stung her eyes as the soldier leaned in, too close for comfort, and said, “My lady, he is not the only man in Asgard who is quite taken with you.” She glared as the warrior looked intensely at her.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Theoric, Captain of the Crimson Hawks.”

From the front of the throne room, Loki's jaw clenched. *Theoric.*

Well, at least now he knew the name of the man. Before he killed him.

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## CHAPTER 6: TIME SERVED

### ~ONE WEEK LATER, THE TRAINING FIELDS~

All eyes were on Sif as though she was a first-year warrior, and in truth, the woman descending the steps was, by all accounts, brand new. The Sif they remembered, the golden-haired double blade wielding soldier, was no more.

She ran a nervous hand through her new raven strands. Her brothers in arms stared at her shamelessly. It was as though the respect that had once shone in their eyes had been replaced by a far more carnal emotion. Maybe she was just reading into things. She hoped so.

Her hair was the obvious change. It was the outward representation of an entirely different Sif. She refused to show it, but her insides were softer. The muscles had healed, the bones had mended, the bleeding had stopped, but her heart felt weak.

She'd been released from the healing rooms with strict instructions to relax, rest inside (apparently the cold weather would delay the healing) and stay away from the training grounds for a week. Tired and weak as she felt, she'd revisited Eir three times over that week, convinced there was internal bleeding. Endlessly patient, the chief healer assured her each time that everything checked out.

But that didn't make sense! She should have felt better by now, yes? Her week of rest had been anything but. What was she supposed to do, just lay in bed agonizing over what was wrong with her? No, she couldn't do that. If she was going to ruminate, she could at least be up moving while she was doing it, so she'd sent her servant away for the week and taken to cleaning her chambers spotless on her own.

The fire had probably done the most damage, but it was Loki's dagger that plagued her thoughts, and as she alphabetized the books on her bookshelf on day six, she finally concluded that the dagger had been poisoned. It had to be! It seemed like something Loki would do, right? She'd even gone so far as to confide in Thor about her theory. When Thor had, with less patience than Eir, assured her that she was fine and that Loki's dagger was made of silver (*nothing more!*), she'd felt like an absolute fool. She hated that she'd been turned into this simpering neurotic mess. That was why it was imperative that she get back into the arena. Get back to normal. Train. Hard. Show all of them she was still strong. Still a fighter.

She wasn't on the ground more than ten seconds when Álfar came running up to her. He held his hands out to her, a welcoming smile stretched across his hard face, and she grasped them powerfully, hopefully with as much strength as he remembered.

“Lady Sif! It would appear you’ve made a full recovery and been graced with a raven mane in the process!”

She set her jaw. Of *course* the first thing out of his mouth would be about her hair. Unbelievable.

“Just to be safe, though,” he continued, “I think perhaps block five is the best place to start. There’s no need to push the boundaries.”

Her eyes went wide. *Block five?! The arena was fenced off into five sections, called blocks, and the furthest was for archers. As far as she was concerned, the bow was for little girls. It was for new soldiers who were too scared to put themselves into the fight.*

“Fine,” she said around a fake smile and made her way around the field.

So that was what they thought of her now. A weak little girl. Blowing out a breath, she seethed. *Loki* had done this to her. Her reputation was ruined. Everything she'd worked so hard to overcome, the scrutiny she'd faced as a woman warrior, the hard-won respect, just.... gone.

His conniving little smirk blazed against the backs of her eyelids every time she closed her eyes. She'd never seen him look more predatory than in that moment when he'd stabbed her. He'd always been *intense*, but she'd never seen him like that before. He had been hungry for a fight. Or a kill. Maybe.

Gritting her teeth, she shook her head and continued walking around the arena. Why had she fought him?! She should have just let Loki battle out his hatred with his brother. Thor was more than capable of taking care of himself! But no, she just *had* to get in the way. She'd been stabbed, broken, burned, and had lost her *stupid* hair, which thanks to Loki, yet again, was now black as night and had every man in this place looking at her like she was more woman than warrior.

*Goddess of War indeed.*

She heard Thor yell across the field as he knocked out a soldier with a solid right hook.

“Sif!”

She sighed. Not slowing her pace, she waved at him. Just what she needed. A man who literally *did* make her weak. Well, weak in the knees at least. He caught up to her in a flash of red and blond that made her heart speed up. He was dirt covered and sweating yet devastatingly good looking as always.

Breathing heavily, he smiled. “You’re on block five, yes?”

Rolling her eyes, she nodded. “Don't remind me. Álfar wants me to take it *slow*. It's so frustrating! I don't need any more time than I've already taken. He's treating me like a woman.”

Her scowl faded, and she gasped a little as he brushed the loose raven locks behind her ear, his hand landing at the nape of her neck, unmoving. He gave her a good once over and half grinned.

“Well, you *are* a woman.”

She found it hard to breathe with his large, rough, and utterly *masculine* hand at her neck. Why was he doing this to her? Here? Now? In front of *everyone*?! She steadied herself under his aqua gaze.

He furrowed his brow knowing that Sif would hate him in the next moment.

“And Álfar isn't to blame. *I* requested block five.”

Her eyes turned black, and she punched him right in the teeth. Okay, he'd expected to see anger, not *stars*! He blinked rapidly and spit the blood out of his mouth as she whispered angrily at him.

“Thor! You know how much I hate archery! Surely you do not think so little of my skills?!”

She wanted to pound him into the ground or, at least, give it her best shot. Thor was sending her to practice with *children*.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. “Sif, try to understand! I was only-”

She shrugged his hands off, and with a tight-lipped glare, she ran to block five.

### ~SAME DAY, NORTH CORRIDOR OF THE EAST WING OF THE PALACE~

One moment's peace. Was it too much to ask? Turning her head, Sigyn looked behind her shoulder. That Hawk was there. He was *always* there. She didn't like him one bit. What was his name again? She pinched the bridge of her nose trying to remember. *Th-* something, or, no, wait, yes, *Th-*

She searched her brain for the word but came up empty. She didn't appreciate being *stalked* and gave the soldier a good long glare as she proceeded to walk right into a pillar.

“*Shit!*”

She was *almost* sure it was her pride more than her body that had taken the blow. She rubbed the arm that had collided with the stone, her face burning as laughter echoed through the hall that led to her chambers.

“I’m amused that you can’t take your eyes off me, Lady Sigyn! That said, it might be more to your advantage to put your eyes forward whilst walking.”

Theoric chuckled as he steadied himself. He’d doubled over laughing when she’d smashed into the pillar. He’d thought to warn her of her impending collision, wanting to spare her pride, but the glare she’d cast in his direction had annoyed him. That vain arrogant dark prince had blinded her to anything but himself, apparently.

Composing herself, Sigyn smoothed her dress and brushed her hair out of her face. She thought to call out an insult, but she choked on the slur when a tall slender dark-haired figure appeared at the end of the hall behind what’s-his-name. She locked eyes with his, their bright emerald hue putting the finest evergreens of Vanaheim to shame. She couldn’t bear it. He was right there. Loki was *right there*. She turned quickly so they wouldn’t see her face crumple and walked away.

He watched miserably as she moved further and further down the hall before moving his eyes to the man who had become Sigyn’s unwanted shadow.

Theoric, sensing Loki was behind him, turned to face him and had the audacity to set his jaw and glare at the young royal.

“Your highness.” Theoric’s glare faltered as Loki inched closer.

He was built like Thor and *might* have bested Loki in a fist fight, but he was clearly nervous. There was a sheen of sweat on the hawk’s forehead, and Loki smirked. The man was wise to be nervous. He should be fucking *terrified*, and as Loki came within inches of him, he realized that was the case. Everything about the soldier screamed *fear*. Rapid breathing, flushed cheeks, neck veins pulsing too quickly, white knuckles. He had to give Theoric credit. At least this soldier knew a threat when he saw it. Loki lowered his chin, looking down at the man who stood shorter than him at only six feet.

“Tell me. What business does the captain of Odin’s hawks have with Sigyn? Do you not have a regiment to command?”

Slowing his breathing, Theoric did not break eye contact with the dark prince. What sort of captain would he be if he ran at the first sign of danger?

“My personal business is my own, Prince Loki.”

Eyes narrowing, Loki clasped his hands behind his back to stop himself from sending a painful blast of his magic into Theoric's chest. He was already in enough trouble with his father. No need to anger the old man further. Wait... oh. He'd forgotten that no magic flowed through his veins anyhow. He frowned at the thought.

*Well, never mind then.*

"That may be, captain," he said calmly, "but if your personal business has *anything* to do with her, then it is *my* business as well." When the man merely glared at him in response, Loki grit his teeth and closed his hand around Theoric's throat.

Eyes widening, his windpipe compressed, Theoric clawed at the hand holding his throat and struggled to grip his sword. But what could he possibly do? He couldn't slay an *Odinson!* And there was much greater power in Loki's grip than he'd imagined there would be. The warriors of Asgard had been very wrong regarding the second son as somehow lacking in strength. Not sure what to do, he stood, unmoving, hoping this decidedly *dark* prince would release him.

"Sigyn is *mine*. Do not forget it," Loki said, letting go and stepping back, glaring as the soldier gasped.

"I do not think the Allfather would take too kindly to the Hawks' captain *murdered*, Your Highness," Theoric croaked, his voice hoarse from having the air crushed out of it.

He gaped, not believing for one second that the prince wouldn't off him and wouldn't bat an eyelash in the process. Odin's youngest wasn't one to make empty threats. Gaze narrowing, Loki licked his teeth.

"Careful," he warned, his voice low and menacing, and stepped around the soldier, making his way down the hall.

The captain exhaled heavily, silently thanking the Norms that he would live to die another day.

### ~LATER THAT NIGHT~

Loki haunted Sigyn's thoughts, both conscious and unconscious, every second of the day. As much as it pained her to think of him since twenty excruciatingly long days stood between her and the younger prince, she couldn't help herself. Even if she *could* have somehow forgotten him, it was impossible because their paths crossed *constantly*.

Both she and he had, not surprisingly, been banned from using the arena during training hours, so she had to wait until the night meal concluded before shooting arrows. Even then,



a guard had to escort her. Somehow, Loki was *always* in the arena at the *exact* second she arrived, with his own personal guard.

She looked across the field now as she descended the steps, and yes, there he was. She was starting to think he was doing this on purpose, that maybe he just wanted to be able to keep his eyes on her. Even from a distance. Why else would he be out here instead of riding or reading or honing his magic skills? Oh... right. She rolled her eyes. She kept forgetting that neither of them had magic.

She could tell that he was avoiding her eyes, slinging dagger after dagger into practice dummies, his blades slashing through the fabric, whirls of sawdust and feathers tossed into the air, until nothing remained but shreds of burlap, his angry grunts and yells ringing in her ears. Doing her best to ignore the *bedroom worthy* sounds he was making, she set her arrow to the bow string, aimed, and released the arrow.

*Oh, for Hel's sake...*

She pulled a hand down her face. It didn't hit the target. Not by a long shot. It was embedded in the wooden door of the weapons shed twenty feet behind and five feet left of the target. Apparently good marksmanship was a lofty goal for her when the only man in the nine who she desperately wanted to touch but had been barred from doing so was a measly twenty yards away.

Letting out a frustrated yell, she threw her bow on the ground. She scowled at the damn thing before bending over to pick it up, wincing at the pain in her back. One of the worst things about losing her magic was the pain it caused. Actual physical pain. Maybe she wasn't hitting the targets because she was weaker.

She looked once more at Loki, watching as his knives hit the bullseye over and over and *over* again. Setting her jaw, she scoffed at his perfect aim, despite his lack of magic, too. Everything about him was just *unfair*. Ridiculous man.... he probably *was* in pain but wasn't letting it affect him. Well, it was affecting *her*, and it was also pissing her off.

The guard who'd escorted her, who was, thankfully, not *what's-his-name*, gave her a sympathetic look. She wasn't sure if the look was because she was the lousiest archer ever right now, or if it was due to the way she was looking longingly at Loki. Everything about her probably looked pathetic. Clearly there was no point in staying here. Frowning, she crossed archery practice off her list of things to bide her time.

## ~NEXT MORNING, THE DINING HALL~

Without his magic, Loki's entire schedule was thrown off. Normally he would have locked himself away in his chambers during the morning hours, lost in his spell books, logging his

efforts, and recording his conclusions. He rarely broke fast until well into the afternoon. Without his studies to distract him though, he experienced hunger pangs strong enough to drive him to the dining hall for the first meal. He understood now why Thor was so grumpy before he'd eaten his first meal.

Stomach growling so loudly it was almost comical, he hurried to the spread of fruits, pastries, breakfast meats, various teas, and hot mulled cider. His usual fare of half an apple would not suffice. Ignoring the surprised looks of the servants who were not accustomed to seeing him satiating himself so early, he filled a plate with ripe citrus and sampled the wild boar slices before piling several to the already stuffed plate and poured himself a cup of tea.

This was absurd. Forced separation from his magic and the woman he *ached for* was going to make him as fat as Volstagg. Striding to his mother, he sat down heavily onto the seat next to her, giving her hand a loving squeeze. The smile that spread across her face was as warm as summer, and he returned it with a much smaller version of his own.

"What an unexpected pleasure to see you in the dining hall at the start of the day, my son," she said, patting his leg.

His father nodded to him from the head of the table. "Perhaps having your magic locked up will put some meat on your ribs," he said, speaking with a mouthful of food, nearly incomprehensible, but the words reached his son's ears, nonetheless.

Loki ignored the comment as he shoved a forkful of the wild boar into his mouth and chased it with a swig of the tea, hissing when it burned his tongue.

"Our son's build is exactly as it should be," Frigga chided her husband, incredibly irritated for her son. "You wouldn't want him to turn into Volstagg, would you now?"

Odin merely shrugged at the question and continued eating as Loki finished off the meat in several bites and tossed his napkin on the plate.

"I'll take my leave now, if you'll excuse me." He pushed his chair back, the legs scraping loudly on the black marble tiles, and made for the doors.

Frigga tried to grab his arm. "Wait, Loki-"

Looking back at her, he mouthed "*it's fine*" as he walked backwards toward the exit. Before he could turn back around, he collided with a small body. Sighing heavily, he closed his eyes. He knew who it was before he turned, and even before he heard her mumble "*sorry*" to him. He turned to face her, his eyes raising to meet hers, and his heart dropped in his chest.

*Gods...*

She had dark circles under her eyes, and her hair wasn't even brushed, but she was *so* beautiful. He wanted to snake his arms around her waist and bury his face in her hair. He wanted to kiss her until she was gasping for breath. He wanted to do a great many things, and he even inched toward her for a second, but thought better of it and stopped. Stepping aside instead, he gave her a wide berth, eyeing his father, hoping that the accidental contact had not just earned them an extra fortnight of separation.

Odin hadn't raised his head and Frigga, seeing that her husband had been too focused on his food to notice, waved her son off. Shaking his head, he gave Sigyn a joyless smile and walked away, the smell of leather that trailed behind him giving her shivers.

### ~THAT NIGHT, THE ROYAL LIBRARY~

Sigyn was running out of things to fill her time with. The arena had proven fruitless, the gardens were icy and had been closed off after several drunken courtiers had slipped, and the dining hall had almost been disastrous. If Odin had seen Loki collide with her that morning, their sentence would have been lengthened for sure.

All she could do was count the days, which was becoming increasingly difficult due to her sleepless nights. Trapped in a haze of mindless palace wandering, everything was a blur. There was, thankfully, one place left that might lift the haze a little. Smiling hopefully, she opened the large doors to the library, and her ever present guard set up shop under the door frame, obviously keeping watch for the younger Odinson.

Walking the aisles, she idly scanned the spines for something entertaining. She *always* avoided the romance section. The last thing she needed was a reminder of what she was missing. She moved quickly through the fantasy section, having read most of those already. There were books on every trade, technique, animal, race, and realm. She even considered browsing through the Asgardian cookbooks. Maybe she could be of use in the kitchen during the next few weeks. She lovingly ran her fingers over the magic books, spell books, and journals of ancient sorcerers and sorceresses. She adored them, but like any *remotely* erotic stories, they would only remind her what she was missing.

Pulling her hand away, she sighed with a shrug and wandered to the history section. Maybe she could find a decent battle story to satiate her current state of anger- something with a good bit of blood and violence. She grabbed a random title and flipped through the pages quickly, looking for a legitimate *fight* scene. Her ears perked when she heard the guard speaking.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but I have orders to deny you access to the reading hall whilst Lady Sigyn browses."

She closed the book and peaked around the corner, her breath hitching at the sight of Loki, clad in his formal armor, standing in the doorway. She should have turned away. She should have spared herself from the “*look but don't touch*” nightmare she was in, but it was impossible to *not* look. He looked *stunning*. She heard him speak sharply to the guard.

“To *Hel* with your orders,” he growled.

She bit her lip. His voice had her stomach twisting in the *best* knots.

“The queen sent me to retrieve the record of the Alfheim dignitaries who are arriving within the hour,” he continued, “and it is absolutely *vital* that I return with it urgently. Now let me *pass*.”

Teeth bared, he shoved the guard out of his way, and she quickly concealed herself behind the shelves. She'd heard that there was a ceremony for several visiting Alfheim nobles that evening, and Loki's attendance was clearly required by the look of it. It was the first time she'd seen him in his formal armor, and she couldn't help but marvel at the gold metal, brown leather, green cape, and the horned helmet that he held at his side. She remained still, silently watching as he turned down the dusty aisle right before hers.

Pulling a heavy blue leather-bound book from the shelf, he turned on his heel and walked back down the aisle. Halfway to the end of the aisle, he stopped abruptly and turned, regal cape swirling with the movement, and setting his hand on the shelf, he peered through the books. When he found her eyes, he grinned crookedly at her.

Oh, if she couldn't just *melt right there*. She smiled back, moving some books aside to see him better. If she reached through the bookcase, she could just barely touch his hand. Would that be so bad? Who would even know? Pushing up on her toes, she looked up and around. She didn't see any ravens, and the guard was busy picking his nails. It didn't matter. As soon as she turned back to him, he was leaving in a flurry of green and gold.

Scowling, she sighed heavily and blew her hair out of her face. She couldn't do this any longer. She was miserable here. And she had been so close to throwing caution to the wind just then and giving in to her desires. Shit, if she *had* touched him, Odin would probably send her straight back to Vanaheim. Her birth realm certainly wasn't the worst place, but she didn't want to be *forced* to go back. Wait a minute....

The thought popped into her head just as she slapped her hand to her forehead. Of course! She could go home for the remainder of her probation! She'd have to be in disguise because.... well.... *never mind*, but she would be at liberty to do anything and everything she wanted to! She could catch up with her sister! Go riding with her and train without distraction!

Laughing out loud (probably sounding completely *insane* to her guard), she immediately shoved the war book back on the shelf and ran right past the guard and straight for her chambers to pack.

~HOURS LATER, MIDNIGHT, LEVENDEGRØN (SIGYN'S BIRTHPLACE), VANAHEIM~

The strange frozen state of Asgard had not reached Vanaheim, and Sigyn breathed in the luxuriously crisp but not painfully frigid air. The evergreen forest whispered in the cool wind that ruffled her cloak and loosened the raven strands that she'd taken to pinning back. Low grey clouds moved across the bright stars casting shadows across a sprawling wheat field. A few laborers trudged through the crop, gathering them into stalks as she walked along the dirt path to the brick and stone abode of her childhood. She pulled her hood lower over her face when they saw her.

Billowing clouds of smoke escaped the chimney and light shone from the windows. Thinking of a homemade meal, tea in front of a warm fire, followed by a hot relaxing bath and sleeping in her own bed, her walk turned into a run. She ascended the stone steps of her mother's house and knocked on the door. From the second story window above her head, Sigyn saw Freya stick her head out.

"Sigyn!" She hissed at her youngest daughter, nervously looking around the fields before disappearing from the window and reappearing at the door.

Sigyn reached forward to embrace her mother (like a good daughter would, right?), but when two hands pushed her back, she furrowed her brow in confusion.

Freya crossed her arms and tapped her foot impatiently. "What do you think you are doing? The queen contacted me about your impending arrival. Although I made it perfectly clear that you are *not* welcome in this house."

Narrowing her eyes, Sigyn pursed her lips in sudden anger. "Nice to see you, too, Mother. Why am I not allowed in my own house?"

A rush of cold air sent a shiver down her spine as sprinkles started to fall, and she looked past her mother into the warm fire lit room longingly. Was this woman truly going to leave her in the freezing rain? *Probably.*

Freya scoffed. "This is *my* house, not *yours*. You are no fool, daughter. At least, I didn't think you were. I'm sure you know why you are not welcome, but I shall tick off the *why nots* for you anyhow." She raised her hand and counted off. One finger, two fingers, three fingers, four fingers.

"One. Falling in love with the dark one, the second son, the evil *skinny* trickster. If you were going to fall for a prince, you could have at least picked the *heir*. He's more attractive anyhow. Two. Nearly burning a famed warrior to death. Three. Showing absolutely no self-control with your magic. And four. Forcing me to part with five hundred pieces of silver to pay for your idiotic mistake. You've done nothing but embarrass the name of

Freya, and you will not enter until you prove yourself worthy of this roof, of being my *daughter!*”

Before Sigyn could even register her mother’s words, the door was slammed in her face. And that was that. She couldn’t even find refuge in her home, or not *her* home, but Freya’s. She slung her travel satchels across her body once more across and trekked back up the dirt path. There was no way in all of Hel that she would return to Asgard. Not yet. So instead of stopping at the sight of the Bifrost, she turned in the direction of her favorite old hiding place. It would be a cold night for sleeping under the sprinkling clouds, but she could always pull out every garment in her bags and hide under them.

She climbed the steep stairs to the cliff’s peak. This had been her quiet perch ever since she was a small child. It hummed with memories. It was a haven, a sanctuary amidst the pressures of being one of Freya’s daughters. She cried herself to sleep many times on this cliff, and never had she shed more tears than when her mother told her that she was the daughter of a black-haired dwarf named Iwaldi. She should have expected no less considering her five-foot-six frame compared with Freya’s six feet. Turned out there had been no need for tears though. Iwaldi had shown her the care that her “mother” (um...not so much) had not. Freya did not like the man, and Sigyn assumed that had something to do with the unkindness that she endured growing up.

She sat with her back against her favorite tree and looked across the waterfall, beyond the far mountains at the moons. Her mind wandered to Asgard and therefore to Loki. She’d fallen for him absurdly fast, completely head over heels, and there was no going back now.

Her life could be separated into two parts now: Life before Loki, and life after Loki. Blowing into her hands, she laughed dryly thinking of his words at that first meal together- “*You are no match for me.*”

*HA!*

*Nothing* could be further from the truth.

She started at the sound of crunching pine needles, drawing her dagger from her thigh instinctively.

“*Easy, Sigyn!*” It was the voice of her older sister, Nanna, and it brought fresh tears to her eyes.

She pulled her sister into a warm hug, and it relieved the coldness in her bones instantly. Nanna rubbed her arms rapidly and blew into her hands.

“You must be freezing out here!”

Laughing, Sigyn's teeth chattered in response. “It’s not as cold as Asgard is right now.”

Her sister picked a few sprigs of grass from their roots and dropped them into Sigyn's hands where they turned into furry caterpillars. She smiled at their ticklish squirming. What simple, *harmless* magic her sister had.

"Asgard is usually warm, is it not?" Nanna asked, putting an arm around her and cuddling with her under her long cloak.

"Well, it's positively frigid there right now," Sigyn said, leaning into her sister. "Everyone's been complaining about it."

Snorting, Nanna rolled her eyes. "Those poor frigid immortals."

Nanna didn't hide her disdain for their sister race. The Vanir were immortal as well, just less arrogant. After all, Vanaheim wasn't golden, nor did it house the protector of the nine realms. Having lived in Asgard for the better part of a month, Sigyn understood, though still loathed, the typical *Æsir* ego.

Her sister whispered then, barely audible. "Iwaldi paid for the hair."

Eyes wide, Sigyn's head shot up. Her father had supplied the silver? So... Freya had accused her daughter of robbing silver from her when it didn't even belong to her in the first place? *Shocking*. She shook her head and laughed, a dry humorless sound.

"Of course, he did."

Nanna placed a kiss on her nose and stood offering her a hand. "He's downtown. He would not turn you away, sister, and no one will recognize you in the city like they will here. Go see him. Be warm. Eat some hot food and sleep in a comfortable bed. Don't stay here in the cold, *alone*."

Shrugging her shoulders because, once again, her own mother had let her down *royally*, Sigyn nodded.

"Alright."

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At the sound of knocking, Iwaldi hurried to his door.

"Who would call so late?" he grumbled, a deep frown wrinkling his forehead. Opening the door, he found the daughter he rarely saw soaking wet and shivering. "Sigyn?"

She nodded and offered a watery smile, suddenly aching to hug her father. She hadn't seen him in *ages*.

"Come in! Come in! Dear girl, come in out of that rain!"

Grabbing her shoulders, he pulled her into a hug, grimacing at the feel of cold wet clothes. He pushed her to the fireplace and took her wet cloak and satchels. Palms facing the fire, the smell of hot bread overwhelmed Sigyn's senses, and her stomach growled in response.

"Bread's freshly made, darling," he said over his shoulder as he went to the kitchen, "and I'm warming a pot of tea, too."

She hurried after him and nodded her thanks, grabbing a slice of the bread he offered. Taking a bite, her eyes rolled back, and she sighed happily.

"This is *heavenly*," she said as she chewed greedily. "Thank you, Father."

He gestured for her to sit and threw her a wool blanket.

"You're most welcome, Raven Girl," he said with a wink.

She'd forgotten that was his nickname for her, and it warmed her heart as much as the glowing fire. Raven Girl. She was his only daughter with black hair.

He brought over the whistling pot and a cup. "What shall it be. Peppermint is your favorite, yes?"

He poured the water over the tea leaves at her nod of approval, sifted the tea into a china cup, and set it on her saucer. Sniffing at the steam, she sighed. Yes, she loved the smell of peppermint.

...and woodsmoke.

...and leather.

"Your mother kicked you out, did she?" He didn't wait for her to respond. He knew Freya well enough. "Sugar?"

She scooped a spoonful from the bowl he pushed to her. "She had no need to kick me out seeing as how I did not get beyond the threshold."

"Damn that woman's temper," Iwaldi growled, lifting his own cup to blow on it. "When she asked for the gold, I said no because I truly had none, but when she said it was you who needed it, I had to do something. How could I not? So, I forked over the same amount in silver. It was all I had. I do wish you hadn't gotten yourself into such trouble, though. I



don't expect you to be an angel, sweetheart, but it seems that prince has affected your judgment for the worse." He looked her straight in the eyes, not a hint of jest in his tone.

"That boy is nothing but *trouble*, Raven Girl."

She stared at him blankly, unsure what to say. She knew he was right. Loki *was* a great deal of trouble. His mischief had a cruel edge, but how could anyone blame him? After all he'd put up with from Odin? From Thor and his friends? She empathized *greatly* with him even if no one else would. She didn't care that he tended to create chaos and trouble all around him.

*I don't care at ALL...*

*...because he's no more "trouble" than I am.*

### ~THREE WEEKS LATER, RETURN TO ASGARD~

She spent the remainder of her sentence in her father's company, and she found that the time went by rather quickly. She liked Iwaldi. She enjoyed watching him fashion iron into beautiful pieces of art, and he even let her try her hand at the forge. He had thousands of books, all of which she'd never read. He was also an incredible cook and threw parties to show off his talent. She loved the parties. After all, getting drunk with friends, even if they weren't *her* friends, was much more enjoyable than drinking alone.

Before she knew it, she was saying her farewells and departing for the Bifrost site. Her heart was pounding with nervous excitement as the beams of light rained down around her. Flying across the realms at near light speed gave her little time to consider what she would do upon seeing Loki.

Norns, she might not be able to stop herself from jumping on him on the spot. She should probably make sure they weren't in public. The way they behaved around each other was probably one of the most cringeworthy things a person could see. Yes, that kiss they shared in the throne room had been very public, and in front of his *parents* no less, but she had no intentions of *just* kissing him this time around.

It felt like an hour passed before she reached the gates of the frozen city, and when she did, it felt like *home*. She had no desire to return to Vanaheim. Not anymore. Asgard was her home now. People stared at her like she was completely mad as she ran through the icy bustling streets, but it was far too cold to simply walk. Why had no one brought her horse to the Bifrost? She was turning into a bloody *icicle*. Clearly her body had adjusted to the warmer weather of Vanaheim during her stay there, and it made Asgard feel even more

frigid than when she'd left. Oh, what she wouldn't give to have her magic right then. Fire beneath her skin would have been blissful.

She would have that fire again *today*. She felt almost drunk from being so happy, so happy that she would skip through the streets, if not for the two heavy satchels slung across her torso. Eventually she arrived at the palace and, surprisingly, did not collapse from exhaustion.

Grinning stupidly, she spotted the queen on her lofty balcony. The woman tossed a knowing smile at her and raised her arms, suddenly enveloped in black smoke.

Sigyn gaped, eyes wide with sheer joy as the dark mist flowed down the stone wall of the palace and slithered along the ground before stopping at the hem of her dress. She reached down and opened her palms to the smoke curling around her fingers, her heart starting to race as it sank into her pores. The sound that escaped her was highly inappropriate (there were children nearby!) but *damn*, it was like heaven had just descended on her as the magic rushed through her veins. Bonus: she was no longer freezing.

*OH BLESS.*

Breathing a sigh of relief, she stood back to her full height. Now there was only one thing left on her agenda for today. Chest heaving now that she was strengthened once more with her magic, she headed straight for Loki's chambers.

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Loki saw the Bifrost roar to life. He saw her running on foot down the bridge, no doubt freezing her tail off. Why the Hel didn't he arrange to have her horse waiting for her? He rolled his eyes. His brain was completely worthless after 20 days of sheer boredom. No matter now. He squinted to see her better. Damn, even with those bags strapped to her, she could run *fast*. Biting his lip, he smiled.

*Bet I can run faster.*

Turning from his balcony, he grabbed his tunic from the back of his desk chair (he couldn't very well go running through the palace shirtless, now could he?), and yanking it on, he walked quickly to the outer doors and threw them open. Abruptly, he collided with Thor on the other side of the door. Before he could give his most petulant eye roll, the man handed him a gold chalice topped with an elaborate gold lid. His brother's eyes were wet, and Loki was relieved to see forgiveness in those tears.

In all honesty, he hadn't been certain that his brother would forgive him for what he and Sigyn had done to Sif. This was just further proof that Thor would forgive him for *anything*. Tight-lipped, the brothers exchanged nods and grasped forearms before parting.

Closing his doors, Loki stepped back slowly into the room and placed the chalice gently on his desk. Carefully, he removed the lid and watched with relief as the green light ran, escaping from its small prison, into his outstretched fingers. The magic filled in every inch of his body, and his eyes slid shut as waves of euphoria rolled over him. Three sharp knocks on his door startled him, and he set his hands on his desk, taking slow breaths to calm his racing heart.

Running his hand through his hair, he turned around and slowly crossed the distance from his desk to the entryway. When he opened those doors, he felt the single most powerful emotion of his life. He refused to call it love. Nothing was as deadly as a broken heart, and *love* had a reputation for leaving behind a trail of *billions* of shattered, bloody bits and pieces of once beating vital organs.

*I don't need more DEADLY pain in my life, but I can't help myself.*

Sigyn stood on the other side of the door, grinning at him with a raised brow like the cat that got the canary. He smiled back, stepping aside to allow her entry, and closed the doors quietly as she walked further into his room. He kept his eyes on her back as he twisted the lock, watching her stop in the center of the room and spin around slowly, wide eyed, taking in her surroundings. As she removed her satchels and carefully set them down at her feet, it occurred to him then that this was her first time seeing his chambers.

He swallowed, realizing he never wanted her to *leave* his chambers. Gods damn, he was so screwed. This woman mattered to him. *Really* mattered. Oh, he was going to get hurt more than ever before, and there was no way out of it. His heart stopped when her eyes finally landed on him, looking him up and down.

Noting that he was clad in his casual clothes, she breathed a little faster. Leather breeches, boots, green tunic. All *extremely* easy to remove. Chewing her lip, she wondered if he'd forgone his more complex armor for just that purpose.

The fire under her skin started to burn as he approached her with careful steps, his gleaming emerald eyes darkening as they locked on hers. Her father's words repeated over and over in her mind- "*That boy is nothing but trouble. That boy is nothing but trouble. That boy is nothing but trouble. That boy is nothing but trouble. That boy is nothing but trouble*"-as he came toe to toe with her, reaching up to pull on the fastenings holding the straps of her dress together.

For a second, she considered bolting. It would be her last chance. *However*, when he lifted his hand to her face, running his thumb lightly over her cheekbone, all thoughts of leaving flew straight over the edge of the balcony on the other end of his room.

*Dear gods, I am not going anywhere without him. EVER.*

By *Hel* did she want him, and here she was, finally able to have him. She wasn't entirely sure that this was even reality. It was far too good to be real, but dream or not, she pressed her hands to his chest, which was barely covered by the low collar of his tunic. Then she slid her palms up to his collarbones and over his shoulders to cling to the nape of his neck. Groaning at the sensation (how could her hands feel *that* good?), he leaned down, his forehead meeting hers.

"Let us be true to one another," he said under his breath, his hands sliding from her face to her hair.

"For the world," he continued, pulling her hair from its side braid, "which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new, hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain."<sup>4</sup>

Oh gods, he was quoting poetry to her, and she was falling, falling so hard. Valhalla help her. She had no idea she was such a godsdamn sappy romantic. She should have been embarrassed for all but *literally* swooning, but with Loki looking at her like *this*, she didn't care. His hands slid down to her neck, over her shoulders, down her arms, and then took her hands in his.

"Asgard is no longer my home, Sig," he said, bringing her hands to his mouth, kissing each palm.

Her eyebrows raised. *Sig?* Had just given her a pet name? She *adored* it.

Bringing her hands up behind his neck, he returned his to her hair. "*You are.*"

Without another thought, her eyes slid closed, and she pulled his neck down, bringing their lips together. The fire in the hearth roared, sparks bursting from the bright green flames, and Fenrir, who they'd quite forgotten was in the room with them, jumped from the hearth rug and crawled under the bed.

*No going back now*, she mused, tugging Loki closer. He had crawled into her heart and was laboring away, building his home there.

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<sup>4</sup> Quote from "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold.

## CHAPTER 7: BLÓÐ SEIÐR

Heaven help her, her mind and body reeled as Loki pulled at the roots of her hair, angling her face up to his in a (literally) *heated* kiss while blindly walking her backward toward his bed. Truly, this man was creating more fire under her skin than her own damn *magic*.

Her back hit the bedpost, jarring her enough to make her yelp against his mouth, but with his (no joke) *tantalizing* tongue forcing her lips further apart, she barely felt the pain. Leaning further into him, she let go of his neck and dragged her hands down his torso, then pushed up the hem of his shirt.

She slid her hands under the fabric, pushing it higher, and kissing him harder as she exposed his stomach inch by inch. Taking the hint, he reached behind his neck, grabbed the back of his collar, and pulled away from her mouth just long enough to yank it over his head. Her jaw dropped at the view.

*Talk about a GOD.*

*...of mischief.*

She had *maybe* two seconds to gawk at his surprisingly broad shoulders and well-defined (but not *overly* so) chest, svelte waist, and the lean v of his hips before he crashed into her again, covering her gaping mouth with his. Kissing her as though he needed the air from *her* lungs, he slid his hands up her sides and gripped her just below her ribs, lifting her easily.

Without hesitation, she wrapped her legs around his waist, clinging to him as he climbed onto the fur covers of his bed. Licking into her mouth slowly, each roll of his tongue over hers moving *just that much* deeper, he dragged her with him closer to the expansive ebony headboard. After laying her head on one of many pillows, he propped himself up on his hands.

Leaning over her, his hair fell into his face as he marveled at the sight below him. Long dark locks splayed across the sleek fabric, she gazed up at him, her lips swollen and red from his kisses. Her fair chest and neck had turned just as pink as her cheeks. His already heavy breathing picked up as the wide straps that held the top of her dress together slid further and further open with each rise and fall of her chest. He swallowed thickly.

*Norns, how is this woman MINE?*

Could she be more *alluring*? She wasn't even half naked yet. He was absolutely going to lose his mind when he removed that gorgeous (but *awful*) garment obstructing his view.

Easing his weight down onto his elbows, he settled his still clothed hips between her thighs, biting his lip as he began a slow grind against her, the friction increasing the pressure in his trousers tenfold. He snaked one hand underneath her neck, threading his fingers up into her hair, and as he lowered his face to hers, she leaned up, meeting his lips halfway. Head tilting, he opened his mouth, groaning as she dipped her tongue under his over and over at a languid pace that turned more than a little frantic when he tightened his grip on her hair.

Not that he was counting the seconds, but that *one* kiss must have lasted five minutes. Reluctantly pulling away to catch his breath, he continued slowly rolling his hips between her legs, then trailed a slow line of kisses along her jaw, the tip of his tongue darting out, just barely grazing the hypersensitive pulse point on her neck before closing his lips over her skin. She moaned loudly in response, her hand flying up to the back of his head, all but ripping his hair out of the roots while he worked his way down her throat. Writhing under him, she scraped the black nails of her other hand down the lean muscles of his back.

*"Fuck,"* he hissed. Sig had *talons*.

Face still buried in her throat, he let go of her hair, and fingers splayed, he slid his hand down the middle of her chest. Her neck was *so* soft, and it smelled impossibly good, but he needed to *see* her, so he pulled away and sat up on his knees. Smoothing his hands under the top of her dress, getting his first feel of her breasts (*gods*), he pushed the straps over her shoulders, and groaned at the sight. Heaven help him...

*I've never been this hard in my life.*

His darkened green eyes roved over her newly exposed skin. She was perfect. What luck to find a woman with a body as gorgeous as her face. He licked his lips, *aching* to see the rest, so he grabbed the top of her dress that was now bunched around her waist, and tried to slide it down over her hips. Dammit- the thing was too tight. Jaw clenched, he tried wiggling it, but even with her arching up a bit to help him, it wouldn't budge. Growing frustrated (there must be a hidden tie *somewhere*), he growled and ripped the seams apart, the skirt splitting below.

"The Hel?" she lifted her head, scoffing at the ruining of her favorite dress, but then he moved down, putting his head between her thighs, and suddenly she didn't give a damn about the stupid garment.

Dropping her head back onto the pillow, she moaned, eyes rolling back. "Oh *gods...*"

She could have cried from relief in that moment because what Loki was doing to her was beyond anything she'd ever experienced, and it was only his *first* try with her. Norns, he deserved a trophy for this. He *had* to be reading her mind. He was just too good at this. Legs shaking, she blindly reached down to grab the back of his neck, pulling him impossibly closer.

Staring intensely at her from under his brow, he slid his tongue over her in achingly slow strokes. He held her rolling hips steady, watching her neck become taut, her head arching back into the pillow and biting her lip. He groaned into her skin, eyes sliding shut, *loving* the feel of her fingers threading through his hair, her nails dragging over his scalp.

He knew she was close, and that she would think he was positively *cruel* if he stopped now, but no way in Hel would he let her finish like this, not just yet. No doubt it was misplaced masculine pride, but he wanted to be inside her the first time she came in *his* bed. After that, he would happily bring her back to that peak with only his mouth over and over. Reaching behind his neck, he pulled her hands off him and lifted his head, sliding back off the bed.

Unable to form coherent thoughts, she sobbed internally (*no no NO, wait!*) at the loss. He'd left her positively *aching* now, and she sat up, damn near ready to slap him for it.

She stopped short, keening his name softly when she saw him unlacing his trousers, the grin on his face positively *evil*. Removing his boots and tossing them on the ground with a heavy thud, his eyes stayed on hers. His damp hair clung to his forehead, and he exhaled through his mouth as he pushed his trousers down, smoothly stepping out of them. Gulping, she stared shamelessly when he walked back to the bed and set a knee on the mattress. She pulled her bottom lip through her teeth. He was...um...*blessed*.

Her skin burned as he crawled up her body, nestling his narrow hips between her thighs, instantly pushing into her in one smooth stroke. He stayed there, unmoving, a deep groan rumbling in his throat.

"Sig, do *not* move."

She was too fucking *tight*, better than he could have imagined, and *damn* had he imagined. The thought of her naked underneath him had been on loop in his head for nearly two months now, and here he was, finally, her toned smooth legs encircling him. He was plenty experienced in bed, but it hadn't been with anyone significant. However, Sig was a different story altogether, and if he didn't calm himself, he would never last.

Well, wasn't this just *brilliant*. He'd devolved into a teen-aged boy in the span of two seconds. With a vice-like grip on her as she struggled to remain still beneath him, he cupped the back of her head, kissing her senseless.

"Loki, *please*," she rasped against his lips.

Hearing his name catch in her throat was like having his heart squeezed too tight. No one had ever said his name like *that*, with that level of desperation. He still could use another minute to gather himself, to build up some godsdamn stamina, but the tone of her voice shut down his resolve, replacing it with unbearable impatience. Arching his back, he pulled halfway out, then slowly rolled his hips forward, burying himself to the hilt again, her

resulting moan tickling his ears. Eyes roving over her face, he settled into a steady rhythm, one long lean arm sliding under her to tilt her up.

“Oh my *gods*... Sig,” he breathed.

She clung to his neck and shoulders, both overwhelmed by and adoring his weight on top of her. The way he held her, keeping her body at an inclined angle...*gods*, he was hitting places that no man before him had even come *close* to. He was deep. Almost too deep. The pressure was *intense*, straddling the thin line between pain and pleasure, and it was incredible. When he dropped his mouth to hers again, it truly felt like every inch of her body started *singing*.

Driving into her deep and slow, he licked her plump bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth. When she pulled his hair, moaning his name in response, he bit down...maybe a little too hard. She hissed, a bit of blood seeping from her split lip. His pace faltered, becoming a bit erratic, and he licked the little wound he'd created. Eyes narrowed, she bit back, pulling his lip between her teeth, and damn did it *hurt*. He bled, but he didn't care. She'd already bloodied up his back.

Intense heat enveloped them, her fire escaping from under her skin, the flames in the hearth burning too hot, and she had a moment of panic. Shit, was her magic going to kill them? Not a bad way to go, if she must. She was so close, *so* close- her legs shaking as her body tightened around him, gripping him harder and harder. Oh gods, oh gods...

*There.*

Her jaw dropped, and she let out a near silent cry, letting her head fall back. Biting his lip, Loki's eyes slid shut while the impossibly tight sensation turned to rhythmic pulses around him. As those *sublime* pulses dissipated, he reached under her neck to pull her head back up from the pillow, then closed his mouth over hers and buried himself harder and deeper for another ten seconds or so. Sweating and gritting his teeth, he finished with a sharp hiss against her lips, his fingers digging into her thighs.

“Fucking Hel,” he gasped, all but collapsing on her, attempting to steady his breathing.

After a moment, he realized he was probably crushing her, so he propped himself up on his elbows. Fingers twisting in her hair, his eyes locked on hers.

*NOW she's mine.*

He knew it was ridiculously possessive- a bit of a character flaw, for certain -but he couldn't help it. She was her own person, not a possession for him to do with as he pleased, but... *gods*. He just wanted to keep her forever. He was falling. Falling so *hard*. She slid her hands from his hips, up his ribs, down his arms, and finally entwined her fingers with his. Beneath his chest, he felt her heart slow to match his as he ran his thumb over her red stained mouth.



“Your lip bleeds still, Sig. I’m sorry for biting you.”

She lifted her head to kiss him. “No, you’re *not*, but it’s fine. I heal fast. I can feel you in me.”

He looked down at their still joined hips and back up to her with a wry smile. Rolling her eyes, she bumped his nose with hers.

“That isn’t what I meant.”

He ran the tip of his finger up her throat and along her jaw.

“I know exactly what you meant,” he said with a smile.

“I felt for a moment that I *became* you,” she mused out loud, furrowing her brow.

He nodded in understanding, and ran his finger along her jaw, tracing the curve of her chin up to her mouth. He held the finger up, now red, and looking at her still, licked it clean.

“It’s called blóð seiðr, darling.”

Her mouth formed an 'o' and she gazed at the beautiful lofty ceiling, unseeing.

*Blood magic.*

That tiny little bite had been a magic ritual? A blood *bond*. Well, that explained why, despite it being their first time together, the sex was *fantastic*—the best of her life. Normally, it took *lots* of practice for a man to learn her body well enough to push her over the edge. But with Loki? Norns, she’d been able to feel his pleasure just as surely as she’d felt her own.

*Wait...*

Did this mean that she would now feel his *pain* as well? Had they just woven themselves so tightly together that only *death* could cut them apart? Did she even want to be cut from him?

*Uh...NO.*

She most certainly did *not* want to be cut from him. He was still seated in her, and she’d never felt so complete and happy in her life.

*By Hel, I am so in love with him.*

In that instant, he dropped his mouth to hers and murmured her name against her lips. It was the most beautiful sound she’d ever heard.

## ~THE KING'S QUARTERS~

Seated on a plush red and gold sofa in front of the huge fireplace in Odin's bedchamber, Frigga stared into the flames, feeling more than a little nervous. Her husband had called for her, and it was odd for him to do so this late in the day. It was near time for the night meal. He was going to tell her something she didn't want to hear. She could feel it. He leaned forward on his chair across from her, elbows on his knees.

"I've set a date for the coronation," he said plainly, as though it were a simple matter, with no weight whatsoever.

Her heart dropped into her stomach as surely as her face fell. It shouldn't hurt to hear those words. After all, the coronation would be a joyful occasion.

*For Thor.*

Covering her mouth with her hand, she blinked back tears and hung her head.

"Oh, Loki," she said under her breath.

Her son would be crushed. They'd all known the day would come when Thor would be crowned king, but her youngest had longed for the throne, or at least he'd longed for the favor that had been shown to his older brother, since he was a boy.

Shaking his head, Odin rolled his eyes. "You dote on him far too much, Frigga. You forget that you have *two* sons."

Incredulous, she scoffed and pushed up from the sofa, her blue eyes narrowed to slits.

"I forget? How can *you* say such a thing? You should look in the mirror!"

"Frigga—"

"I am quite aware how many offspring we have, Odin," she snapped, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "A mother's love for her son cannot be outmatched," she continued. "I assure you, husband, that I love Thor and Loki *equally*. I also know that *you* once told Loki he was born to be a king. This will break his heart! Have you no pity at all?"

The memory of the small pink baby with a black tuft of hair and green smiling eyes sliced through her heart. She'd loved Loki instantly just as surely as he'd loved her, wrapping his tiny hand around her finger.

"You are twisting my words, Frigga, and you *know* it. You know as well as I do that that was not a lie," Odin said, rising to his feet, angry at her clear preference for his youngest,

“but Loki cannot sit on the throne of Asgard, and you, of all people, know why. There is nothing left to discuss other than the arrangements for *Thor's* coronation.”

Without uttering a goodbye, she marched straight to the doors, the face of a black haired wide-eyed little boy stealing a bouquet of flowers for her pulling a painful sob from her throat once she was in the hall.

### ~BEFORE DAWN THE NEXT MORNING, LOKI'S CHAMBERS~

Loki shot upright, drenched in a cold sweat and shaking, pulling his body from Sigyn, who was still asleep next to him. Fenrir came out from his hiding place beneath the bed, concerned for his master, and Loki flinched, nearly falling off the bed at the sight of the wolf before remembering where he was.

His chest heaved, and bending forward, he put his face in his hands, his body convulsing with quiet sobs as his mind replayed the terrifying images it had concocted and strung together in arguably the worst “fairytale” dream of all time...

*\*\*\*The moons of Asgard shone on Loki and Sigyn, their cold skin gleaming blue in the moonlight, as they panted into each other's mouths. He moved within her, burning her back against the snow-covered stone beneath her. Wincing at the friction, she arched into him, away from the frozen ground.*

*His body offered no sanctuary from the painful cold, and she choked on a cry as his skin darkened to a deep royal blue. He gently brushed off the tiny frozen tears on her cheek, his teeth chattering against hers as the sharp black icicles that were locks of his raven hair fell in clumps onto her face, shattering on contact. He screamed into her mouth as each of his cold limbs ceased moving, bones becoming ice.*

*She wanted to rip herself away from him, but his frozen body was a shackle. Pain twisting every nerve ending, she pushed and pulled against his ice encrusted frame. Her pale crystallized skin burned, black smoke swirling beneath its thin surface.*

*It started as a small opening, a rip in the skin below her belly button, where Loki's ice had trapped her against him, billows of onyx mist escaping through the wound as she writhed in pain, her body heating beyond a bearable temperature. Her body melted the frozen prince, his ice*

*becoming nothing more than cold water as the dark flames encircled him, burning his cold blue flesh. The whites of his eyes, the green irises, and black pupils, became hot (too hot) and burned red.*

*Hundreds of ravens suddenly appeared circling and cawing loudly overhead. Pulling her hands from the back of his head, she covered her ears. His eyes, wide with fear, followed the birds as he came to his knees pulling her up with him.*

*Menacing growls then pierced through the birds' incessant crying. They stood to their feet, his magic enveloping and protecting them from not only the cold, but from the dark creatures peering through the trees. Wolves, salivating with hunger, stalked them on all sides.*

*Without warning, the ravens dove for her, swirling around her, and she screamed, their beaks clamping onto her, their sharp talons piercing her skin. He tried to yell for her, but no sound escaped his mouth as the ravens took her into the snow filled clouds, his silent cry cut off by powerful jaws chomping into his leg.*

*He kicked the black canine and reached for the dagger that should have been, but was not, in his boot. Looking up, he saw bared fangs. Twenty of them, at least, snarled and snapped at his ankles, and as they launched themselves at him, he found his voice, his torturous cries ringing in his ears. \*\*\**

The nightmare had been too real. Fenrir pushed his muzzle into Loki's hair, earning a weak pat on his furry head, and convinced that Loki was fine, he ran to the balcony, jumped over, landing solidly in the garden below, and ran off in the direction of the forest, presumably, to find a small animal to eat.

Sigyn shifted, opening her eyes slowly and ran a hand through her hair and over her face. Breathing a heavy sigh of relief that she was awake, she sighed. Loki had been in her dream, and he had changed. He'd become ice. His eyes had turned red and his skin, blue. He'd looked *Jotun*, of all things.

Ravens had then wrenched her from his arms, and she'd watched wolves kill him. She didn't want to know why she would dream such a thing and thanked the Norns silently that she didn't have the gift of foresight, at least she didn't think she had that gift. Well after that dream, she certainly hoped not. It was probably just a healthy fear of losing a loved one that had caused the nightmare. Or maybe she'd eaten something rotten. Wrinkling her nose, she shrugged it off. She wasn't about to let the hair-raising dream pull her down from the high Loki had given her.

Wanting to hold him, she started to reach across the sheets. She'd barely moved an inch when he was suddenly on top of her, his large, cold hands grabbing her face. His warm mouth covered hers, kissing her desperately, as though she'd just come back from the dead.

"You're here," he whispered against her mouth, his voice hoarse.

Kissing her mouth, her chin, her jaw, her neck, he wrapped his arms around her ribs, crushing the air out of her lungs. She kissed him back with equal need, bringing her thighs up to cradle his hips. This was the way to wake up. But why did his kisses seem different? She felt more fear from him than passion. And what was wrong with his voice? As he came back up from her neck to kiss her mouth, she could feel his wet cheeks. Had he been crying? She brought her hands to his face, running her thumbs along his cheekbones. Yes, he'd been crying.

It took her a moment to realize he'd had the same dream thanks to their new blood bond, and clearly it had rattled him more than her. His reaction was alarming, and she could hardly just shrug off the dream *now*. As he continued kissing her, she deconstructed the dream as best she could. She'd seen Huginn and Muninn flying around earlier. That explained the ravens. The wolves had shown up, without a doubt, because Fenrir had crawled under the bed. Why the Hel had her stomach been ripped open, though? And why would Loki have injured her? Then she'd been pulled from Loki? She was in control of her own actions, and no one could pull her away from him. She would *never* leave him. But what if...

*Someone takes him from me.*

Eyes blowing wide, fear reared its ugly head at the thought. *No*. It was just a stupid dream. It meant nothing. He was just overreacting.

"I can't bear the thought of losing you, Sig," he muttered into her hair, his hands moving from her waist to her hips, down her thighs and back up.

She wasn't just a bedmate. She was a soulmate (if there was such a thing). She meant more to him than anything in the nine, and she could be gone in an instant, leaving him broken and hollow. Seeing her picked up by those ravens, it had felt as though *he* was falling from *her*, more than her being taken from him. It felt so *real*, and it had shaken him to his core. He was behaving as though he was in love with her, and that was more terrifying than the nightmare. As he pushed into her again, he clamped his eyes shut at the incredible sensation in both his body and his heart.

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## CHAPTER 8: IT WAS ALWAYS YOU, LOKI (IT WAS NEVER YOU)

### ~THREE HOURS LATER, AFTER SUNRISE, LOKI'S CHAMBERS~

Sigyn never considered sleeping in a man's arms to be comfortable. It was always too hot, or too tight of a hold, keeping her from shifting how she wanted to. Without fail, she had to shove the man away every time, which then led to him (whoever he was) hogging all the covers. That of course left her positively miserable and *freezing*.

However, Loki's arms, long and lean and so wonderfully *cool* to the touch, had given her the best rest of her life (creepy nightmare not included). Lying on her side, she sighed happily and sank back into his chest, her fingers trailing across the prominent vein of his forearm that was draped over her. This is how she wanted to wake up every day for the rest of her days, however long that might be.

Eyes fluttering open, it took Loki a second to remember he wasn't alone in his bed, but once he did, he smiled and pulled her further into him.

"Is it morning already, woman," he groaned and kissed her hair, burying his nose in its clean citrus smell.

Inhaling deeply, he noticed a hint of something else, something smoky, in the scent of her hair as well. Pursing his lips, his unseeing gaze wandered up to the ceiling, trying to place the scent. To his recollection, she hadn't smelled like smoke ever before, unless she was using her magic, of course. No, she'd always smelled like some wonderful mix of tangerine and lemon, maybe the *slightest* dash of apple as well. She *literally* smelled like something he wanted to eat. He smirked at the thought.

It clicked then what the new scent was, and his eyes went wide. Oh god, she smelled like *his* bedsheets. It was the smell of his own soap, the fragrance he'd picked out years ago at the harvest market. Smoked Winter Mint. That was the name of it. He'd loved it so much that he'd bought the entire supply and paid extra for the vendor to sell that fragrance to him alone. A huge smile spread across his face, and he bit his lip. The possessive part of him was overjoyed.

"*Is it morning already, woman,*" she mocked his voice and elbowed him in his ribs. His chest rumbled with a small laugh, despite the pain from the jab. "I think I've earned a slightly more affectionate term than just *woman*. Do you call Fenrir *dog*?"

"Heavens no," Loki said, faking a scoff as she shifted under his arm to face him, the crooked grin on her face making him want to bite her lip again. "I love him far too much to call him something so *base*."

She opened her mouth to make some quip about him loving his wolf more than her, but thinking better of it, she clamped her mouth shut.

“I believe he jumped over the ledge of your balcony hours ago,” she said, changing the subject as she played with the few strands of hair that peaked out from behind Loki's ear.

“Did he? During which round, I wonder,” he said, pulling her flush against him and smiling. “We went so many that the memory escaped me. You just couldn't get enough of me.”

“So smug,” she said, rolling her eyes at his playful smile and smacking his shoulder.

She had to concede that he did have a point, though. She most certainly could *not* get enough of him. But it was disturbing to think of Fenrir in the same room when they were doing *that*. Hopefully, his paws had been over his ears. Poor thing.

“Oh, dear gods, was he hiding under our bed the whole time? I'm glad I didn't realize that at the time,” she said, cringing at the thought.

He raised an eyebrow and smirked. “*Our* bed?”

Face reddening, she cleared her throat. “I meant to say *your* bed,” she corrected herself, looking away from his suddenly too intense green eyes. “It was an honest slip.”

Cupping the back of her head, he tangled his fingers in her hair. Look at her, blushing like that. As though he wouldn't want her forever in his bed, in *their* bed.

“Look at me, Sig,” he whispered, and she reluctantly moved her eyes back to meet his. “This *is* our bed. What's mine is yours now.”

The grey green of her eyes shined a bit more, and she leaned in to kiss him, his eyelids sliding shut at the idea of her lips on his first thing in the morning. By the *Norns*, did he love this woman.

The thought had barely come into his head when he felt her eyes on him, her mouth still suddenly. Pulling away, he knew she'd heard his silent admission, or maybe she'd *felt* it? He wasn't exactly sure how the blood bond worked. He built a wall in his mind, stone by stone, slathering mortar between, blocking her from the *impossible to stop* thoughts of love running through his head. He felt her bristle next to him, as though she knew he was keeping her out on purpose. Smart woman. Yet another thing to love about her. He rolled his eyes as his heart surged with the emotion *again*.

*Damn. It.*

He laid his head back on his pillow, closed his eyes, and whispered, “Do you love me?”

He knew the answer. It wasn't as though she'd been hiding her thoughts like he had. He just wanted to hear her *say* it.

Eyes roving over the beautifully sculpted features of his face, Sigyn took a breath.

"Yes," she answered, her voice catching on the word.

*From the moment I first saw you.*

Saying nothing, he opened his eyes, turned his head sideways and just stared at her. She swallowed and looked away, focusing on the chandelier above his bed. Being stabbed probably would've hurt less than the deafening silence. Apparently an "*I love you, too*" was too much to ask of him. Unbelievable. She pushed up, pulling the sheets up over her breasts, suddenly feeling overexposed. Maybe now was the time to leave. She'd had no intentions of leaving at all, but this was really starting to hurt, and the tears were building. And if she was going to cry, it was *not* going to be in front of him.

Before she could scoot off the bed, his hand landed on her shoulder, and he sat up beside her. He could hear her quarreling with herself over whether to leave, and he absolutely would *not* let her leave.

Before he could stop himself, he asked, "Have there been others?"

He rolled his eyes. What a *ridiculous* thing to ask her. Turning her head, she looked at him over her shoulder.

"Other what?" she asked, one eyebrow raised as she sucked in her cheeks.

She could have guessed what he was asking, but she was somewhat amused by how pink his cheeks had gone and wanted him to clarify *out loud* what "others" he was referring to. A little embarrassment would do him well.

Loki knew it was none of his concern, of no consequence, but he wanted to know, and frowning because there was no way to get around this, he blew out a breath.

"Have you been with any other men?" he asked, and closing his eyes tight, he dropped his head to her shoulder, adding, "... sexually?"

Honestly, he could have facepalmed right then. He'd said it *wrong*, and now he sounded like an absolute fool. *Of course*, at her age, she'd had sex with other men, but he wanted to know if she'd been *in love* before. Sigyn was his first love (he scowled at the word), and he wanted to be hers. More than that, though, he wanted to be her *only* love. It was why he hated that damn hawk so much. If Theoric came within an inch of her again, he would kill him. He looked sideways.

*I might have some jealousy issues.*



“You are not the only man I have slept with, Loki,” she finally answered.

Loki glared at her. Well, obviously.

Surely, she didn't think he was asking if she had been a virgin for nine hundred years! She wasn't *dense*. She *knew* what he meant. Oh, that she would have expounded on the subject and told him what he really wanted to know without forcing him to ask it. She was just punishing him for not returning her sentiment verbally.

Smirking, she added, “My previous bedmate was actually how I ended up here in Asgard. You should be grateful.”

Her humor was lost on him, and she narrowed her eyes. If he was going to be this openly possessive and jealous, why was he trying to hide his feelings for her? His shifting emotions had her wanting to claw her skin off.

Loki was genuinely confused. He'd assumed she would answer curtly, he would have to clarify, and be forced to say that he loved her. Instead, she'd piqued his interest with the mention of how she came to Asgard. Hadn't she come to study under the tutelage of his mother?

Tilting his head to the side, he frowned. “What does a previous lover have to do with coming here?”

“He was hardly a *lover*, Loki,” she said, shaking her head. “We'd grown up together. Friends. His name was Jöður.”

He wondered momentarily if this Jöður (he rolled his eyes at the name) resembled him. He hoped not.

“What did he look like?” *Oh, for fuck's sake.*

He couldn't believe his own idiocy. As if the man's appearance had anything to do with this story. Thankfully, rather than calling him out on his stupidity and leaving the room, she merely shrugged though her tone suggested annoyance.

“Um, well, he was a bit shorter than you. Hair and eyes the color of chocolate. His skin looked like a sort of...light caramel. He was thin but strong. Is that a good enough picture for you?”

Nodding, Loki stared blankly at her. He was the picture of apathy, but in truth, he'd been uneasy. Maybe it was silly, but he hated the idea of her having a penchant for black hair, pale skin, or green eyes. He wanted to know he was far more to her than just a *type*.

“As I was saying before I was required to describe for you the merits of his physical appeal, we'd known each other from childhood. Freya said we very nearly shared a crib.”

“Brilliant,” he sneered, unable to hold back the intense jealousy rising in his chest, “so you began sleeping together from an incredibly *early* age.”

Jaw set, Sigyn grabbed the belt of his robe from his desk chair, and yanking it toward her, she wrapped it around herself.

“I’m not discussing this any further,” she said.

She was halfway off his bed when he snaked his arm around her waist, pulling her back to him.

“Forgive me, Sig,” he said, smoothing his tone into velvet against her ear, sliding the fabric off her shoulder and kissing her neck. “I’ll hold my tongue. Please continue.”

Shuddering, she leaned into his kiss. *Damn him.* He was pure *evil* with that glorious mouth of his.

“It just happened one day. We’d been exploring the cliffs near my mother’s home, and he kissed me,” she said, glancing warily at Loki. His jaw was set, teeth clenched, but he did, as he’d said he would, hold his tongue. Taking a breath, she continued the story.

“I didn’t stop him, and he didn’t stop either until, well, surely you see where this is going. I’m not expected to give the graphic details, am I?”

Sucking in his cheeks, Loki cleared his throat, and looking down at her shoulder, he shook his head.

“That won’t be necessary, no.”

Not that she *would* have given details, but she was relieved that he didn’t want them. She squared her shoulders.

“Over the course of several months we continued to... um... *see* each other. Then I started having dreams. Dreams of a pair of mesmerizing, beautiful eyes. Emerald eyes.”

She paused, looking at his reaction. The faintest hint of a grin appeared at the corner of his mouth. *Smug bastard*, she thought loudly, earning her his signature full smirk. She spoke freely then, no hesitation left in her voice.

“I must have sketched them a thousand times. Those eyes haunted me, and not only in my dreams. I looked for them in every face, to no avail. Everyone had the same brown or blue color. I tried locator spells hoping to find the man with the green eyes, but the spells could only search the faces of those on the same realm. Well, I say that,” she sighed, “there *were* spells that could see much further, across the galaxies even, but I was terribly inept with those.”

Her eyes glazed over, as she mused further. "I suppose I'd become obsessed and had, unaware, pulled away from Jöður. My dreams were no longer just the eyes. My body writhed under those eyes."

His smirk widened into a genuine grin with each word. Obviously, she'd been dreaming about *him*. And not just dreaming *about* him but dreaming about him fucking her passionately. This story was becoming quite entertaining, and *extremely* flattering.

"It came to a bit of a head when he discovered the sketches and evidence of my failed spell casting. Also, I'd always kept my eyes open when we," she stopped herself before completing *that* sentence and waved her hand at his glare.

"*Never mind*," she said. "One day I closed them, and from that point on, I kept them closed. I wanted *green*, not brown, looking back at me. Then at the festival of Dauða Nótt, or Death Night, on the first night of our eighth month, he confronted me about the *'green-eyed man I was clearly fucking'*. His words, not mine," she clarified.

"It was quite ironic that this happened on the eve of the dark season. While everyone was giving the typical *'may you be well'* greeting, he was greeting me with *'go to Hel, you whore.'* It was all very ugly."

Her eyes turned black, and Loki noted a burning smell as black smoke seeped from the ends of her hair. Kissing her neck again and stroking her hair, the smoke dissipated. He would seek out this pathetic whelp and *slaughter* him.

"I became quite irate with him and his choice of words," she said, turning her eyes to Loki again. "You and I both know that my magic is of a somewhat *wild* nature, even now. Unfortunately for Jöður, and the rest of the village, the bonfire everyone was dancing around exploded, and the torches that surrounded the dinner became the rather nasty and deadly equivalent of flaming arrows. Most were burned in the blast, some were killed, including Jöður." She stared blankly at him, devoid of any scrap of emotion for those she'd killed.

Scoffing, he stared back, wide eyed, mouth agape. "You *killed* him?"

He didn't know if he was impressed or disappointed. He'd been looking forward to plotting the bastard's death.

Apathy clouded her features. "Not intentionally, but yes. After that, Freya feared I would either be locked up or executed so she brought me here under the guise of magical studies. Guise or not, I do have better control of my magic now."

Shaking his head, he clicked his tongue. "I wouldn't go *that* far, Sig."

"Hey!" she scoffed and hit him in the stomach, and the bed shook as he laughed.

"I knew," she said, her expression turning serious as she ran a finger from his throat to just below his right eye. "Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew it was *you* I'd dreamt of when I saw you."

Heart clenching, Loki turned his face and kissed the palm lying against his cheek.

"From the moment I saw you in the throne room, I thought I knew you. I just wasn't sure until last night when your eyes were hovering above me. It was *always* you, Loki. And I think I loved you from that first moment."

Reaching around the back of her head, he twisted his fingers in her hair and pulled her onto his lap, bringing her mouth to his. She spoke between his kisses.

"Why won't you just *say* it? I can feel it. I *know* you love me. I know-"

He cut her off, pushing her back onto the black sheets, her words swallowed by his tongue. Leaning over her, he pushed her legs apart and slipped his hips between them, running his hand up her thigh. He couldn't say it. Not yet.

### ~THAT AFTERNOON, THE KING'S QUARTERS~

Stomach churning with anxiety, Loki made his way down the east wing of the royal corridor toward his father's personal business quarters. He'd been summoned for the gods only knew what. Knocking on the door, he remained under the door frame when the doors were opened by the guards. Odin stood from his seat behind a sprawling gold accented cherry desk. His mother was seated by the fireplace opposite him and had plastered her gentle smile on her face. His father looked as solemn as ever. The whole scene was very foreboding.

What had he done *now*? He'd served his time for the damage to Sif, and he'd done nothing mischievous since the sentence had come to an end. Well, that was if one did not consider what he'd been doing with Sigyn *mischievous*. Panting against her, very nearly to climax, he'd taken none too kindly to being interrupted by the pounding on his doors not fifteen minutes ago. Neither had she, for that matter. She'd thrown a robe on and legitimately *growled* at the guard. Fenrir would have been envious of the ferocious sound. She could have spooked a bear.

"Please, sit, dearest," Frigga said, patting the space next to her on the sofa.

"I would prefer to stay on my feet, Mother, thank you," he said, moving into the room slowly, eyes on his father who was gesturing him in with two fingers. No, this was *not* good.

“My son.” Odin’s expression was something between sympathetic and stern.

Nodding at the king, Loki clasped his hands behind his back. “Father.”

“The time has come, my son,” his father said, walking around the desk and past Loki to sit by Frigga, “for Thor to take the throne. The date is set. One fortnight from today.”

Jaw clenching, he turned away from his parents to stare at the floor. So that's what this was about. He'd been removed from the comfort of Sigyn's arms and brought here to be given the news that his insipid brother would be crowned king of Asgard in two weeks. Oh, what *joy*. He unclasped his hands, running one through his hair, the other rubbing the back of his neck. Turning back to his parents, he dropped his hands, and shrugged.

“Should I have prepared a concession speech?” he asked, not hiding his sarcasm.

Frigga’s eyes brimmed with tears as she stood and approached her youngest.

“Loki, darling, please don’t,” she said reaching for his hands.

He looked at her, incredulous, and tucked his hands behind his back once more.

“Don’t what? Don’t remind you of his arrogance? His recklessness? Or perhaps his temper? Why, he’d no sooner take the throne when Asgard would be at *war* with another realm just for pissing him off!”

Shaking his head, hoping to wake himself up (he was in a living *nightmare*), he grabbed the goblet of mead on Odin’s desk, tossed it back with a grimace (it tasted like absolute *swill*) and threw it off the balcony.

“Oh Loki,” Frigga sighed, wringing her hands and eyeing Odin. “Please don’t resort to such crass words.”

He laughed humorlessly. “I can do far worse than *piss*, Mother.”

He was seething, positively *livid*. Stretching his hands out on the stone railing of the balcony, watching the grey clouds drop more snow onto the city, he replayed his father's once words to him in his head.

*You were both born to be kings.*

He heard Odin approach him from behind and turned to stand toe to toe with him.

“I would remind you of *your* temper,” Odin spat, his hands fisting at his side, “and *your* recklessness. And do not talk to the *queen* of Asgard with such disrespect.”

Loki fumed. Here he was, standing on a balcony, visible to anyone passing by below, and his father was shouting at him, scolding him as though he were a schoolboy! Eyes wide, he

gritted his teeth, his hands glowing with bright green light aching to escape. Right then, he didn't care if sending a burst of magic right into his father's chest earned him a place in the dungeon. Frigga hurried toward them and placed herself between the two men, her back to her son, hands on her husband's chest.

"Cease this, both of you! You are father and son!"

She felt Loki's heavy breathing on the back of her hair and considered using a bit of her own magic to place a shield between Odin and herself and Loki. She didn't think Odin would *truly* strike Loki, but she wouldn't put it past him in *that* moment considering how riled up he was.

"Husband, please," she continued, eyes pleading. "He is your *son*."

With a stern look written on his face, Odin backed away, though he continued to stare at his youngest.

"I'm sorry, but it was never you, Loki," he said quietly and turned away.

Loki dropped his forehead to rest on Frigga's shoulder. There was nothing to be done, nothing more to say. Stepping around her, he went straight to the doors.

"Please do inform me if I can be of any help in planning the *joyous* occasion," he said on his way out, slamming the doors behind him with the flick of his wrist, green light shimmering around them.

### ~SEVERAL HOURS LATER, FAR FROM THE PALACE~

"The air is so much *thinner* up here," Sif gasped, sitting down heavily on a flat boulder.

Thor swept his arm out, gesturing at the view from the highest mountain peak of the Realm Eternal. He'd asked Sif to go on a hike with him that day, though he hadn't planned to hike *this* high.

"It is stunning, though, is it not?" he asked, taking a seat next to her.

He closed his eyes as an icy gust whipped his blond hair about his face. Sif couldn't help but stare at him. They were alone, and far from anyone's peaking eyes, and he was so *close* to her. Without thinking, she reached up to push his hair behind his ear. She quickly pulled her hand away when he opened his eyes, and she flushed with embarrassment.

Thor turned to her with not an ounce of jest in his eyes and pulled her hand back to his cheek. He moved a touch closer, dropping his gaze from her eyes to her mouth, then kissed

her. Heart pounding against her ribs, she opened her mouth as his hand tangled in the hair at the back of her neck. She grabbed at his armored shoulders, wishing it hadn't been so cold so she could remove the metal and feel his rough skin against hers.

He gripped her waist, pulling her into him as far as possible with all the layers between them. He needed to be inside of her *now*. Why had he taken her *anywhere* other than his bedchamber? What in the nine had he been thinking?

Feeling his hand run up the inside of her clothed thigh had her body temperature skyrocketing. Maybe ridding themselves of their *awful* clothes might not be a bad idea after all. She pulled at the clasps of his cape as he yanked the fur coat down from her shoulders desperately. Hearing cawing from above though, they pulled away from each other and turned around. Huginn had appeared behind them. Rolling his eyes, Thor groaned and adjusted his trousers.

*Excellent timing, you cock blocking daft bird.*

He glared at the black avian whose gravelly voice sounded in his ears telling him that Odin had summoned him. Reluctantly and full of disappointment, he let go of Sif.

“This isn’t over,” he whispered into her ear, helping her off the rock, sending electric shocks throughout her body as they began their descent from the mountain.

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Lithe muscles tensing, Loki watched through narrow slits of eyes as his brother retraced his steps down the mountain with Sif in tow. Sinir, sensing the seething rage rolling off his master, bobbed his head anxiously underneath him.

“That foolish brute will bring Asgard to its knees, Sin,” he whispered, stroking the beast’s neck, calming him.

“Soon we’ll be kneeling before Midgard’s barbaric humans,” he spat, flaring his nostrils and glaring at the blond warrior and his *lover*, apparently.

Sigyn, astride her black mare, Móða, appeared next to him.

“You don't really think that,” she said, pulling the hood of her cloak down further to shield her face from the blowing snow.

His stallion nuzzled her horse’s nose, and not removing his eyes from Thor as the man disappeared, Loki sighed.

“No, I really *know* that,” he corrected her. With a flick of his wrist, their gloves dissipated, and he wove his bare fingers with hers.

“I admit that your logic is sound, Loki. Mjölmir would do well to spend a day in the toolbox, after all, one cannot solve every political discourse with brute force. Boring as diplomacy is, it is usually the best course of action. I hardly imagine Thor is capable of withstanding such boredom for long.”

She trained her eyes at the forest not twenty yards hence wishing desperately to steal him away to Vanaheim just for the day. She wanted to think only of him, be only with him for the day. Escaping to her cliff would have been the perfect option.

“I cannot just *leave* Asgard, Sig,” he responded to her silent musings.

Reaching for her, he pulled her into a tight hug. He *wanted* to leave. He wanted to run away with her. But he loved his home and refused to watch Thor destroy it with his idiotic rule. He had to do something, *anything*, to keep that from happening.

“Stop reading my thoughts, Loki,” she whispered into his hair. “There are other more inviting places on my person for you to invade than my mind, are there not?”

It was probably futile, the effort to distract him from the forthcoming coronation and his consequent miserable musings. He did, at least, offer her a mischievous smile and kissed her nose, but all too soon he pulled away. She sighed.

*Worth a shot.*

“I shall take you up on said invitation later, but Sig, I would appreciate solitude for the time being.”

Her shoulders slumped but she nodded in understanding. She would have felt the same way if she'd been in his position.

“Of course.” She clucked her tongue, and Móða hitched forward into a light gallop.

He watched as she picked up speed, her black hair floating behind her in the wind, and once he could no longer see her, he turned Sinir to the forest and kicked him into full speed. Feeling as though he was flying through the trees, he smiled. Sinir was agile as a cat, slicing through the maze of branches. *Damn*, this felt good. Riding was liberating, allowing him to set aside his anger, even if just for a moment. Freedom came to an abrupt halt when the frozen over opening in the boulder he'd discovered many years past came into view. He hadn't aimed for it. He'd not even thought of it, but as he neared the opening, excitement brewed in his stomach.

*Jotunheim.*



Clucking his tongue, Loki led his horse to the icy rock, a surge of green light escaping his fingers and melting the ice barrier. He dismounted, tethering the dark stallion to the bare branch of a sturdy oak, and passed through the melted doorway with a low familiar, feminine voice ringing in his ears.

*Don't do anything stupid, love.*

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## CHAPTER 9: YOUR END IS MY END, LOKI.

~THIRTY MINUTES LATER, A MILE OUTSIDE THE CITY~

Sigyn was *freezing* cold, and not just because a fresh coat of snow now covered every surface in Asgard. She'd been riding back to the palace stables, when it was suddenly cold enough to give her frostbite, every bit of exposed skin crusting over with a thin layer of ice so cold that it burned bad enough to bring tears to her eyes.

*What the Hel?*

Grimacing, she brought a hand to her face to wipe away the tears as she rode, but they were frozen solid, and when she tried to pull her hand away, it yanked on her cheek, nearly ripping the skin open. She cried out in pain and left her hand there for a moment, doing her best to focus on the fire within her. Closing her eyes tightly, she winced as black smoke seeped from her fingers, the heat rising to the surface, melting the tears enough to let her bring her hand down. Jaw dropping, she watched with wide eyes as her hand began to freeze over again.

No way in all the nine was this due to the unusually cold winter. No, this was something else altogether. This was magic. Extremely *unpleasant* magic. Was *Loki* doing this? Did this have something to do with their blood bond?

She pulled Móða to a skidding stop on an icy patch of cobblestone and turned back to the forest, squinting to see better through the snow. He had disappeared from the powdery white clearing at the base of the mountain where Thor had been with Sif. She hadn't seen them herself, but the blood bond had allowed her to see through Loki's eyes at the time, albeit blurred and hazy, and his interpretation of his brother and Sif had very clearly been that Thor was *manhandling* her. Sigyn had been more than a little disturbed by the sight herself, but in her opinion, Thor could manhandle whoever he wanted to so long as Loki damn well continued to manhandle *her*.

It dawned on her now as she peered across the open terrain that she could no longer feel his emotions or see what he saw, and according to him, that only happened if they were in different realms. However, even if they couldn't see through each other's eyes or feel if they were sad or happy or any other number of emotions, they could still feel the physical sensations of their surroundings. Furious, she tugged the reins and bolted for the forest. Loki had left Asgard, and his destination was *literally* giving her frostbite.

*Jotunheim.*

Surely, he hadn't used the Bifrost. Heimdall wouldn't allow a prince of Asgard to go to Jotunheim alone, would he? She spotted horse tracks in the snow leading into the trees. Was there a portal that led to that cold rock of a realm in the forest? The zig zag pattern of the tracks was making her queasy, but a low velvety voice dulled the nausea instantly.

"Miss me already?" Loki, astride Sinir, came up behind her silently, the snow muffling the sound of hooves.

Relieved to see him alive and in one piece, with no apparent injuries, smirking at her, she reached for him. She clung to him as though he'd been gone a great deal longer than twenty minutes, and once she'd had her fill of the embrace, she slapped him right on the cheek as hard as she could.

"Gods *dammit*, Loki! Jotunheim? Are you mad?"

Glaring at her, he grabbed her hand and yanked her forcefully against him, pulling her as close as the horses would allow. She looked positively incredulous and tried to pull away from him.

"You could've been killed!" she shrieked.

Gods, she was *unbelievably* pissed off that after that stunt he'd just pulled, he had the gall to try to *hug* her, and worse that her instinct was to crawl onto his lap and let him.

"Stop your whining, Sig," he said, and caught her lips with his, not caring that his cheek still stung from the slap.

The trip had been exhilarating. He'd come up with a plan, a *brilliant* plan, and seeing her angry with him was incredibly arousing, to be honest. He wouldn't even mind the sting of another slap. Pulling back from her enough to catch his breath, he smiled wide, green eyes shining.

"I'm very much alive," he whispered, biting his lip as he pulled her back for another deep kiss.

She caught herself before she moaned into his mouth. Determined not to let that sinful tongue of his play with her head any longer, she mustered up the strength to pull away from him and put her hand over his mouth to stop him from trying to kiss her again.

"What was the purpose of your little excursion then?" she whispered harshly, eyes flashing. "*Sightseeing?*"

He reached up carefully and pulled her hand away from his mouth. Eyes on hers, he smirked and kissed her palm.

“Just a bit of fun, darling,” he said, eyebrows raised, the picture of innocence.

Tilting her head, she gave him a look. Norns, with those wide eyes and boyish smile, he must have gotten away with every nasty little trick as a child. Well, obviously it hadn't worked on his father (it *still* didn't work on the old man), but without a doubt, Frigga had been more than a little... *forgiving*.

“Tell me the truth, Loki,” she said, eyes narrowed, attempting to use their bond somehow to see through him.

Her efforts proved useless though. He'd locked up whatever dealings he'd had with the monsters and swallowed the key. Snaking his arm around her waist, he pulled her onto the saddle behind him. Something about this entire situation had her on edge, for *him*, and now that her anger had had time to dissipate, she wanted to keep him as close as possible. She reached around his neck, and turned his head, bringing his mouth to hers.

“It's near time for night meal,” he said, smiling against her lips. “There'll be time for *that* later.” Calling for Móða to follow, he kicked Sinir into a full gallop toward the stables.

### ~THAT NIGHT, THE DINING HALL~

Sigyn gagged at the way Thor was aggressively chewing on a leg of meat (his beard was *filthy!*) as she and Loki approached him and his friends at the head dining table for the celebratory night meal. As soon as Thor spotted them, he stood from his chair and grabbed his younger brother by the shoulders, pulling him into a bone crushing hug. Cringing at the grease stain Thor's hands left on his tunic, Loki rolled his eyes and grabbed a napkin to wipe it clean. He then patted Thor on the back of his head twice.

“Congratulations, brother,” he said, flashing Thor a bright smile. “I fear for Asgard like never before.”

Laughing out loud, Thor sat back down and resumed his assault on his dinner.

“You *should* fear for Asgard, Loki,” he said between bites. “Because *you* will be my chief counsel.”

“Can't wait,” Loki said under his breath and plucked a goblet from a passing tray.

Taking her seat next to him, Sigyn peered at the contents of the cup and made a face. Mead. She absolutely *despised* mead. Ever since she'd come to Asgard, it was either mead, or hot tea, or water. *Godsdammit*— why did they provide *nothing* else to drink? Maybe there were different choices further out from the palace. Not that it mattered *right now*.

Rolling her eyes, she grabbed a cup for herself. After a few drinks, the mead would start to taste like everything else anyway. And she wasn't interested in staying sober during this meal, with everyone buzzing about Thor's coronation, and fawning all over him. She held the cup to her lips and sniffed. *Ugh*. There was no need to wait for it to suddenly become appealing, was there.

*Bottoms up.*

Before she could throw the drink back, Loki swiped the cup from her.

“What are you-”

“Shh,” he said, cutting her off with a finger to his lips.

He then dipped that finger into her cup, swirling it in the mead, and it turned a deep crimson. He sniffed at it, swirled again, and taking a sip, pleased with his work, he handed the heavy steel cup back to her. She didn't need to drink it to know what it was. She could smell it without even lifting it to her nose. Robust, earthy, with a hint of oak. Licking her lips, she looked from the cup up to Loki's face. He was of *course* smirking, and she smiled back, bringing the drink to her lips.

“Did you just turn that into *proper* wine for me?”

Taking a long drink, she melted into her seat, and he leaned into her, lazily resting his arm across the back of her chair, nodding. Winking, he kissed her cheek.

“It was nothing,” he whispered with a shrug.

She downed the drink quickly and moaned, thoroughly enjoying the way his chest rose and fell faster at the sound.

“Mmmm. Your tricks continue to be most convenient,” she said, drifting into wine heaven.

*Valhalla*, he'd made it as delicious as the best reds from Vanaheim. Was there anything he couldn't do perfectly?

Noticing the group's empty goblets, Fandral shouted at a passing servant girl.

“More mead!”

The girl quickly poured another round for them, blushing as his hand grazed her backside, and scurried away. Having seen it, Sigyn glared at him as she pushed the mead that had been set down in front of her by the poor servant girl to Loki and waited for him to fix the drink again.

“Tell me, Fandral,” Sigyn said, setting her jaw, “is there a maidservant in Asgard who shall be spared from seeing the color of your bedsheets?”

The dashing blond man tossed back his fifth drink within the hour and winked at her.

“She has not .... *yet*. But once she visits them, they’ll be ripe with fresh red.”

Sigyn choked on her wine, suddenly put off by its crimson hue.

“You are *sick*, Fandral,” she spat out, coughing into her napkin. “Was that comment necessary?”

Side-eyeing Fandral, Loki rubbed Sigyn's back as she coughed.

“Tactless cretin,” he said, rolling his eyes and gesturing to their plates. “We're trying to *eat*.”

Seeing the face Sigyn made at her red drink, he grabbed her cup, swirling his finger in it until it transformed into a freshly chilled white instead. The alcohol having gone to her head, she reached for him, kissing him openly.

*My god of mischief, I do adore that magical finger of yours.*

Hearing her thoughts, he shifted in his seat, adjusting his tightening breeches and stifled a moan as her tongue darted into his mouth. *By Hel*, he loved it when she called him that. Breathing a bit harder, he moved his mouth to her ear.

“I’d be happy to use my magical finger in a more private setting,” he whispered, behind the privacy of her loose hair.

Thor cringed at their display and held his hand up, trying to block the image of his brother and Sigyn practically eye fucking each other right across from him.

“Ugh, stop, please!” he shouted, *clearly* drunk. “Tis bad enough hearing of Fandral's sexual conquests. Save it for your bedchambers, little brother.”

“I don’t get it,” Volstagg piped up between bites, chomping away at a block of cheese, looking very akin to a huge auburn rodent. “What’s wrong with red sheets? It's a lovely color!”

Throwing his head back, Fandral laughed. “*Really*, Volstagg?”

He made a lewd gesture to show the rotund warrior what he had meant, but Volstagg only raised his eyebrows and shrugged, still lost.

“What am I missing?” he asked, nearly incomprehensible, spraying bits of cheese as he spoke.

Putting a *slight* distance between himself and Sigyn, Loki rolled his eyes. That ginger bearded brute was more brainless than an ox. Loki was embarrassed *for* him.

“What he means is that his sheets will turn red with the girl’s blood when she is fucked for the first time, you giant buffoon,” Loki clarified, running his hand down his face.

Volstagg’s eyes widened, and he nodded.

“Ah, yes, I get it now,” he said, turning to Sigyn. “Fandral is basically the male equivalent of a harlot, you know.”

She burst into stomach cramping laughter.

“I’d already figured that out,” she managed to spit out as she wiped tears from her eyes, “but I’ll keep that in mind if he makes me an offer.”

Volstagg glanced back and forth between Loki and Sigyn. “But I thought you and Loki were...” he trailed off, clearing his throat.

Loki raised his eyebrows, looking from Volstagg to Sigyn and back again.

“Thought we were what?” he asked, smirking.

Sif coughed, her drink going down the wrong pipe, and Thor patted her on the back, wishing that he were deaf momentarily.

“Oh gods, Volstagg, please don’t say anymore,” Sif pleaded once she was able to speak. “Thor is sitting right here! Do you wish to make him vomit all over the floor? Why are we even talking about this?” She looked at Fandral accusingly, and he raised his hands in surrender.

“Don't look at me, *he* brought it up!” he said, pointing at Volstagg.

“This conversation has taken a rather *lurid* turn,” Hogun said quietly into his drink.

“Well, we all saw them kissing!” Volstagg shouted, continuing to chomp away as he spoke. “Is it not a natural assumption to assume that they are.... *you know?*”

Shrugging, Loki bit into an apple and spoke once he'd swallowed his bite.

“We may be doing something like that.”

The group looked stunned that he had confirmed it, and Loki leaned his head onto the back of his chair, arching his neck as he finished his apple. After a beat, Sigyn leaned over to him.

“You mean we are doing something *exactly* like that,” she said and licked his Adam's apple.

Loki sat up like the back of his chair had electrocuted him and spit half chewed apple on his plate, raising an eyebrow at her as she bit into a smile. Had she just *licked* him? Right here, in full view, at an *extremely public* dinner? Yes, she had, and from the looks of it, she didn’t

regret it in the slightest. For a split second, he felt a *bit* guilty for making that wine a little too... *magical*.

But then he glanced at Thor and his friends, noting their jaws on the floor, as though Sig had just sprouted antlers, and it was *hilarious*. Lips pressing together, he looked back at her, and when her shoulders started shaking, they both nearly fell out of their seats from cackling. Composing himself, he threw his napkin on his plate and stood. He grabbed Sigyn's hand and pulled her up with him. He leaned down and moved her hair away from her neck.

“Come on, Sig,” he whispered into her ear, his hands gripping her hips. “You need to *thank* me for the wine.”

She shivered as she raised her eyes to meet his, and face red from anticipation, she turned to Thor and his friends.

“Guess we're leaving now,” she said, grinning like an idiot and waved goodbye as Loki all but dragged her to the doors.

As they neared the exit, he caught Theoric staring at them, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up when he heard the captain thinking so loudly that he couldn't *not* hear it.

*His EVIL highness probably ties her up against her will, or shoves her to her hands and knees and rips her open with his-*

Setting his jaw, Loki shut the words out of his mind and pulled her closer, his hand firmly grasping her hip. He was damn near ready to conjure a dagger, cut the man's limbs off one by one and slit his throat in front of the entire hall. Instead, he leaned down to kiss her hair as they exited the hall and made for his chambers.

## ~NEXT MORNING, THE PRIVATE ROYAL PALACE GARDEN~

The garden, still iced over, was the location of Sigyn's lesson with Loki the next morning. Since Frigga was busy with the coronation arrangements, he had offered to take over as her tutor.

“Why can we not study *indoors*, Loki?” she whined, teeth chattering as she wrapped her thick cloak around the front of her body and hopped up and down on her feet. “I can only stand so much cold before I succumb to frostbite.”

Clad in his cold weather armor, Loki rolled his eyes at her tone and sat on his haunches, gesturing for her to do the same.



“I’m afraid today’s lesson must be performed outdoors, lest the palace workers experience the same fate as Jöður and your other *toasted* villagers,” he said, blowing into his hands as she sat down next to him. “Now conjure a fire for us before you *succumb to frostbite*.”

Grinning, he pulled the hood of his long leather armored jacket over his head, but Sigyn jumped to her feet and threw up her hands.

“Loki, I’ve told you before that I can *manipulate* fire, but I cannot create it out of thin air. I tried for hours with your mother. I tire of reminding you.”

Unbelievable. Not five minutes into the lesson, and her substitute tutor had already exasperated her. She much preferred him teaching her new sexual positions over teaching her magic. Her mind drifted to the night before, her eyes glazing over in the process.

Seeing the images of himself naked in her mind, he snorted. Good gods, this woman was *insatiable*. Not that he minded in the *slightest*, giving her as much pleasure as he possibly could (which she was all too happy to reciprocate), but he truly wanted to help her hone her magic skills at the moment. That, and his mother was counting on him to do so, and he didn't want to disappoint her.

“That’ll be enough of *that*,” he said, grabbing Sigyn's gloved hands and pulling her back to the ground. “Now tell me, where did the fire that ruined Sif’s hair come from?”

He continued his hold on her hands as she scowled, the unpleasant memory replacing her blissful train of thought and sending a wave of nausea through her stomach. Clearing her throat, she took down the picture of the war goddess' burnt body and hung it on the back wall of her mind.

“I have absolutely no idea how I did that,” she mumbled, looking down at her hands.

“Sig, if you did it once, then you can do it again,” he said softly, putting his first finger under her chin to lift her face and meet her eyes. “You have the talent for conjuring fire. You just need to work on your *skill*. That’s why I’m here. Natural talent is useless if you don’t have skill when you need it.”

Frowning, she tilted her head. “I have *some* skill, Loki,” she said, defensive.

She thought back to the day before when she melted her frozen tears. That had required skill, had it not?

“Not enough,” he said, lips pursed. “Practice, practice, *practice*. Why do you think I get up so early? Well,” he paused when she smirked at him and raised her eyebrow, “before I had *you* in my bed, of course.”

She bit her lip, smiling at his wiggling eyebrows.

“I was practicing my magic,” he answered for her. “What, do you think I just woke up one day and conjured a double of myself?”

“Of course not, I'm not completely lacking in intelligence,” she said, glaring at him. “I know it takes—” She stopped abruptly, brow furrowing in confusion. *Wait, what?*

“Conjured a double? I thought you could only make an illusion of yourself. Are you talking about something corporeal?” Her jaw dropped then, gaping as a second Loki sat beside her and draped his arm across her shoulder.

“What in the name of Odin...” She trailed off, marveling at the attention to detail.

Every fine line, every pore, every little speck of blue in his emerald eyes, it was all there. Curious, she moved closer to the second Loki, despite her hesitance to touch him. She looked at Loki, the *real* one, and pointed at the second one.

“Can you feel what *he* feels?”

He flicked his wrist, and the double leaned over and kissed her, enjoying the blush that spread across her cheeks.

“If he were only an illusion then, no, I wouldn't feel it,” he said. “Your hand would go straight through him. An illusion isn't real. It's a visual lie, but he is not an illusion, thus, you can touch him just as you would me, and what he feels, I feel.”

The double wrapped his arms around her, and she watched Loki from the corner of her eye. His hands were open, palms up glowing green in front of him, eyes narrowed at the double. Disconcerted, she pulled away from the too real second one, and he dropped his hands.

“I don't recall any of your mother's spell books mentioning this sort of magic.” Pursing her lips, she poked the double as he dissipated into a bright green light.

“Oh, yes, they do,” he said, reaching out to pull her up against him, her back to his chest.

“Just not explicitly,” he continued and circled his legs around her. “He is a complex cocktail of mind control, teleportation, the elements, conjured light and disappearance, and siren magic. Her books list each of these under different headings—*huga stjórna*, *vöruflutningar á huga*, *eldur*, *vatn*, *jörð*, *vindur*, *ljós*, *hverta*, and *sírenu seiðr*. According to those books, you should never combine unique *seiðr* because it turns into black magic, which can,” he paused and cleared his throat, “result in death if the wielder is inexperienced.”

Eyes wide, she looked up at him.

“Death?” she asked, her hold on his hands around her waist tightening.

“Shhh,” he shushed her and kissed her nose. “It's fine. I know what I'm doing. He is a delicate balance, and it is exhausting to maintain his existence. He is my original recipe, if you will, and I worked on him for two hundred years before I measured the ingredients successfully.”

“But black magic is *illegal* in Asgard,” she whispered harshly. “What happens if you are caught? And what did you mean by siren? What, does he lead ships astray and to their end with beautiful songs?”

Loki laughed into her hair, both amused and flattered by her concern.

“The likelihood of being caught is slim to none as he is an *exact* copy of me. There is not a soul in the nine realms that could spot the difference between us. Not even *you*. Darling, it's not as though I traipse all over Asgard with him at my side. He goes in my stead if I wish it. And, no, he does not lead ships astray. His purpose is to distract, to confuse, to kill if needs be.”

“But if you can feel what he does,” she kept her voice low, “what happens to you if he is killed?” She pulled his arms further around her waist, panic rising in her chest at the thought of his doppelganger, for lack of a better word, inadvertently taking Loki from her permanently.

Feeling her anxiety, he kissed her cheek, trying to calm her. “The point of impact stings, but no physical injury to my person occurs.”

This conversation was suddenly very off putting to him. The fear rolling off of her was giving him a hint of nausea. He needed to change the subject. A thought occurred to him then, and it replaced his nausea with warmth, his lower stomach twisting with arousal.

“Come to think of it, since *I* feel what he feels, it might be fun to test his abilities in bed.”

Pulling her hood back, moving his mouth from her cheek to her neck, he ran a hand up her torso, his fingers teasing the low neckline of her dress, and he nipped her ear. She thought on it for a moment. It did sound entertaining, though strange. But something was nagging at her too much for her to just drop everything and have a threesome with Loki and his .... friend.

“I'm open to experimenting with him as long as his purpose isn't to kill me,” she responded, only half joking. “Speaking of which, *has* he killed anyone?”

He sighed and dropped his hands from her. He'd said too much, and his attempts at hiding the more devious deeds of his conjured twin were proving futile. He had been ready to end this lesson early and do something far more fun. He chose his words carefully, hoping that his honesty would encourage her to drop the issue.

“Not in Asgard,” he whispered, the line between his brows deepening. “He is talented at...running errands...if you will, for me.”

Swiveling her head, she glared at him. “Does he run errands in *Jotunheim*?”

He glared back at her, his lip twitching. “Let it go, Sigyn.”

She bristled at his use of her full name rather than the more affectionate *Sig* that he’d taken to calling her. Shaking her head, she returned to the more important matter. If he’d sent the double, he must have assessed that the danger was too great to risk death. Then why would he have gone at all? He must have interacted with the Jotuns and for what purpose? Was he planning to do something to Thor? Surely not. He loved Thor, even if he was jealous of him. Blowing out a heavy breath, she pushed to her feet, and paced across the icy grass.

“How could I possibly *let it go*?” she asked, her voice raising as she ran a hand through her hair. “If I’d taken a trip to the frost giants home unaccompanied, would you not beg for answers? How can you be so careless? So reckless?! I’ve bound myself to you, Loki! *If you die, I die!*”

He was on his feet before she could continue, one hand at the back of her neck, the other clamping down over her mouth.

“Do you wish all of Asgard to hear you? Desist your *raving!*” He pulled his hand away from her mouth and put a finger to his own, giving her a warning look.

“I am not *raving*,” she whisper-shouted, shoving him away, eyes filling with hot tears. “I simply care enough about your life to wish that you not bargain with it!”

She turned on her heel and started toward the nearest palace entry, but he wouldn't have it. He caught her arm and pulled her back to him, wrapping her in a hug. Trailing his hand up and down her spine, he held her shaking body as she pulled at the collar of his coat, her breath scalding his throat.

“I’m no fool,” he said into her hair. “I don’t bargain with my life. Oh, and let me explain one more thing. The blood bond wouldn’t kill you just because I was killed, Sig. That’s not how it works.” He thought on that for a second and frowned. Well, he *hoped* that wasn’t how it worked.

Scoffing, she pulled back to look him in the eye. “I’m not talking about the damn blood bond! I’ve given you my heart, and you will break it, break *me*, if you get yourself killed!”

Closing his eyes, he sighed. There it was.

*Love*. It was the most incredible thing that had ever happened to him, and at the same time, the absolute *worst*. Angry at his own *stupid* heart for getting him in this mess, he pushed

her back (not *too* hard) and squared his shoulders. His chest heaved, and he could feel his body shaking.

“You want to know why I refuse to say that I love you?” he asked, jaw clenched. “The frost giants could not with all their strength destroy me as you could,” he whispered, sniffing as he blinked back tears.

Wrecked by his words, she fisted and flexed her hands, successfully containing her fire.

“You fucking *coward*,” she whispered shakily, and swiped the tears from her cheeks.

Grabbing her satchel, she slung it across her body and marched off across the frozen grounds. He stayed there, squelching the desire to run after her, and watched her until she disappeared into the palace. It had taken everything in him to not yank her to him before she could leave and throw her over his shoulder, return to his chambers, and show her just how much he loved her. Maybe she'd forget his cruel words, forget *Jotunheim*. What was *wrong* with him? Oh, how he absolutely *hated* that he couldn't turn back time to two minutes ago and stop himself from saying those things. He'd never meant to hurt her. Running a hand through his hair, he shook the snow out of it, and keeping his head high despite feeling lower than ever before, he returned to the palace.

### ~TWELVE HOURS LATER, NEARLY MIDNIGHT~

Staring into the flames of the large hearth in his bedroom that night, Loki chewed his lip so hard that it nearly bled. He shouldn't have been surprised when she did not come to him. But dear gods, how he'd *hoped* she would, if not for any reason other than to satiate her physical desire for him. Sighing heavily, he shook his head. He knew though that what she felt, what *he* felt, was infinitely more than just physical desire. And it was for that reason, that he felt like his heart was splitting to pieces, knowing he'd split hers too. Head in his hands, he sank into his hearth sofa.

He'd not seen her at all the rest of the day. Not in the arena. Not in the armory. Not at second or last meal. He'd ventured through the markets, checked the pubs. He'd seen Móða in her stall in the stables still, so clearly Sig hadn't gone riding. He'd been to her chambers only to be told by Kyaer that her mistress hadn't been there since that morning.

Was she avoiding him purposefully? She *had* to be. Yes, he could have used the blood bond to discover her whereabouts, but he hadn't wanted to feel her emotions, so he'd closed off his access to the bond ever since their fight in the garden that morning. She had been right. He *was* a coward, and he was completely and utterly *wrecked*.

Standing from the sofa, he crossed the room and yanked the floor to ceiling drapes open and climbed the steps of his balcony. He'd drawn the drapes earlier to hide behind them (because he was *pathetic*). He could see the windows of her chambers from this spot if he wanted to. Before he could stop himself, he gripped the ledge, and leaned over the stone only to find that her room was dark. Nostrils flaring, he continued to stare at the room, as though she might magically appear the longer he looked.

Where *was* she? Surely, she wasn't in bed already! Dammit, why did he even look? He'd just needed some fresh air! Why did he have to feel like this? He'd been alone his whole life, and he'd been *fine*. But now? Now he felt physically *ill* without this woman he'd known all of two months, maybe? Seething at his *need* to see her, to make her come back to him, he slammed his fist into a nearby pillar. This was absurd. Why was he fighting this? He was just torturing himself by trying to .... to *what* .... let her go? Let her run off after an argument over *nothing* and then just call the whole thing off? Did he really think that that was even possible? *No*. He didn't.

Defeated and desperate to see her and apologize (*for the rest of his life*) he closed his eyes and opened his mind, scanning the golden halls and rooms for her. It didn't take long before the smell of books filled his nostrils, before the fire in her veins heated his skin, before the breaking of her heart had tears filling his eyes.

Sigyn was in the library, and her mind was racing. A horse out the gate could not have kept up. Face screwing up in misery, he struggled to sort through the chaos that he'd caused within her. He listened, feeling every scrap of pain rip her apart, feeling as though the air in his lungs had transformed into her black smoke, and he choked on her despair, gasping for air.

*I'm going to lose him. They'll kill him. I fell in love with the DARK prince of Asgard. What the Hel did I expect? I'm a fool, an absurdly arrogant fool to believe it possible that he could love me the way I love him. But he DOES love me. I know he does! But not enough, not enough. I cannot lose him. I should go home, but I can't. HE'S here. I can't leave him. I'd die without him. Fuck, I'm being such a melodramatic whining entitled little.... ugh. Maybe I should put us out of our misery and kill us both. Maybe that's why he went to Jotunheim. He's going to kill us because it's too much. Love destroys us. Maybe I should just jump off the Bifrost-*

His eyes blew wide at that.

*JUMP off the Bifrost?*

No way in Hel was she truly *suicidal*, but his gut twisted painfully, nonetheless. He blasted open the doors of his room and ran, his long legs covering the long distance from his corridor to the library in a quarter of the time it would take any other Æsir. Even Thor with all his physical prowess could not have matched his speed. He came to an abrupt halt at the doors of the library when he heard a deep voice, *too* deep to belong to her.

"I'll say it again, Sigyn. He is evil and cruel and will be the death of you. He can only bring you sorrow. Nothing more."

"You know nothing, Captain."

"*Theoric*. My name is Theoric. I beg of you, Sigyn, address me as such!"

"For Hel's sake, leave me be!"

"Please, please, *please*. Just listen to me-"

"Take your hands *off* me."

"Not until I have your ear."

"Theoric, *I swear*, if you don't let go of me, I will-"

He threw the doors open with such force that they came off their hinges, and Theoric immediately dropped his hands from her arms, staring with thinly veiled fear. He stepped back, hands raised as if in surrender, as Loki stalked toward him. That hawk had put his hands on her and *kept* his hands on her after she *explicitly* told him to remove them. Another man had touched Sig.

*MY Sig:*

Seeing the glint of his dagger in his hand, Sigyn hurried to Loki, positioning herself in between the men.

"Don't you dare," she warned him, placing her hands on his chest. "You and I both know that he could not do so much as scratch me without succumbing to the same fate as Sif."

"I would *never* hurt you, Sigyn," Theoric scoffed.

She turned on him then, her back pressed against Loki's front.

"Well, you certainly *irritate* me," she said, taking a deep breath to calm her increasingly angry fire.

"Sigyn, please listen to me," he pleaded and dared a step in her direction.

Intent on *ending* the hawk, Loki grit his teeth and pulled her behind him, but she quickly moved in front of him again, once more putting her hands on his chest. He was overwhelmed with rage, with jealousy, with the fierce need to wrap his arms around her, to save her, to protect her. It mattered not that she was right about being perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

“Do you desire death so much, *hawk*,” he snarled, “that you would seek to take what I have already claimed as my own?”

Pointing his razor-sharp dagger at Theoric, he snaked his free hand around her waist and pulled her flush against him. She bristled at the insinuation that she was some sort of possession (*claimed as his own?*) but shook it off. That was a discussion for another time. It was far more pressing in that moment that she halted this deadly confrontation in its tracks before it ran off the rails and crashed, effectively sending Loki to the dungeons for killing the captain of Odin’s personal guard.

She was also just bloody sick of these *boys* trying to rip each other apart to *win* the girl. As though it wasn't *her* decision who *she* wanted no matter which one drew the most blood in this *ridiculous* fight? Grabbing Loki's chin, she turned his head to face her, though he continued to glare at Theoric and somehow pulled her even closer. She looked sideways at the *other* one, only to find him glaring right back at *this* one. Rolling her eyes, she blew the hair out of her face. Alright, she was *done* with this idiotic battle of testosterone.

“Enough!” she shouted, the flames in the hearth glowing brighter and shooting sparks onto the rug.

Thankfully, it didn't catch fire, so she didn't need to deal with that, too. Instead, she snatched the dagger from Loki’s hand and turned it sideways, shoving it against his chest. Finally meeting her narrowed eyes, he returned the weapon to his boot. She spoke firmly then, her eyes never leaving his.

“I suggest you leave, Theoric. That is, if you wish to keep all your parts.”

With a humorless snort, the captain gave them a wide berth and exited the hall silently. Wondering to the gods why Sig hadn't just let him kill that son of a bitch, Loki’s jealousy spiked. He *needed* to mark her somehow, and he couldn't wait another second.

*She is MY woman.*

Jaw set in determination, he put his other arm around her and with a surge of green, they reappeared in his chambers. Ignoring the glaring of her eyes at him, he pushed her up against the wall beside his bed.

“All of that could have been avoided if only you had come to me,” he said, his mouth hovering over the skin below her ear as he slid his hands up her legs, the skirt of her dress bunching up around her thighs.

“Absolutely *not*,” she hissed, attempting to push the dress back down, thoroughly pissed with him. “Are you out of your mind? I’m not letting you fuck me after that display in the garden. Not to mention in the library *five seconds ago*.”



She fought him, pressing her hands against his strong body. Godsdammit, he was *too* strong— she couldn't get his hands off her, and that left her feeling weak and powerless once again.

"I'm not a toy that you can just wind up and play with after tossing it aside," she growled.

"I never said you were," he said through his teeth, then grabbed the back of her hair and kissed her hard.

She yelped softly at the pain he'd inflicted on her scalp. Oh Hel, she did *not* want to be turned on. She did not want to want him like this. She did not want to love the feeling of his hand gripping the back of her knee and hoisting her thigh up so forcefully over his hip that she knew she would have bruises.

"I don't want this," she whispered, chest heaving as his mouth moved to her ear.

"I *know* you don't mean that," he said, unbuckling the front of his trousers. Relief flooded him as soon as he was free of constriction. "You may be angry with me, Sig, but you still want me."

She moaned (dammit!) as he pushed her harder against the wall, letting go of her thigh to shove her wrists above her head and hold them there.

"You're right. I *do* want you- I want you to stop," she said weakly as his free hand ripped the top of her dress open.

"Pretty little liar, you are," he groaned, his eyes roaming over the newly exposed skin. "You do *not* want me to stop. You can't hide it. I can *feel* it, remember?"

Eyes meeting hers, he held her steady, waiting for the go ahead. She gritted her teeth, angry that she couldn't twist her body far enough to *literally* kick herself.

*Fucking blood bond.*

Even her most convincing poker face couldn't hide the truth. Despite his behavior that day, she still *ached* for him. Her response to him was absurd. And... wrong.

But was it really? The bond allowed her to know his true feelings as well, and he may have yet refused to say it, but he loved her. Breathing hard, she wrapped her legs around his hips, giving him her silent permission. He was right. There would be no denying him because she *did* want him. Right here. Right now.

Gasping against her mouth, he thrust up into her, and eyes rolling back, her mouth fell open. He let go of her wrists to hold her legs, and she took advantage of her freed hands, yanking the hair at the back of his head just as hard as he had hers. A low groan rumbled in his chest as she nipped the sensitive skin of his throat.

“You are *mine*,” he said tightly, then grabbed her chin, bringing her mouth to his in a deep kiss.

Pulling back long enough to catch his breath, he continued driving his hips up into her. Overwhelmed and completely lost in the feeling of him inside and *all around* her, she just nodded in agreement, unable to respond verbally. If she could speak, she would tell him this wasn't one sided. She would simply say “just as you are mine” because she had marked him, too. If he said otherwise, it would be an absolute *lie*. He wasn't just possessive— he was almost *obsessively* protective of her.

*Because he would be shattered if he lost me.*

Dropping his forehead to her shoulder, he pushed deeper, then deeper still a few more times. He hissed against her neck when he came, and if he'd been more aware, he might have felt guilty for not giving her the chance to finish, too. As it stood, however, he was too exhausted from the let down to care.

He *could* at least hold her though, so he did. Keeping her in his arms, her legs still encircling him, he took her to his bed. Fumbling to push the furs back, he stripped them of their remaining garments, and pulled her into the sheets, tangling his long limbs with hers. Drifting into a dreamless sleep, barely conscious, he felt her breath against his ear, her thoughts piercing every cell in his body, leaving him bloodied and broken in pieces.

*If he brings only sorrow, then so be it. I will never love another.*

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## CHAPTER 10: SPIN ME A WEB OF LIES

~TWO WEEKS LATER~

Standing before the full-length mirror in her washroom, Sif scowled at her reflection as she adjusted the wide silver belt engraved with feathers into its perfectly polished, shining metal.

“For the life of me, I do not understand how the other women can stand to wear this sort of nonsense every day,” she said to herself, smoothing the navy satin that clung to her long legs.

Horrible skirt. Why, she was going to trip all over herself at this stupid ball tonight. She rolled her eyes at the word. *Ball.*

*More like BULL...*

*...shit.*

She ran a nervous hand through her loose hair, grimacing as she did so. She would have to *dance*, and everyone would be watching because Thor was her escort. This was going to be so unbelievably humiliating for two reasons: Not only was she a *terrible* dancer, but the other soldiers would see her as more woman than warrior. Her shoulders slumped forward as she returned to her bedchamber to pull on her knee-high formal boots, crisscrossing the long straps over the black suede up her calf.

“This looks positively *ridiculous*,” she whined, pushing up from the bench at the end of her bed once her bootlaces were tied.

“Well, I’ve never seen you in anything quite this *fetching*.”

She jumped at the sound of Thor's voice coming from the doorway. He crossed the room and wrapped his arms around her waist. Butterflies put her stomach in knots as she twisted her fingers in his hair, momentarily forgetting how upset she was about her impending doom at the ball.

“You know,” she said, pausing to lick her lips as his hands moved lower, from her waist, to her hips, and slid around to grab her backside, “a crowned prince should not barge into a woman’s chambers without-” She yelped in surprise when his mouth came down on hers in a kiss, which went from chaste to decidedly *not* chaste in less than a fraction of a second.

“I must have missed the propriety lectures at the academy,” he whispered against her mouth between kisses. “We have just enough time.”

His breath was hot on her neck as he pulled at the slit in her skirt (the most *convenient* invention in the history of women's fashion) exposing her thigh. Unbeknownst to them, Frigga appeared in the doorway to collect them.

“Oh dear,” she said under her breath, immediately dropping her eyes to her hands, then cleared her throat.

Thor and Sif instantly put several feet between each other, both blushing from the tops of their heads to their toes. Frigga chose to keep her eyes down as she spoke.

“A soon to be king cannot be late to a ball in his honor on the eve of his coronation.”

Sif blanched at Frigga's words, horrified that Thor's mother had witnessed .... *that*.

The queen offered her hand to her son then, and reluctant to leave Sif's side, he sighed and tucked his mother's hand in the crook of his arm. Sif trailed behind them as they left for the celebration hall.

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Loki stood behind Sigyn, his arms encircling her waist, outside the lead glass main doors of the grand hall. She leaned her weight into him, watching the dancing on the other side of the crystal-clear barrier. Vanaheim did *not* have [music like this](#).<sup>5</sup>

The drums were so *loud*, and even though her ears were not used to it, she rather liked it. The dancing was her biggest concern. She knew every dance in Vanaheim, but this looked far more improvised, as though Asgardians just grabbed each other and experimented with different steps with each new song. This reminded her of being the new girl at the academy who didn't know where she was going or what she was doing. Gods, she hadn't danced with Loki yet, but something inside her just knew that he was a good dancer, and she would look like a bumbling idiot next to him. Holding her stomach, she turned in his arms to hide her face in his chest.

“My insides are churning so much they'll turn to butter,” she mumbled, playing with the gold collar of his formal armor.

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<sup>5</sup> Song “Black Beatles” by Rae Sremmurd (Violin cover performed by Daj Jordan uk)

“Do *not* be nervous about this, Sig,” he said, kissing the top of her head and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “Everyone in there is positively wasted. They don't care how well you dance.”

“Easy for you to say,” she whined and pushed up on her tiptoes to breathe in the cool and smoky scent of his neck, hoping it would calm her nerves. “You aren't a foreigner.”

Loki tightened his grip on her waist, stifling a moan as her mouth brushed against the underside of his jaw, her breath making him lightheaded. By the *Norns*, he was going to ravish her right there in the middle of the hall if she didn't stop this instant. Taking a deep breath, he managed to find his voice, and it thankfully did not sound strained.

“I'll be there with you,” he said, leaning his head back slightly, enough to be out of reach of her perfect mouth. Not that it really helped him to back away from her mouth because now he was just watching her bite her lush dark red bottom lip anxiously.

“Gods, is it hot in here, or is it just me?” she asked, holding her hair up off her neck.

Watching her, he swallowed hard and chewed his lip. Gods, he could not take his eyes off her, especially now that she was holding her hair up. He could see a light sheen of sweat across her neck and clavicle and lower down her chest because her dark green chiffon gown sported a *sinfully* (blessedly) low neckline.

“It is a little warm, yes,” he said, voice cracking a bit, still watching her as she twisted her hair up to fit under the two golden serpents coiled into one that formed a circlet atop her head.

“Good, I thought it was just me going crazy,” she said and stepped back from him, nervously pacing with her hands on her hips.

The hem of her skirt was just short enough in the front to expose her brown ankle boots, their thin gold heels glinting in the dim light of the torches lining the hall. The gold cord of her dress cinched her waist and accented the flare of her hips with each step she took. Just the way she *walked* had all his blood pooling at the top of his legs. Truly, he couldn't stop staring. Mind racing with thoughts of ripping that pretty dress off, he grabbed her as she passed in front of him again. He gripped her hips, leaning his forehead against hers. She grinned and slid her hands up over his armored shoulders and into the hair at the back of his neck.

“Believe me, I'd love to do exactly what you are thinking about right now,” she whispered, licking her lips when his hands began to wander, “though maybe not right here in plain sight.”

He pulled her hips flush with his and brought his mouth down on hers, but before he could deepen the kiss, he heard approaching footsteps. *Damn*. He let go of her, and she turned to see Odin, Frigga, Thor, and Sif coming down the hall. Groaning quietly, Sigyn turned back

to Loki and dropped her head to his chest. She chuckled with him as he tried to discreetly adjust himself in his trousers while her body blocked him from his family.

*Moment ruined.*

She'd had every intention of dragging him back to his chambers, pushing him down onto his bed, unlacing those trousers and crawling on top of him. He was the god of *mischief*, for Hel's sake. He *should* be late to the coronation ball for less than honorable reasons. She heard him curse under his breath then.

"Sorry," she apologized, forgetting that he could hear her thoughts, which were not helping his *situation*.

"It's fine," he whispered to her and stepped around her to greet his mother. He bowed, kissing Frigga's hand. "Hello, Mother, you look beautiful as always."

He resumed his posture and nodded to his brother and father. "Thor. Father. Sif...?"

His eyes widened at the woman in front of him. "Wow, nice *dress*."

He smirked, knowing that wearing a dress was probably killing her. He tried not to laugh at the scowl on her face as he grabbed her hand to place a kiss on her knuckles, as was practice at a formal event.

"Sig and I thought you might be no shows. It took you long enough," he said brightly as Sif snatched her hand back.

Winking at Sigyn, he bit his cheeks to keep from laughing. She merely rolled her eyes, elbowing him in the side while Frigga and Thor threw warning glances at him, and Odin, clearly annoyed, gestured for his youngest to enter the ballroom. Loki offered both arms to the young women, and his brother's *lady* friend glared at him.

"Oh, come now, I won't bite you, Sif."

Glaring at his younger brother, Thor scoffed. "You had *better* not."

"Shall we, ladies?" Loki asked, smiling brightly at Sif when she reluctantly took his arm.

He then escorted them underneath the guards' arched swords and into the drunken dance filled hall. Frigga on Odin's arm followed. Finally, Thor walked in, the guards announcing their arrival amidst deafening cheers and applause.

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~CORONATION BALL, THE GRAND HALL~

When they first entered the ballroom, at Sigyn's request, she and Loki went straight to the beverage tray. If she was going to *attempt* to dance alongside these Asgardians to songs she didn't know, she told him firmly that she needed a drink. Maybe three. With his arm draped across her shoulders, he waited for her to finish a pint of dry hard cider (bless him for ordering the kitchen staff to provide something other than mead). He then dragged her away from the bar, yelling into her ear over the loud music that they were playing his favorite song<sup>6</sup>, and they needed to get on the dance floor *now*.

Biting his lip around a wide smile, he held her hand as they weaved through the dancing bodies to the middle of the floor. He staked out a spot for them, and holding her hand over her head, he spun her in a slow circle and pulled her into him.

He slid his hand to the small of her back, the other up to the nape of her neck, sending a shiver straight down her spine. Instinctively, she put a hand on his shoulder and her other on his neck, almost mirroring his stance. With a hint of a smirk, he bent down slightly and molded her body to his. Then right in step with the *deep* beat of the music, he twisted his hips in an entirely *inappropriate* fashion. Her jaw dropped as he pressed her further into him, moving her hips with his.

Dear *gods*. She had never danced like *this*. Her insides were turning to lava as he spun them in slow sensual circles. She'd been wrong. Loki wasn't a good dancer. He was an *amazing* dancer. She gazed up at him, completely dazed, in the *best* way.

The slightest hint of sweat shone on his brow, he leaned his head down and swept it back up in time with the beat of the drums to get the strands of loose hair that had fallen out from behind his ears off his face. With his eyes closed, he looked completely lost in the moment, and he was the most gorgeous thing she'd ever seen, the most gorgeous thing she could have *imagined*. This was a side of Loki that she hadn't seen— a wild and free side, and it had the fire under her skin burning hotter for reasons that had *nothing* to do with anger. She wanted to stay here and dance with him forever, or at least until her feet ached so badly that she had to stop.

Many people tried to move in on them, but both she and Loki stared daggers at each of them until they backed off. Eventually, Odin called both aside, scolding them for being *antisocial*, and she nearly threw a tantrum right then and there. Were they not all here to simply have fun? For the love, this wasn't about *mingling*.

So now, here she stood, downing more cider at the bar, having been forced by *his majesty* to separate from Loki. She crossed her arms and cocked her hip angrily, glaring at the woman that *her* man had been forced to dance with. She had the urge to grab *whoever she was* by

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<sup>6</sup> “Bad Guy” by Billie Eilish (violin cover performed by ItsAMoney)

her golden hair, drag her to the cold balcony, and throw her over the ledge. Why would that woman even want to dance with him? What exactly did she get out of it? It wasn't as though he was *available*. Anyone with half a brain could see that Loki of Asgard wanted *only* Sigyn of Vanaheim, thank you very much.

*Come now, I'm wearing green and gold and SERPENTS, for Hel's sake!*

He was, to her relief, incredibly inattentive to his partner. He barely touched the woman, keeping a good foot and a half between them. Just when it looked as though he was finally free to come retrieve Sigyn, the [song](#)<sup>7</sup> having ended, he was handed off to another irritatingly well-endowed woman. She spat her drink back in her glass, her eyes blazing and nostrils flaring when the woman put her hands around his neck and tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling him down and giving him an eyeful of cleavage.

*What. The. Fuck.*

She slammed her glass down on the bar, black smoke seeping from her fingers. The torches flared, stealing her attention away from Loki. Seeing the flames growing in height, she *somehow* managed to reel in the smoke from her fingers. Her eyes moved back to him just in time to see him yanking the woman's hands off his neck and turning completely away from her. Grabbing her stomach, Sigyn doubled over in laughter at the woman's shocked face. Clearly, that person had never been rebuffed before, and she was not hiding her horror well, what with her mouth hanging open like a damn trout.

The musicians finished the last [stanza](#)<sup>8</sup>, and after huge cheers and applause, they yelled out the next [tune](#)<sup>9</sup> they would play. It must have been a favorite because the cheering grew substantially. She smiled. Now was her chance to reclaim *her* man. She took a step in his direction but was stopped by a hand on her shoulder. Turning, she saw a blond man dressed in the garb of the Crimson Hawks smiling at her.

“Will you only be dancing with Prince Loki this evening, Lady Sigyn?” he asked, holding his hand out for her.

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes, instead forcing herself to be *nice*. Wouldn't want to upset Papa Odin. She looked down and snorted at the title. It had just come to her.

Raising her head to look at the soldier in front of her once more, she decided it wouldn't be the worst thing to dance with someone else. At least while Loki was unavailable.

“Not if you ask nicely,” she smiled rather convincingly and took his hand.

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<sup>7</sup> “Heathens” by Twenty One Pilots (violin/cello/bass cover performed by Simply Three)

<sup>8</sup> “Royals” by Lorde (violin cover performed by Daniel Jang)

<sup>9</sup> “Shape of You” by Ed Sheeran (violin/viola cover performed by sleightlymusical and ThatViolaKid)



"You may call me Gylfi. I am a lieutenant of the Crimson Hawks, my lady," he said and brought her hand to his mouth, kissing her knuckles. He stood to his full height then, shorter than Loki by a few inches. "I have been watching you all night, and you are the fairest lady in all of Asgard."

She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. *Fairest lady in all of Asgard?* Did that line work on the other women? Ugh, sadly it probably did.

He'd not released her had yet and was standing too close for comfort. She looked back to where Loki had been, hoping he hadn't seen the attentive soldier. Nothing could ruin the night quite like a blood splattering *murder*, and she doubted he would restrain himself like she had.

"Lead on, Gylfi," she said, gesturing to the dancefloor, wondering idly if he would try to dance with her just like Loki had. Heavens, she hoped not.

Blessedly, Gylfi kept a respectable distance, mostly just dancing around her, and clapping his hands like everyone else. Distracted, she scanned the room again, looking for Loki's green cape. Where was he? She'd just seen him not five minutes ago when he was pushing that large breasted cow off him. Gylfi's hand landed on her waist then.

"You are not dancing!" he shouted, not rudely though.

"Forgive me, Gylfi," she shouted back over the music and shook her head. "Thank you for the dance." From across the room, she made accidental eye contact with Theoric, and she cringed, watching as he set his drink on the bar and headed in her direction.

"For the love, not *again*," she grumbled under her breath.

Pushing her way through the crowd, she hurried in the opposite direction and conveniently found Thor and his friends dancing. She slipped her hand into the crook of Fandral's arm. Smiling broadly, he slid his arm around her waist and looked behind him, wondering where the Hel Loki was.

"Where is your dark suitor, dear Sigyn?" Fandral said directly in her ear as he spun her out from him and brought her back. "Surely he would not approve of this. Though I must admit I rather like it!"

"Indeed! Where is my brother?" Thor added, eyes sweeping the room as Sif planted a kiss on his cheek.

"It is unfortunate that he is not wearing his horns," Volstagg chimed in, his mouth, for once, devoid of food. "It would be so much easier to spot him."

Giddy from the alcohol, Sif made a pair of horns with her first fingers as she swayed in Thor's arms.

“His helmet is absolutely *ridiculous*,” she shouted.

She then openly grabbed Thor by the neck and kissed him. His eyes widened but crinkled with a smile, his hand massaging the small of her back as he nipped her ear.

“I think that mead has gone to your head, Sif,” he laughed as Sif turned in his arms, dancing with her back now to his front, and reached her hand up behind his head to pull him back for another kiss.

Ignoring their romantic display, Sigyn looked away, and once again saw Theoric within a few feet of her. She wrapped her arms around Fandral's neck, allowing him to pull her closer to him, nearly as close as Loki had. She certainly wouldn't have chosen to dance to [music](#)<sup>10</sup> this provocative with Fandral, but somehow it felt like a safer place than anywhere near Theoric. Not to mention she still had no clue where Loki was, and she was genuinely becoming worried. Despite her efforts to appear otherwise occupied, the captain didn't stop in his pursuit of her, and within seconds he was standing behind her, speaking directly in her ear.

“Sigyn, I'd love a dance with you after this gentleman.”

She tensed up immediately, her stomach churning with nausea at the feel of his hot breath on her ear. She wasn't exactly *afraid* of him, however, being a woman did have its downside in that moment. Knowing she could take care of herself wasn't enough to ease her queasiness when a man who she *did not want* was this relentless. She wanted to ask if he'd gone mad. Surely, he wasn't this dense. Had she not made herself painfully clear on multiple occasions? For the love, where was Loki? She was positive this man wouldn't bother her if Loki showed up next to her (like he *ought* to). Squaring her shoulders, telling herself she was *fine*, she tried to keep a cordial tone despite her anxiety.

“My apologies, but I'll be dancing with Fandral for quite some time,” she said loud enough for Theoric to hear without yelling.

She then pulled Fandral away with her, clutching his neck tightly. He pulled a face as she moved her hips with his.

“I feel quite used,” he scoffed, “but if you wish me to take over *all* of Loki's duties, I shall sacrifice my entire evening.”

He winked, but she didn't see it. Lost in her thoughts, she didn't even hear him. She was still shaken by Theoric's words, from his mere presence. She would feel so much better if Loki were here, wrapping his strong arms around her, kissing her hair, and threatening to cut off that man's head and serve it on a gold platter at Thor's coronation meal. Where in the nine had he gone? She couldn't even feel him through the bond! It clicked then.

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<sup>10</sup> “I Fall Apart” by Post Malone (violin cover performed by Rhett Price)

Jaw clenching, she narrowed her eyes. She would have known exactly where he was, even if her skin hadn't suddenly frozen under a paper-thin sheen of ice. Fandral dropped his hands from her as though she'd burned him and pulled away to look at her.

“Odin’s ravens!” he shouted, stunned by how pale she'd gone. “Sigyn, darling, you are absolutely freezing! It hurts to touch you! Here, let me help you to Eir to determine the cause immediately.” He helped her across the dancefloor, rubbing her arms to calm her shivering.

“I'm fine,” she muttered, once they were near the exit.

“Are you certain, dearest?” he asked, reluctant to let her leave by herself.

Once again, she focused on her fire to warm her up enough to at least walk on her own. Looking up at Fandral, she nodded and pulled away without another word. She turned left and headed straight for the south wing of the royal corridor to wait for Loki in his bedroom. He'd better have a damn good explanation when he returned from Jotunheim.

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If only an illusion would have been enough. Visual lies practically sustained themselves, with little to no effort from Loki, for long periods. Unfortunately, the frost giants were much smarter than their loincloths and bare feet suggested. They would have seen right through it.

When he first ventured into the frozen realm through the rock portal in the forest after Sigyn had left him at the foot of the mountain two weeks prior, he had flicked his wrist, and in a flash of green light, he'd enshrouded himself in the guise of a palace guard. However, fooling the Jotun king, Laufey, would take more than a convincing illusion, so he'd stealthily returned to the portal and uttered the spell to conjure a double. Though it couldn't be *his* double. He'd needed a different body, lest something go awry and Laufey sent a legion of his monster race looking for Loki. No, he couldn't let Laufey see his face.

He had not yet learned the formula for conjuring a new person, that is, one who did not actually exist, so he'd racked his brain, searching for a disposable soul, and had landed upon the *perfect* candidate. When a convincing, though not exact, replica of Theoric had approached Laufey, Loki had waited within the portal, watching through the eyes and hearing through the ears of the conjured hawk. It was exhausting to conjure his own double, but to make a double in the form of someone other than himself was *painful*. He'd bent over, clinging to the icy cavern walls of the portal, trying to catch his breath and keep down the bile as “*Theoric*” bargained with them:

*“I shall return on the eve of the heir’s coronation and bring you to the vaults. Your invasion will go unnoticed as the people will have indulged far too much in their mead. You shall hide within the vault until the ceremony begins the next day, for then the guards will have dwindled in their numbers to behold the new king. As Captain of the Hawks, I will order a change of guard and shall take post at the vault. You can then retrieve your Casket and return to Jotunheim.”*

*Laufey, eyes narrowed, had stood from his frozen throne. “How shall we return undetected?” he asked, his voice gravelly.*

*“A militia has already formed against the thunder god. I shall ensure your return with their aid.”*

*“And what of this militia? You would surely be sending them to their deaths. The Allfather would have them executed. Is that a price you are willing to pay?”*

*“Yes. A few dozen Asgardians killed is hardly worth batting an eyelash over if it would mean saving the entire realm from the heir’s idiocy. Prince Thor is a fool. He cannot replace the Allfather. Asgard would fall under his rule. When you invade the vaults, not only will his coronation be ruined, but his desire for retaliation will prove to Odin what many of us already know: Thor is not ready to be king.*

*He will never be ready. Odin is weary in his old age and does not want war. He prefers diplomacy. He will not attack if he believes you won't use the Casket for realm domination but only to restore Jotunheim to its former glory. It would take some convincing, but it can be done. I realize that sneaking into Asgard through a secret forest portal will make the convincing a bit more difficult, but what choice did you have?*

*All you ever wanted was to restore your home. Or so you can claim. Odin has grown soft. I imagine with a pleading look you can tug at his heart strings. And part of your treaty can be to keep the location of the portal secret. Do I have your word that you will not use it against Asgard? I do this in hopes of keeping the peace treaty intact.”*

*“This plan is foolhardy at best,” Laufey said with a deep scowl. “Keep the portal secret as part of a treaty? Do you think your king is an imbecile?”*

*“I have been his captain for over a century. He has changed much since you last had conflict with him. He is not as power hungry as he once was. He wishes to protect, to keep peace. Your treaty has lasted for centuries. You’ve not once betrayed his trust. He will remember that.”*

*“And what of Heimdall? How did he not spot you coming through this portal? How will he not see my men coming through? And if this plan works, and we want the portal kept secret, why wouldn’t he aim his eyes to the forest?”*

*“We have a few sorcerers amongst our militia, and they aided me. They shall aid you as well. And when they are executed, which they are prepared for, their secrets will die with them. They are willing to die for this cause.”*

*Laufey frowned, deep creases in his brow growing deeper still, making him look like the saddest creature ever to have existed. “I do not wish to conquer the realms,” he said, sighing heavily. “I only wish to restore my own. We lost our power because we attempted to take over Midgard. I accept your offer. Heed this warning though, Captain of the Hawks. If we are unsuccessful, if war comes to Jotunheim, we will have your life.”*

*“Oh, I’m counting on it,” Loki had said to himself through Theoric's double as he came back through the portal, dissipating his form just in time to escape being seen by Sigyn when she came back into the forest.*

Now, he looked on from the empty stables as the Theoric's double made good on his promise and escorted three Jotuns along the outskirts of the city. The pain of sustaining the double, of enshrouding them in an invisible cloak, was worth it. He was gleeful, despite the ache pounding away at the top of his spine. He watched with narrow eyes as the hawk with the monsters in tow, slipped unseen, even from Heimdall, through the guards’ quarters below the palace gate. Safely arriving in the vault, still invisible to the soldiers pacing the cavernous hall, the Jotuns disappeared within the shadows. Loki allowed “Theoric” to dissipate outside the vault as he trekked back to the palace from the stables.

He could hear cheers, laughter, and loud [music](#)<sup>11</sup> floating across the cold wind as he climbed the stone wall below his chambers. Apparently, the festivities were still in full swing. Fine by him. It was likely no one had even realized he was gone.

Well, Sigyn might have, but he'd honestly hoped that cider had kept her distracted from reality. Reaching his balcony, he jumped over the ledge, but before his boots even hit the floor, a dark figure assaulted him. Shaking his head, trying to get his bearings, he squatted low, his dagger unsheathed. He returned the blade to his boot as soon as he heard his attacker crying. Sighing heavily, he pushed her hair behind her ears and wiped under her eyes with his thumbs— *Oh Sig*. She was breaking his heart as she fell to her knees in front of him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Why?” she sobbed into his neck.

She didn't need to explain her question to him. He knew that *she* knew where he'd been was dangerous and that it could've killed him, but she had no idea why. Why did he keep forgetting the bond? He would never get away with anything all because he'd bitten her in one moment of passion!

Kissing her cheek, he lifted her, one hand under her knees, the other under her shoulders, and carried her into his fire lit room. He set her down on the hearth sofa and tucked a large soft black blanket around her, so she could warm up. Gods, she'd felt positively *frigid* out on the balcony, which was absurd because she had *fire* magic for Hel's sake. He took a second to look her over. Other than being ridiculously cold and red-eyed from crying, she seemed fine. Shaking his head, he frowned. Why was she still shivering? He didn't understand. Clamping his eyes shut, he ran a hand down his face. The bond. That was why she was cold. Fucking Jotunheim.

He sighed heavily. She'd be fine after a few moments by the fire. Nothing to truly be concerned about. Right? Pushing to his feet, he began the process of unbuckling, unhooking, unstrapping, and unclasping the many fastenings that held his armor together. She followed his movements with her eyes.

“Please, Loki,” she whispered.

“Let it go, Sig,” he said, voice strained a bit from the cold.

“Look at me,” he continued, holding his arms out perpendicular to his body, palms up. He spun in a slow circle. “Not even a scratch.”

It wasn't the way she would have chosen to stop shivering, but if becoming uncontrollably angry was the only way, then so be it. The fire beneath her skin grew hotter as she watched him flop backward on the bed, refusing to explain any further.

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<sup>11</sup> “Am I Wrong” by Nico & Vinz (violin cover performed by Damien Escobar)

“Enough with the secrecy, Loki,” she said, keeping her voice low, trying to control herself. “I want to know why. What business do you have with Jotunheim?”

Nothing. Not a peep. Throwing the blanket off her, she stood from the sofa and threw her hands up.

“Gods dammit, Loki, *answer me!*”

She wanted to beat it out of him. Why was he *doing* this to her? Why wouldn't he tell her? This wasn't the way to treat someone you loved! Did he not care at *all* how much he was hurting her? She felt sick in every way that one could be sick. Her head pounded. Every joint, every muscle, every bone screamed. It felt as though Fenrir was sitting on her chest. Her throat was dry, and nausea wreaked havoc within her core. She wondered idly what he would do if his spotless fur rugs were soiled with her vomit.

In response to her question, he had the *gall* to shake his head and actually grin at her, and that did the trick. All control was lost. Her black smoke not only pooled at the hem of her dress, but rushed out from her fingers, from the ends of her hair, and enshrouded her as the flames within the fireplace shot out across the room, dangerously near him. The enchanted green flames on the huge and *heavy* chandelier that hung above his bed grew until the iron began to melt from the heat, the hot metal dripping onto his bed.

His eyes widened in horror as it shook, and it fell before he could register that he needed to move. She screamed as the wrought iron and flames crashed onto him. Throwing her hand out in front of her face, black mist flew across the room and onto the flames of the chandelier before they could burn him. Instantly, the flames were snuffed out into smoke and ash, and she ran to him to help pry the heavy iron off him. Groaning, he rolled over once she'd been successful in her attempts.

“Let me see!” she shrieked, lifting his arm to get a better look wishing he'd not stripped off his armor. “Oh gods, are you bleeding? Are you hurt? Let me see!”

Thank Odin he'd left his trousers on at least. Inspecting him closely for injuries, she found some scratches, and bruises were forming across his torso, but other than that, he was surprisingly *okay*. She shook her head, confused.

How had he not burned at all? How had that heavy chandelier only left scratches? Asgardians were strong for certain, but he should have come out with at least a broken bone. That chandelier had to weigh upwards of seven hundred pounds! Not that she *wanted* him to be hurt. To her surprise, he then started laughing and pulled her on top of him, his hands gripping her waist, his hips rocking up as she straddled him. She pushed his hands away, unconvincingly attempting escape.

“What the Hel is *wrong* with you? Here I am, terrified, thinking I've pulled a Sif on you, and all you can think about is your cock?”

“You *did* pull a Sif,” he said, delight and admiration evident in his tone, “and it was amazing, albeit slightly terrifying, to watch.”

He then rolled them, positioning himself over her, and flashed her a dazzling smile before moving his mouth to her ear.

“The power that flows through your veins is unbelievably arousing to me, Sig,” he whispered. “That smoke swirling around you, your hair whipping about your face, your eyes darkening. *By Hel...*” His voice gave out on him. His trousers were becoming far too tight.

She pushed half-heartedly at his chest. “Get off me, you idiot.”

She’d meant it to sound genuine, but she was a terrible liar, apparently. Her voice was becoming raspy as he kissed her neck.

“Loki, you can’t keep doing this.” She was beginning to think that she had no resolve at all. “You can’t shut me up with sex every-”

His mouth covered hers, effectively doing exactly that. Shutting her up. And she was letting him. Again.

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## CHAPTER 11: THOR IS NOT READY

### ~NEXT DAY, THE CORONATION HALL~

Sigyn stood up on her toes, trying to see how far the crowd of Asgardians stretched beyond the boundary of the coronation hall. Not that *hall* was a grand enough description for this place. She couldn't help but gawk at her surroundings.

Dead center within the palatial stadium that formed the *entire* foundation of the palace, a shinier and larger replica of Odin's throne stood proud. The official throne room where Odin did most of his work could, at most, hold a thousand bodies, which wasn't *nearly* grand enough for an Asgardian coronation, so they were crowning Thor here instead. She rolled her eyes. Only in Asgard would a thousand guests be too small. This impossibly huge arena she found herself in had to house at *least* ten times that.

“By Hel, the entire realm must be in attendance,” she mumbled to herself, nervously playing with the ends of her hair.

Frigga had told her to stand in the inner circle, which was reserved for nobility and foreign dignitaries. She felt neither dignified nor noble, but if the queen wanted her to be with the *fancy* people, then she would do as she was told. At least she wasn't alone. Sif and Thor's friends were there, too.

“Tis a good thing it is not raining,” Sif said, looking past the sea of Asgardians dressed in their finest garb to the cloudless sky as she adjusted her new polished silver vambraces.

Fandral held a mirror, fixing imagined flyaways on his perfect coif.

“Heimdall would only need to cover the open-air rim with the palace's transparent shield,” he said, shrugging.

Sigyn side-eyed him. “And what of those who are not within the shield's boundaries?” she asked, pointing to the thousands gathered on the grounds surrounding the royal family's golden castle.

“Oh, dearest Sigyn,” he chuckled and wrapped one arm around her waist, sweeping the other across the scene. “If only you could see that far, it must be difficult with those delicate Vanir eyes, you would note that our lovely peasants have fastened hooded cloaks about their shoulders.”

She shrugged out of his hold, glaring at him. “My eyesight is *excellent*, thank you,” she practically growled.

“Hogun,” she said, turning to the grim warrior and scoffing. “You are of Vanaheim, as well. How can you stand him? I would leave red handprints on his face regularly for all his racist and, might I add, misogynistic comments. Of course, a more effective discipline would be to simply destroy his mirror.”

Hogun chuckled quietly, a rare thing indeed. “I cannot recall when I last granted Fandral my full attention outside of sparring,” he said softly, winking at her. “Those of Vanaheim are skilled at tuning out buzzing flies.”

Fandral rolled his eyes. “Considering your realm is full of those nasty little bugs, you should be,” he said, pausing to kiss her cheek. “I’ve yet to see so much as a *gnat* in Asgard, however.”

She made a face, swiping her now wet cheek with the back of her hand.

“And I shall simply steal one of Loki’s many mirrors,” he added and poked her nose. “There is none *vainer* than your dark prince.”

Crossing her arms, she gave him a once over and shrugged. “It does him better than it does you, clearly,” she said simply.

His smirk was quickly transforming into something resembling a sneer. “Once again, the poor quality of your Vanir eyes fails you.”

“I swear, Fandral,” she hissed, hands fisting at her sides, fighting to control her anger. “I will claw out *your* eyes if you-”

“*Children*, please!” Volstagg groaned, cutting her off and pulling Fandral who was still glaring at her by the elbow to the steps below the throne. “Come, we must go to our places. The queen and Silvertongue are coming!”

Breaking her glaring contest with Fandral, she turned to watch Loki escort his mother down the long aisle to the throne. Eyes blown wide with admiration, she nearly stopped breathing. He was in full regalia armor (minus his horned helmet), his green cape flowing behind him. The previously silent crowd erupted into cheers for their adored queen and her mischievous son. She applauded along with the crowd, trying to keep her composure, despite wanting to grab him for a kiss as he passed.

He looked just .... what word could describe him? Delicious? No, that wasn’t good enough. Delectable? Getting closer. He looked like godsdamn *dessert*. She saw him bite his lip and smile, and she knew he’d heard it as he took his place on the steps, below his mother and above Sif.

Odin appeared at the end of the aisle, and everyone solemnly bowed as he passed. Once at the throne, he nodded, and Thor entered, thrusting Mjölfnir in the air, a silver winged helmet adorning his golden head. The ensuing roar of applause and heralding from the

proud citizens literally hurt her ears, causing her to wince. She had to stop herself from covering them. Rolling her eyes at Thor's arrogant display, she trained her eyes on Loki.

Despite him being a good actor, she saw pain in his face. No one else would have noticed it, but considering how much time she'd spent studying his face, it was easy for her to see. Of course, she could also *feel* it. Feel the rejection, the sorrow, the disappointment. The utter sense of *failure*. She hung her head and closed her eyes. This was *awful*. She wanted to run up there and just *hug* him.

Then something changed. Sorrow turned to excitement. Disappointment to anticipation. Confusion creasing her brow, she looked on as a small smile appeared on his face. Was he ... *happy*? As Thor came to the bottom of the golden stairs and knelt before his father, a slightly blurred image, almost like a mirage, appeared in her mind: *Out of the shadows, within the weapons vault, three Jotuns appeared, charging toward a transparent box that sat atop a tall stone pedestal. Blue light swirled within the box.*

She recognized the box. Loki had shown it to her once. It was the Jotuns' power source, the Casket of Ancient Winters, and it had been taken long ago by Odin. The image continued: *Lifting the pulsing casket, one of the frost giants turned to run, but a blast of bright fiery light shot him in the gut, wrenching the powerful box free of his grip.*

She shook her head, trying to understand what she had just seen. Then it clicked. Frost giants. Jotunheim. *Loki*. She was only vaguely aware of her actual surroundings. Thor was repeating an oath spoken by his father, but she could barely hear his words. She was too busy staring at Loki, horrified.

*What have you done?*

Her silent question rang in his ears, and he raised his eyes to look for her. He found her easily. One hand on her mouth, her eyes glistened. He locked eyes with her, jaw clenched, his body tensing visibly. His eyes glazed over, and everything that wasn't Sigyn blurred. He could see her struggling to hold back her tears, and there was nothing he could do. He desperately wanted to run to her. To tell her that it would be *alright*. That the Jotuns wouldn't hurt them. That everything was under control. That he was just sparing Asgard from a foolhardy king.

He forced his body to stay still though, despite feeling every ounce of fear and anger that was boiling over within her. Honestly, it was the anger part that he was most concerned about. Sucking in his cheeks, he discreetly eyed the many torches throughout the hall. To his relief, the flames hadn't grown in height.

*Yet.*

He then realized that Odin had stopped saying the oath.

*What is my father doing?*

“Frost giants,” the old man whispered.

Loki's eyes blew wide. Shit, this was really happening.

Sigyn's other hand flew to her mouth at the booming sound of Gungnir hitting the foot of the throne. It was the Allfather's silent command for the Destroyer, the fire breathing twenty-foot-tall metal man and lethal protector of the vault, to kill the invading Jotuns.

Stunned by their king's words and actions, the crowd's confused murmurs grew to a panicked roar, and hundreds of soldiers pushed against them, attempting to calm them and bring order. Odin angrily descended the stairs, ordering his best guards to the vault. Thor took off after his father, but someone grabbed his cape, forcing him to halt in his pursuit.

Turning, ready to punch whoever had grabbed him, he growled, “Dammit! Who-”

His anger ceased immediately at the sight of Sif.

“I'm coming with you,” she said sternly, removing a leather strap from her formal armor to pull back her long hair.

Thor shook his head, pulling her against his chest in a tight embrace.

“Not this time, Sif,” he said, wincing as her face fell, but there was no time for apologies, so he pulled away, handing her his kingly helmet before turning once again to run after his father.

Sigyn fought to get through the chaotic swarm of bodies, but it was to no avail. She was strong, but not *that* strong, and she was being pushed from all sides. This was *insane*. She was going to either suffocate or be trampled. Mercifully, there were a few shorter Vanir nobles around her, so she could see over them to find an exit. Blowing her hair out of her face, she scanned the crowd for an opening.

Then someone's elbow slammed right into her solar plexus, and she doubled over, gasping for breath, the pain in her chest radiating out to all her limbs. The tears were now flowing freely, and she was quickly losing hope for getting out of this place without a serious injury. Now that she was bent over, she was, to her horror, being pushed further down and would soon be on the ground under foot.

*Oh gods, stand back up!*

But she couldn't. Not only was the pain in her chest making it hard to catch a breath, but the fire under her skin combined with the crowd pushing in from all directions was going to give her heat stroke. Just as her vision was about to fade to black, she heard a deep voice growling “*Get off her!*” followed by the sound of someone being punched, and then two strong arms came around her waist, wrenching her free from the crowd. Despite being wrapped in his arms, Loki's voice sounded far away.

“Sig!” he yelled, moving one hand up to her cheek. Her eyes were still closed, and she felt far too hot, her breathing shallow.

*Oh no.*

“Sig, darling,” he hoisted her up further against his chest and moved his hand to the back of her neck, the ache in his chest growing the longer she remained unconscious. “Come on, *wake up!*”

It was the coolness of his hand on the back of her neck that brought her back, and her eyes fluttered open to see Loki, his green eyes red and shining with tears, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Loki?” she said, voice hoarse as she blinked rapidly.

“You're alright,” he whispered, leaning his forehead against hers.

Out of her periphery, she could see everyone was still rushing around, shrieking and crying. This was *scary*. She focused on the sound of Loki's breathing and the feel of his arms around her to help ground her. Reaching up, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him as close as she could. Despite the madness around her, she felt safe right here. That feeling didn't last long.

“I must go,” he said, pressing a kiss to her temple, his arms loosening their hold on her.

Her jaw dropped as she pulled back to look him in the eyes. “What? Loki, you *cannot* leave me in this madhouse! Wherever you're going, let me come with-”

“No, Sig,” he growled and crushed his mouth against hers.

“Go to my mother,” he said, pulling away from the kiss. He pointed behind her. “She's not but ten feet away. Everything will be fine, but I *must* go!”

Kissing her one more time, he pushed her back and turned on his heel. In a flash of green, he dashed after his father and brother, catching up to them quickly with dozens of soldiers on his tail.

### ~MOMENTS LATER IN THE WEAPONS VAULT~

Breathing through his mouth, Loki put a hand under his nose as he stepped carefully around the guards' corpses frozen solid in their own blood on the floor of the weapons vault. He watched with steely eyes as the Destroyer returned to its post behind a wall of spiked metal gratings at the front of the vault behind the casket's pillar. No doubt the Destroyer had done its job since three frost giants lay dead at the base of the pillar with the casket next to them.

He felt a bit sick, and he blew out an unsteady breath as Odin carefully lifted the casket back to its rightful place. There was no way Odin could possibly guess that he had anything to do with this, right? Staring at the old man, he straightened his shoulders and listened to his thoughts. He breathed a sigh of relief when all he found was confusion and anger aimed at the Jotuns only.

Closing off his mind to his father's, he refocused on shielding his own from Sigyn. *No doubt* she was trying to see what was happening through the bond. He allowed her to see only the three scorched frost giants, not the image of the unexpected Æsir casualties. He scowled, remembering his own words—*Just a bit of fun*. Well, *fun* only applied to a few dead frost giants ruining Thor's big day. Mauled bodies of Asgardian soldiers were *not* part of the plan. Wrinkling his nose, he looked down at his hands. The blood on them wouldn't wash away with water. No. This blood would stay with him.

Kicking the closest Jotun corpse, Thor growled and let his hammer drop to the ground heavily. Odin sighed as he bent over the burnt body of a frost giant, examining the blue flesh.

“Well,” he said, turning to his sons, “this seems a most opportune time for a lesson. As king,” he looked at Thor specifically, “what would you do, my son?”

“Send our army to Jotunheim, of course,” Thor said without hesitation. He looked to Loki for confirmation. After a stunt like this, *surely* diplomacy had flown out the window.

Rolling his eyes, Loki cleared his throat. Yes, he'd been right to stop the coronation. His brother was a fool.

Thor scoffed at his brother's silence.

“If you have something to say, then say it,” he said, crossing his arms.

Letting his eyelids fall shut, Loki dropped his head and laughed mirthlessly.

“*War* with Jotunheim, Thor? Really? Father has a truce with Laufey.”

“Truce?” Thor said through his teeth, gesturing to the dead guards. “This doesn't look like a *truce* to me!”

Odin raised his hand, silencing his sons before the argument to escalate to something more barbaric.

“Calm down, Thor,” he said with a sigh. Much like Loki, he was disturbed that Thor's first decision was war.

“A king must keep his head and not make such rash decisions,” he reminded his first son, not hiding the disappointment in his voice.

Thor's jaw nearly dropped to the floor. He looked at the carnage around him. Was *this* not an act of war? He couldn't believe his father was blatantly ignoring the threat of a Jotun invasion. Was he the only one using his head at all? Who was to say that Laufey wouldn't send his entire army next time? And how had they even gotten past Heimdall in the first place?! Did no one else find it more than a little alarming?!

"Loki," Odin said, not even looking at his second son, "go inform your mother that the casket is safe and that the frost giants were slain."

Clenching his jaw at being dismissed so flippantly, Loki nodded. What else was there to do? Clearly his father did not care to hear his opinions or suggestions. It certainly wasn't the first time he'd felt the sting of his father's disregard. He knew without a doubt that it wouldn't be the last, either.

"Very well," he said, straightening his shoulders, "I see that, once again, my presence is not needed"

*Or wanted.*

He turned and climbed the steps to the doors without another word. Let Thor have his ass handed to him by their father. See if *he* cared.

## ~THE QUEEN'S CHAMBERS~

"Oh Loki," Frigga breathed, hurrying to her son, and throwing her arms around his shoulders as soon as he appeared in her doorway, "I'm so relieved you're alright. What happened?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but he was cut off by Sif.

"What of Thor?" she asked.

She had joined Frigga (and Sigyn, he assumed, though looking around he didn't see her) in the queen's chambers after he and his brother ran after their father.

"Is he still in the vault?" she continued, not giving him a chance to answer her first question. "Why did he not come back with you?"

He rolled his eyes. For the life of him, he did not understand this woman's infatuation with his insipid sibling.

"Father and he are having a slight *disagreement*," he said, shrugging his shoulders and glaring at her. "It would seem that your beloved desires war with Jotunheim."

They gaped at him as though he had grown two heads. He was about to repeat himself when Sigyn, her eyes puffy and red, appeared in the doorway of the washroom. His heart *ached* at the sight of her. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, but at that moment she looked like Hel. He crossed the space in two long strides, and cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her forehead.

"I'm so sorry, Sig," he whispered low against her ear. "I didn't *want* to leave you. Are you alright?"

"She's got a nasty bruise right smack in the middle of her chest, poor thing," an older woman (a healer) answered for her, walking over to her and placing an ice pack on the bruise.

He pulled back from Sigyn enough to look at the injury, and sure enough, big, and purple and blue, a bruise marred her lovely skin right across her sternum. He took the ice pack from the healer and held it against the bruise. She winced, probably from the cold, and he kissed her forehead.

"Is Thor completely mad?" she said, looking up at him with wide eyes. "A few Jotuns in the vault, and he's ready to plunge headfirst into war with the frost giants?"

She was quickly losing faith in the *heir's* ability to rule the nine realms, not that she'd had much in the first place.

"I'm going to him," Sif said, tightening the leather strap around her hair. "Someone needs to talk him down, and forgive me for saying so, but I doubt that the Allfather can do it." Without another word, she ran through the open doors.

"Loki," Frigga said, though it sounded more akin to a sigh, "you and Sigyn should change out of your formal attire. I fear that the coronation is on hold for an undetermined amount of time." Running a hand down her face, she went through the door of her bedchamber and closed it behind her.

Now that she was alone with him, Sigyn pulled him down for a lengthy kiss, though it was from a place of relief, not passion. Watching him run out of that crowded hall earlier, with no idea what he had done, she had been terrified that Odin would kill him for it. Well, maybe not *kill*. She pulled back from his mouth when the ice pack started to melt and drip all over the front of her dress.

"It was absolute *chaos* back there," she whispered heatedly, taking the pack to the washroom to drop it in the wash basin, then turned around and walked back toward him. "If your mother hadn't been there, I would have been trampled by all those giant *Asgardian* idiots."

"I'm Asgardian, too, Sig," he said, eyes narrowed as he took a step toward her. "We're not *all* idiots."



“You aren’t like them!” she shouted, cutting him off. “I’d swear you weren’t of the same genetic make-up!”

Taken aback by the insinuation that he was *genetically* different, as opposed to only *feeling* painfully out of place (all his life!), his mouth fell open a bit. He started to speak, but she waved her hand.

“It matters not,” she continued, completely unaware of the pain in his features, “I knew you were alive. I *felt* that you were, but I was still so scared of-”

“*Enough*,” he growled over her words while grabbing her elbow.

Pulling her to him, he flicked his wrist and transported them instantly to his chambers. He refused to listen to this “*I’m so scared because x, y, z!*” nonsense any further, and hearing “*you can’t possibly be from this planet!*” was even worse.

*Conversation OVER.*

The less well-behaved part of him wanted to shove a gag of some sort in her mouth to shut her up, however, doing so would come back to (literally) bite him the instant that gag was removed. That, or seeing her in a *somewhat* submissive situation would turn him on, thereby turning him stupid, and then he might let her say whatever the Hel she wanted to him. What was the point? Putting the *smart* part of his brain to good use, he shushed her with gentle kisses on her cheeks, nose, chin, and mouth, sparing no part of her face.

“Everything is *fine*,” he whispered against her temple, one hand in her hair, the other wrapped around her ribs, “just as I said it would be. My father sits upon the throne still, and he won’t break his truce with Laufey. Even after this, he’ll just tighten security. Maybe have a talk with Laufey himself. Now help me get out of this. I feel as though my skin is *melting* underneath all this leather and metal.”

Pulling his cape free, she held the green fabric to her chest, inhaling the smell, setting it to memory, lest he leave again and not return. He sat on the hearth sofa, bending to remove his boots as she knelt in front of him, reaching around his neck, unhooking the clasps of his breastplate. Brow furrowed, she eyed him.

“All this Jotunheim nonsense was just to stop the coronation?”

“Indeed, it was,” he said, maybe a touch too brightly.

He left out the part about Laufey killing Theoric. He knew she didn’t like the hawk, but somehow Loki doubted she would approve of killing him. Free from the constraints of his armor, he gripped her waist and pulled her into his lap.

"I think the coronation will be delayed longer than I'd anticipated. *March on Jotunheim*," he mimicked his brother's voice and chuckled darkly, shaking his head. "Thor is a fool. Father might be questioning his choice to crown him at all."

Sigyn relaxed a little. She'd feared that Loki's jaunts to Jotunheim had been for a more sinister purpose. His words put her at ease. Somewhat. She couldn't help feeling there was something he wasn't telling her, something he was blocking her from. She shook her head, deciding she'd had enough worrying for the day, and reached down between them, unlacing the front of his trousers. A jolt of arousal shot through her abdomen as her hand grazed him through the leather.

He groaned as she dipped her hand underneath the waistband. *Valhalla*, what he wouldn't give to let her do that for a bit.

"Trust me, Sig, there is nothing I would rather do than *that* right now, but," he pressed his lips together, and with no small amount of effort, he pulled her hand away. "I must find Thor. I wouldn't put it past him to do something incredibly asinine after his fight with father."

Pushing up from the sofa, giving her an apologetic look, he kissed her cheek and walked to his dressing room where he pulled on a simple black tunic and boots. He grabbed his thick leather jacket on his way back out into his room. When he reemerged, Sigyn was talking to Fandral who stood at the outer chamber doors.

"Fandral? Why are *you* here?" he questioned, eyes narrowed.

Ever since that first meal together, when Fandral had flirted with Sigyn, he couldn't stand to see that vapid blond anywhere near her. Tossing his jacket angrily on his bed as he walked past it, he hurried to them and put himself between the two. Sighing, Fandral ran a hand through his hair nervously.

"Thor is set on going to Jotunheim," he said.

Loki just stood there, one eyebrow raising as his mouth fell open. His brother was going to Jotunheim? Surely, he'd heard that wrong.

"Come again?"

"You heard me," Fandral groaned, shaking his head. "With or without our aid, I might add."

Screwing his eyes shut, Loki let his head fall forward. He heard Sigyn mumble a curse behind him, and then he felt her forehead between his shoulder blades. Her thoughts echoed his thoughts. His brother was out of his damn mind.

"I think it best we not let him go," Fandral sighed, "or, at the very least, not let him go *alone*."

Loki ran a hand through his hair as Sigyn's arms came around his waist from behind, pulling herself flush against him. She was shaking a bit, and he could feel the angry heat of her skin through his tunic. Fandral's hand came down on his shoulder.

“Now might be the time to put that silver tongue of yours to the test, Loki,” he said apologetically.

He lifted his head just enough to meet Fandral's stare, and Sigyn's hold tightened tenfold. He ran a hand down his face. *Shit.*

“Of course,” he said finally, rolling his eyes. He turned in her hold to face her and gave her a small smirk. “Seems I was right about him doing something asinine,” he said, snorting.

She just set her jaw and stared at him because she saw absolutely *nothing* funny about this, and she knew he didn't either. She could feel his nerves through their bond. Blowing out a breath, he pulled her hands off his waist and leaned down to plant a kiss on her lips.

“I won't be long,” he said, firmly grasping her shoulders. “Stay here.”

He turned, looking back at her over his shoulder, then left with Fandral. Seething, she gritted her teeth and stared after them.

*The Hel I'll stay.*

She was in no mood to be left *again*. Hiking up her skirt, she dashed down the corridor after them, dodging the nervous palace workers scuttling about with excitement over the frost giant gossip. At the sound of her clicking heels gaining on them, Loki turned, anger pulling at his features.

“*Sigyn*, I thought I told you to-”

“I don't give a damn *what* you told me,” she snapped. “I could just as easily tell *you* to stay. Doesn't mean I expect you to *do* it.” She grabbed his hand, lacing her fingers with his and turned to continue down the corridor.

Jaw clenched, he lowered his voice, so only she could hear. “That's *different*. You're-”

“I'm what? A *woman*?” she scoffed, glaring up at him.

“*No*,” he groaned and rolled his eyes. “I mean, yes, you *are* a woman, but that's *not* what I meant.”

*You're too important to me— That's* what he'd meant if she would've let him finish his damn sentence.

*Just as YOU'RE too important to ME, Loki.*

He heard her voice in his head as clearly as if she'd spoken the words out loud, and his eyes slid closed, his heart clenching in his chest. He brought her hand that he'd been holding up to his mouth to kiss it then dropped it and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She slid her arm around his waist and leaned her head on his shoulder as they picked up the pace. He sighed heavily. The forthcoming chat with Thor had the potential to blow up in his face, and he really didn't want her involved. He had a distinct feeling that her fire was going to be a problem.

When they finally reached the celebration hall where Thor was last seen, they gaped at the sight. The long head table had been overturned with various gourds, apples, grapes, pastries, meats, and cheeses littering the freshly waxed granite floors. His brother sat on the steps leading to the balcony decked with fresh evergreen garland which had been a gift for the *would-have-been* new king from some of the Vanir nobility. Servants busied themselves cleaning the leftovers of what had clearly been a self-entitled "*but I was BORN to be a king!*" angry outburst.

Eyebrows pulling together, Loki watched "his royal *blondness*" hang his head while mindlessly rolling a mead goblet between his thumb and his forefinger. If his brother was *this* angry, there would probably be no talking him down, but he would do his best. Exhaling heavily, he dropped his arm from Sigyn's shoulders and approached Thor with careful steps. He wasn't afraid of him, but he needed the few extra seconds to collect his thoughts. Sigyn kept her eyes on Loki as she walked backwards to join Thor's friends at one of the buffet tables.

"We salvaged some of the food," Volstagg said, holding a bowl of cherries out to her. "These are particularly exquisite. Just look at them! Deep red and shining. Mm!"

When she didn't respond, only continuing to watch Loki and Thor, Volstagg shoved the bowl under her nose.

"Try them, Lady Sigyn. They are perfectly ripe!"

She turned to glare at him. She was trying to listen to Loki's conversation with his brother, for heaven's sake. She didn't care about cherries! Just as she was about to take the bowl and throw it across the room, her stomach growled, and she got a whiff of the cherries. Figuring she might as well, she popped one in her mouth, her eyes going wide and then sliding shut happily at the sweet taste. She moaned so loudly that even Loki turned to look at her from the other side of the room with raised eyebrows.

"Goodness, Lady Sigyn," Volstagg muttered, turning red. "I didn't realize they were *that* good."

She might have apologized for the highly erotic sounds she was making, but she was too busy working her way through the bowl. Gods, she hadn't realized how hungry she was.

Fandral smirked and fetched another bowl. "Please, do continue," he said grinning from ear to ear and handed it to her.

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head and grabbed a napkin to wipe the cherry juice from her fingers. She would have licked them clean, but she especially didn't want to see Fandral's reaction to that.

"Tis unfortunate *you* can't produce such sounds from a woman, Fandral," Volstagg said, laughing out loud and slapping him on the back.

Fandral looked as though he would beat him into the next century but stopped at the sound of Thor and Loki approaching. Thor beamed like it was his birthday, and Loki followed, his face set in a deep frown.

"Loki and I have decided to go to Jotunheim," he declared, a toothy smile crinkling his eyes.

Looking between the two men, Sigyn's jaw dropped. She was at Loki's side in a heartbeat.

"*What?*" Normally, she would have been embarrassed by the shrieking pitch of her voice, but not now, not when Loki was in for an absurd battle on gods damn *Jotunheim*.

"Um, no," Loki corrected, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, and glaring at his brother. "I was completely *opposed* to that, but I cannot let this royal *fool* go there alone. Valhalla knows he will need all the help he can get."

"Absolutely not!" she said, anger swelling in her chest. Jaw set, she pointed at Thor, angry tears pricking her eyes.

"*You* are positively *infuriating!* What in the nine are you thinking?! You'll get yourself killed! Or worse-" she pointed to Loki "-you'll get *him* killed!"

She ran a hand through her hair and blew out a breath, trying to calm down. This wasn't happening. This could *not* be happening. Dear gods, she was going to lose the man she loved. She couldn't even fathom her life without him anymore. He mattered too much. He was *everything* to her now. Thor moved a step closer to her then.

"You may lie with my brother nightly, Lady Sigyn," he said, eyes narrowing, "but that is no excuse for addressing the crowned prince of Asgard with such disrespect."

Her chest heaved as her anger boiled over into flat out rage, and the warriors gawked in silence as the torches in the hall grew, sparks falling to the floor. Gritting her teeth (*why did this keep happening?!*), she slammed her eyes shut, focusing on pulling the smoke back in. It was physically painful to do so, but she managed to do it.

Once the torches returned to normal, Thor raised an eyebrow at her. "And you think *I'm* going to get everyone killed?"

*Ouch.*

Tears filled her eyes quickly, and her lips trembled. She'd managed to control the fire, had she not? It had taken every ounce of strength she had to do it, but she'd *done* it. She didn't deserve to be scolded. She deserved a godsdamn *trophy!* She tried not to hit him— she *really* tried. It wasn't enough. Her fist collided with his face, and his head whipped back from the force of it.

Eyes blown wide, Loki instinctively grabbed her and pushed her behind him, putting himself between them. He'd never seen a woman hit Thor, not even *Sif*. He had no clue what the man would do, but he would be damned if he let his brother lay even a *finger* on her. Thor rubbed his cheek and stared daggers at her. Loki had a death grip on her waist, holding her back behind him. Eyes narrow, his magic pooled in his chest, ready to be used if need be. His brother would *not* hurt her. *No one* would. Not *ever*.

Sticking her head out from behind Loki's shoulder, she shouted, "You're just pissed because you didn't get a crown today, but you'll *never* get one with such *petulant* actions!"

Glaring at her, Thor fisted his hands and addressed his brother. "Gain control of your *pet*, brother," he growled, moving another step closer.

Nostrils flaring, Loki seethed— *I beg your pardon?!*

His entire body responded before he could even mentally process what his brother had said. He shot a burst of magic into the man's chest, sending him flying across the room.

"You speak of disrespect, and yet you call her my *pet*?" he shouted through his teeth.

He didn't think he'd ever been so angry at Thor before. He was willing to endure insults himself, but he would not, he *could* not allow anyone to speak like that to Sig. It was akin to being kicked in the gut. She wasn't a pet. She was a strong, powerful, intelligent, beautiful woman, and he'd not stand for anyone speaking down to her. Honestly, he wanted to see Prince *Jackass* on his knees at her feet, begging for forgiveness.

On the other side of the room, Thor stood to his feet and swiped at the blood on his lips. Looking at the shocked silent warriors (even *Sif* hadn't come to his aid), he felt nothing but shame. It must have been the mixture of adrenaline and testosterone coursing through him that had made his tongue loose. His behavior was positively wretched, and he knew it. Frowning deeply, he turned to Sigyn who was now standing next to Loki (clearly still pissed) who had his arm around her waist, pulling her into his side.

"Forgive me," Thor said in earnest, "I spoke out of turn, but I stand by my decision."

Loki rolled his eyes. Well, this fool hadn't done it on his knees, but at least he'd apologized. Impossibly angry, Sigyn shrugged out of his grasp and ran full speed out the doors.

“Sig!” he yelled and took off after her, chasing her down the guest corridor.

She made it to her chambers and started stripping immediately. If Loki was going to Jotunheim, she was too, and she wasn't going in this dress. She managed to get her straps unhooked just as he rounded the corner and burst through her doors. She shrieked at the loud intrusion, dropping her traditional Vanir armor accidentally and grasping the top of her dress to keep from exposing her breasts. Eyes wide, he came to an abrupt halt and quickly closed the doors behind him to give them privacy.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his *extreme* concern for her raising the pitch of his voice at the sight of her bow and quiver on her bed. “Sig?”

Rather than answer, she just blew her hair out of her face and let the dress top fall as she bent to retrieve the armor. Shaking his head, he crossed the room in all of three long strides and snatched the armor from her hands with one hand and began re-fastening the straps of her dress with his other. It was certainly the first time he'd actively tried to put her clothes back *on*.

“You are absolutely *not* coming with us,” he said, panic rising in his chest at the thought of her in Jotunheim battling frost giants.

“Stop it, Loki,” she sighed and pushed his hands away with great effort.

Keeping her eyes on him, she walked backwards from him while pulling her shoulders free from the impractical coronation gown that Frigga had made specially for her.

“I am well skilled with bow, blade, and magic,” she spoke firmly. “Need I remind you that I am the only one of you who is fully capable of actually *melting* a frost giant? You will *not* leave me again.”

Loki watched her with wide eyes, his hands running through his hair anxiously. Sigyn going with them had not been part of the plan. Marching on Jotunheim *at all* had not been part of the plan. He'd only intended to piss off Laufey so he could retaliate with Theoric as his target eventually. Perhaps he hadn't thoroughly thought it through. It mattered not now. All he could think of was Sigyn getting herself killed. He wanted to rip out his hair in frustration. *He* was the one who watched out for the others' backs, slinging daggers at enemies unaware, but if she were present, his focus would only be on keeping *her* safe! She was a greater threat to the six of them than *Laufey*, for Hel's sake!

Feeling helpless, he watched as she removed the dark green dress, replacing it with black leather leggings and boots and covered her grey long sleeved wool tunic with a silver leather armored corset, a black evergreen stitched into the thick garment. Tugging on a silver fur-lined cloak, she looked every bit the deadly Vanir warrior she was. He didn't care that she wasn't a damsel in distress who needed him to save her. He couldn't help the deep need to protect her at all costs. And he couldn't do that in Jotunheim! Grabbing the longbow and

quiver from her hands and tossing them on the bed, he pulled her against him and cupped her face, looking in her eyes.

“I will not be able to protect you,” he said, his voice cracking.

Sighing, she closed her eyes. “You won’t *need* to.”

He stroked her hair, combing the waves with his fingers. “You are far too important. I *cannot* lose you.”

“Nor I you, Loki, which is precisely why I am coming with you. End of discussion.”

Pulling out of his hold, she wove her hair into a side braid and retrieved her bow and quiver, slinging them across her torso. His emerald eyes filled with hot angry tears as he watched her strap her sharp black bladed dagger to the inside of her leather clad thigh.

“*No, Sig,*” he pleaded. He couldn't believe she was refusing his request. His mind reeled.

*She'll get the both of us killed.*

“No, I won’t,” she insisted, hearing his unguarded thoughts.

She pushed up on her toes to place a lingering kiss on his cheek, surprised to find it wet with silent tears. Gods, he was breaking her heart. His arms came around her, pulling her so tight against him that she could barely breathe.

“Come,” she whispered, taking a step sideways. “We need to go to your chambers. You'll freeze without at least your jacket.”

He didn't let go of her, only stepping with her and whispering “no no no no no” into her hair repeatedly. She continued stepping until he finally relented and let go of her. Before she could move away from him, though, he grabbed her hand, and with a heavy sigh, he pulled her with him toward the south wing of the royal corridor.

## ~THE BIFROST~

Sigyn felt as though she would be sick from anxiety as she rode down the bridge behind Thor and his friends. She didn't want to do this. She'd never fought Jotuns. She'd never even been to Jotunheim. However, if Loki had to go because his moronic brother needed to measure dicks with the frost *giants* (a contest he would most certainly *lose*), she would follow.



Turning her head sharply to the left, she focused on Loki's face. His jaw was set, eyes narrowed as he applied more pressure to his horse's side with his legs. She heard him say “*run, Sin*” through his teeth, and Sinir lengthened his stride into a full gallop. Through the bond, she knew his nerves were as bad as hers, though he was better at concealing it. His anger was far more potent, though.

Good.

Being pissed off was better than being scared. Nostrils flaring, she allowed his anger to compound hers and propel her forward even though she wanted to turn back. She lightened herself in the saddle, and clucking her tongue, Moða took off like Surtur was at her heels, matching Sinir's stride within seconds. Even at a full gallop, it seemed to take hours to get to the observatory. Time was relative though, wasn't it? It flies when you're having fun. Gritting her teeth, she rolled her eyes. Yes, never in her life had she been more *joyous* than at this moment.

She dismounted just as Thor announced their destination to Heimdall. She blew out a breath and took her place alongside Loki, the warriors three, and Sif. Feeling pure dread, she chewed her bottom lip and looked down at her boots as the golden observatory that was the gate of Asgard spun to life.

*This is a fucking terrible plan.*

Her eyes snapped up to the back of Loki's head. Those exact words had echoed in his mind just as she'd thought them. Pushing a few loose strands from her braid behind her ears, she smirked humorlessly and raised an eyebrow. Well, at least two of them on this little adventure had something other than empty space between their ears. Heimdall's deep voice set them on edge as he pushed his sword into the stone rudder, inputting the coordinates of their destination.

“Heed this warning, young warriors,” he said, “if there is any threat to Asgard, I will not reopen the Bifrost.”

*Brilliant*—As though she wasn't already nauseated. The familiar pull into the beam of light came over her, and she reached for Loki's hand just as he stretched back to grab hers.

He frowned though when his hand grabbed at nothing but empty space. What? Why wasn't she taking his hand? He barely had a nanosecond to think on that before he heard her screaming.

*“No! No! Let me go! Let me go! Take your hands off me!”*

He whipped his head around just in time to see Theoric's arms wrapped around her waist, dragging her back to the entrance. Filled with rage, he conjured a dagger.

*“Son of a-”*

It was too late. Loki was pulled headfirst into the light with the others before he could do a damn thing about it. Her cries faded to nothing as he along with his brother and their friends flew toward the cold realm. When he returned to Asgard, he would slit that hawk's throat. That is, *if* he returned. For now, he had a much bigger problem to deal with. They landed heavily on Jotunheim, and he looked up, watching with dread as the rainbow of light disappeared into the black clouds above them. Blowing out a breath, he stood slowly, green eyes sweeping the desolate plain for Jotuns.

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Finally wrenching herself free of Theoric's hold on her, Sigyn grit her teeth and kned him where it would hurt most.

"How *could* you?!" she yelled at him before taking off back down the bridge toward the palace, whistling for Moða to come back to her.

Heimdall had closed the Bifrost, and she had no way of following the warriors. She had to tell Frigga where they'd gone. She should have told her before they'd left in the first place. Maybe the queen could've stopped it. Vaguely, she heard Theoric's fast and heavy footsteps behind her, and she spun to face him, unsheathing the dagger from her thigh holster.

"If you come within a foot of me again, I swear I will *kill* you!"

He held his hands up, though he didn't stop in his approach.

"Damn you, Theoric! One more step, and you'll be food for the vultures!" she growled, sincerely hoping he wouldn't come any closer because she really *would* kill him, and that would land her a spot in the dungeons. She breathed a sigh of relief when he *did* stop. If only he could've kept his mouth shut, too.

"I couldn't let you go! You were on a *death* mission!" he shouted, the wind howling around the bridge nearly drowning out his voice.

Silver cloak tossing about her frame, her stormy eyes blazed. Gods, she hated him at that moment. Loathed him. *Despised* him. With *every* ounce of her being.

"What is it *with* you men?" she cried out in frustration, tears welling up and flowing over. "I do not need a savior! *I* was going to protect *him*, you bastard! Must you be my shadow? What do you *want* from me?" She saw him sigh heavily, and he hung his head.

“I am in love with you, Sigyn,” he said, his voice cracking on the word *love* as he lifted his head just enough to look her in the eyes from across the small distance that separated them.

“Has *he* ever said those words to you?” he asked, taking one small step toward her. “*Will* he ever?”

She realized his eyes were full of tears, too, and she frowned, empathy easing her hatred *just that much*. The man had no idea that he was in a losing battle, did he. She dropped her head, laughing humorlessly as she sheathed her dagger once more.

“Find another to bestow your affections upon. I've bound myself to Loki. I love him. I *adore* him. As he does me.”

*Even if he won't SAY it expressly.*

Theoric opened his mouth, but she cut him off, her eyes flashing just as Moða came up to a halt behind her.

“And if he does not return,” she hissed, putting her boot in the stirrup, and swinging her other leg over the saddle, “by the gods, I will have your *heart* for first meal!”

“Sigyn, *wait*,” he started.

Gripping the reins, she tugged them to the right, and Moða turned around to run toward the palace, leaving Theoric standing alone at the observatory.

## ~JOTUNHEIM~

Loki twisted, slinging a dagger, slicing it through the neck of a Jotun coming at Sif from behind. Once again, it was left to him to watch the sixes of Thor and his friends. This *always* happened. Assessing the scene, he conjured razor sharp knives glowing with green light and continually flung them at the incessantly attacking Jotuns. Thor and his idiot friends would all be *dead* if he weren't there.

His brother's demands for answers from Laufey had turned into a battle. Because why *wouldn't* they turned into a fucking *battle*? Did his brother really think that *thousands* of frost giants were no match for him?

Vaguely aware of the inhuman growls spewing from Thor's mouth as he pounded Mjölfnir into giant after giant, Loki dissipated the illusion of himself that had tricked an oncoming Jotun, its monstrous body falling into the icy chasm behind his “trapped” fake. He gaped in horror then as Fandral, screaming in torturous pain, was impaled in the shoulder by a huge sharp icicle.

Chest burning from the cold, Loki grit his teeth and slid beneath the legs of the giant that had attacked Fandral before it could finish the job. Daggers in both of his hands, he sliced through the backs of its knees. He cringed as the blood splattered across his cheek, dragging the back of his hand across his face, then he watched the giant scream and crumple to the ground. Somewhere in the disastrous scene, he heard the gravelly voice of Volstagg shouting.

“Don't let them touch you!”

Loki rolled his eyes. Now Volstagg needed saving as well. *Wonderful*. Setting his jaw, he conjured a dagger and turned in a circle to locate the barrel-chested brute. When he spotted him, he froze. Swallowing back the bile that was rising in his throat, he sneered at the sight of the slowly crusting over black flesh of Volstagg's arm who was now repeatedly head butting the giant who had grabbed him. Well, *that* was disgusting.

He knew that the frost giants conjured icicles to slice apart their enemies, but their ability to *literally* give frostbite to anyone they touched was news to him. He felt a rush of wind behind him then. Instinctively, he spun on his heel, glowing dagger in hand, and stabbed at the approaching Jotun's chest. Before the blade made contact, though, the monster grabbed him by the forearm, and the leather of his jacket sleeve ripped apart just as his vambrace shattered in the Jotun's icy grasp.

He winced, anticipating the forthcoming freezing burn, but upon feeling only a slight chill, he stared at his arm. His jaw dropped, and he blinked rapidly at the sight of his skin turning blue, the classic Jotun raised markings appearing on his flesh.

*What the fu...?*

Returning his eyes to the frost giant who seemed just as surprised by his skin's transformation, Loki clenched his teeth, and nostrils flaring, eyes glistening with hateful tears, he thrust the dagger into the stunned giant's chest. As it dropped to the ground dead, he gaped at his arm, the dark blue returning to the pale color he'd known his entire life. He shook his head, clearing what must have been a hallucination from his mind.

*I'm going mad on this desolate rock.*

He whipped his head around at the sound of Sif crying out his name. She and Volstagg and Hogun were struggling to pull Fandral free of the icicle that had impaled him and still held him there in his vulnerable state.

“Get down!” he yelled out, and they ducked as he slung two daggers across the battlefield, sinking them into the throats of two Jotuns on the verge of beheading the warriors from behind.

“Let's go!” Hogun shouted once Fandral was free, and Volstagg hefted him over his shoulder and took off alongside him.

Jotuns were at their backs, and Sif bent low and swept her long sword out behind her, slicing off the legs of four Jotuns at once.

“*THOR!!*” she shouted over her shoulder as they ran.

Thor continued swinging his hammer, completely oblivious to his friends as he decked every frost giant that approached him. Loki flung ten daggers in quick succession, stabbing with precise aim the hearts of Jotun after Jotun who neared them from behind. Dear gods, he was *exhausted*, but there was no time to bend over to catch his breath. With an angry shout, he forced his legs to run faster, despite the burning of his muscles. He could still hear Mjolnir swinging. That fool was *still* fighting? There was no time to keep fighting! His brother would truly get himself killed!

“We're leaving!” he yelled back at his brother, flinging another four daggers as he did so. “*NOW, THOR!*”

His baby brother's voice had always been capable of scaring the living daylights out of him, thus the sound of Loki's angry growl finally caught Thor's attention. Raising his hammer to the sky, clouds gathered above him and lightning connected to it. He then crashed it back down to the ice below his feet, and the ground exploded, frost giants tossed about like ragdolls from the impact. Nodding once, satisfied that his work was done, he ran after his brother and friends with a huge smile plastered on his face. They finally arrived at the steep cliff that the Bifrost had dropped them on, and looking to the clouds above, they screamed in unison, terrified, begging the invisible gatekeeper to save them.

“*HEIMDALL!!*”

Receiving no response, frost giants descending upon them from every angle, the group crouched, their backs to each other, weapons at the ready. Well, at least now Loki had a chance to catch his breath, though the sight of thousands of blood red eyes staring back at him was dampening the effect of *that* tiny silver lining. This was it. Heimdall had said he wouldn't reopen the Bifrost if there was a threat to Asgard, and if thousands of angry frost giants weren't a threat, he didn't know *what* was. Maybe they could just jump from the cliff. How badly could it hurt? He discreetly eyed the steep crevice behind him. Oh shit that was high. Badly—It would hurt *badly*.

He thought of Sigyn. If he was going to die, it was going to be picturing her face and remembering her voice. If he closed his eyes for a second, he could almost hear her. Wait...

He *could* hear her. How was that possible? Neither his mind-reading, nor their bond worked across the realms, but he could hear her, nonetheless, crying out to him, screaming his name, telling him to “*just hold on!*”

His eyes blew wide. *Hold on?* For how long? He had *maybe* six seconds left before he would be ripped to pieces!

Out of nowhere the Jotuns halted their deadly charge and squinted at the sky. The six Asgardians followed their line of sight and looked to the swirling clouds above them. Chewing his lip, Loki stared, at once both terrified and relieved to see the Bifrost descending. Guaranteed, Sigyn had told his mother, and his mother had told his father, and now he and his brother would likely receive more wrath from their father than they would have from Laufey. The powerful beam of light exploded from the sky and crashed onto the ground next to them. Thor's victorious cry was nearly as loud as the thunderous roar of the bridge between the realms as the Allfather landed on the ground and reared back on Sleipnir, the horse's neighs deafening.

“Father!”

“The Norns be praised!” Fandral said, breathless, his words hoarse, as he lifted his head from over Volstagg's shoulder.

“Dammit,” Loki muttered to himself, not that anyone would have heard him over the sound of the Bifrost or Odin's horse. Relieved as he was at the prospect of getting home with all his parts still attached to him, the stunt they'd just pulled would in all likelihood land them a special place in the dungeons.

Odin's voice held great power, as did Gungnir, held steadily in his hand.

“Laufey,” he said firmly, addressing the Jotun king.

To Laufey's credit, he didn't shrink at the sound or the sight of Odin but held his ground.

“It seems that your foolish brood desire war, so war they shall have,” Laufey said.

Then he nodded to Thor, red eyes glaring from under his broad and sharply curved brow and gestured to a Jotun near the thunder god. A thick shard of ice grew from the giant's hand, ready to embed itself in Thor's jugular. Seeing the ice coming at his brother, Loki's jaw dropped.

“*NO!*” he screamed, and conjuring a dagger, he threw it at the giant before its icy weapon could run his brother through.

The glowing blade sliced off the attacking Jotun's offending arm, and his brother turned, barely registering what had happened. Before *anyone* could process what had happened, Laufey grabbed Loki, yanking him back forcefully against his freezing body. He cried out, more from horror than pain, as his armor ripped and broke apart at every point of contact, his flesh once again turning that monstrous Jotun blue where it was exposed. Using all his strength, he kicked against Laufey. He was so upset that he clean forgot he could use his magic to get the monster's fucking hands *off* him. He slammed his eyes shut, not wanting to see his horrid skin.

*No, this isn't possible! It cannot be real!*

It was probably no more than two seconds, but it felt like he'd been trapped in Laufey's arms for a lifetime by the time he heard his father legitimately *roar* his name.

*“LOKI, NO!”*

Odin pointed Gungnir at the boulder below Laufey's feet, and a flaming hot light burst from its end. The stone exploded into pieces, blowing the Jotun king back and freeing Loki from his icy grasp. The Bifrost reopened then, and the blinding beam of light surrounded the seven Asgardians, dragging them with it as it disappeared from Jotunheim.

Flying at light speed back to his home, Loki watched his skin return to its normal hue. He landed, along with the others, on his feet in the observatory. So much relief washed over him, he nearly kissed the floor. No, he didn't want to kiss the floor. He wanted to kiss *her*. He'd heard her. He knew he had. Where was she? He could feel her. She was there somewhere. Oh gods, he needed to see her. He needed her arms around him, fiery hot blazing arms around his neck were the only antidote to the icy cold he could still feel from Laufey.

Determined to keep his composure, he searched for her face among the dozens of soldiers who had been called to stand guard against a possible onslaught of Jotuns. He didn't want to call her name for fear that his voice would crack like some little prepubescent boy. Finally catching her eyes from across the observatory, he sighed heavily and slowly fought his way through the sea of bodies, growing increasingly frustrated with how many people had crowded into the observatory. As soon as she was within his reach, he grabbed hold of Sigyn's hand that was stretched out to him. Blowing out an angry breath, he elbowed the last soldier blocking him from her with his free arm.

“Step *aside*, Private,” he growled, and the soldier bowed his head, mumbling “*my apologies, your highness*” as he moved out of Loki's way.

“Sig,” he breathed as he finally pulled her into his arms.

Bloody Hel, she felt *divine*, the fire under her skin melting the *awful* ice in his bones. Burying his face in her hair, he clung to her as though she would disappear at any second. As the soldiers surrounding them marched back to the palace having been ordered to stand down, he kissed her square on the mouth (propriety could go to Hel for all he cared), and the tears he'd been holding back fell down his cheeks. He reached up to swipe them away angrily.

*So much for keeping my composure.*

“You're alive,” she whispered against his mouth, holding onto the back of his neck. “You're okay.”

She paused, brow creasing when she realized he was trembling in her arms. Pulling back just enough to get a good look at him, her eyes filled with tears all over again. His face was drained of all its blood, and his eyes were positively bloodshot.

“Loki?”

His lips were practically blue as he just stared at her in response. Eyes growing wider, she shook him a little. Either he was in shock, or he was purposefully shielding her from what he'd witnessed in Jotunheim.

“Loki, what happened?” she whispered more harshly, pushing his hair back from his face. Still, he didn't answer. She spoke through her teeth then. “Tell me what happened!”

He swallowed audibly. He *wanted* to answer her, but he couldn't find his voice. But even if he could speak, what would he say?

*What happened? What HAPPENED? My skin turned fucking BLUE! That's what happened!*

But his voice refused to cooperate. His green eyes met her grey, and he offered the smallest of smiles. He couldn't talk here anyway. They needed to go. He pulled her hands from his neck and started to pull her by the hand to the bridge, but he stopped short when he heard his father yelling. He thought maybe the old man was yelling at *him*, but his eyes went wide when it became clear that Odin was only angry at Thor.

Loki turned with Sigyn to watch the scene play out before them. Thor was yelling back at their father as Odin yelled at Volstagg to get Fandral to the healers. Volstagg then pushed Fandral onto the saddle of his horse, and they along with Hogun and Sif galloped away at full speed to the palace. Thor shouted that Odin was an old fool, and Odin then plunged the blunt end of Gungnir into the stone rudder of the observatory, the huge golden gears spinning together and roaring to life.

Loki stared, confused by his father's actions. “Father, what are you-”

He was silenced by the Allfather's deafening growl. His father then shouted something about taking Thor's power, about him being unworthy of Mjolnir, and banishing him. The hammer then shot out of Thor's hand, and Odin caught it swiftly. Loki and Sigyn stood frozen, gaping, not believing what was playing out in front of them. Yanked into the beam of light, back first, Thor screamed, his arms flung forward, reaching for his home, for his family. The ancient markings on the hammer faded, and Odin threw the hammer after his firstborn.

Sighing, weary with sorrow for his loss, Odin retrieved his spear, and looking to his youngest, the king shook his head.

“Come, Loki. It's imperative that you see Eir.”



Sigyn gaped at the king as he walked away. He banished *Thor*? His own heir? Had Loki known that he would? Was that why he was sobbing? No, that couldn't be. He was as genuinely shocked as she was. Not only that, why was it imperative that Loki see the chief healer? For the love, what had *happened* to him?

“Sig?”

She was snapped from her musings when he finally spoke to her. He led her to Sinir, who had, along with the other warriors' horses, run to the Bifrost at the sound of their return. Setting his boot in the stirrup, he pulled himself onto the saddle and reached down to lift her up to sit behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, still wondering what the Hel had happened to him as they set off to the palace.

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## CHAPTER 12: I AM NOT WHO I WAS

*“I could tell you my adventures—beginning from this morning,” said Alice a little timidly, “but it’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.”*

*-from “Through the Looking Glass” by Lewis Carroll*

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~ A PRIVATE HEALING ROOM, TWO HOURS AFTER THE RETURN FROM JOTUNHEIM~

Sitting next to Fandral’s bed in the private healing room, Sigyn placed a hand on his slightly damp forehead.

“Despite my distaste for you seemingly knowing no bounds, I do hope that you won’t have to suffer long,” she said, winking.

“Your concern is much appreciated,” he groaned, offering a weak smile, and rolled to his side to face her. “Even more so because of said distaste.”

Sighing heavily, Sigyn offered him a *real* smile. She hadn’t realized that she genuinely cared about his well-being. She cared for *all* of them, even if they were idiots. Well, not Hogun. He was the only one with a brain worth its weight.

“How’s your shoulder?” she asked, leaning over to peek at the wound underneath the bandage.

*Oh, that was a mistake.*

She cringed, gagging a bit at the clear fluid seeping out of the jagged ripped flesh. Fandral laughed as she covered her mouth and nose.

“Not too pretty, eh, pretty girl?” he said, wincing when the bandage tugged on the skin.

“I wouldn’t talk to her like that if I were you, Fandral,” Hogun said, approaching him to hand him a glass of water. “Loki would kill you if he found out.”

“No, he wouldn’t *kill* him,” she said sweetly at Fandral and wrinkled her nose. “He’d just, you know-” she waved a hand “-rough you up a bit.”

“That makes me feel so much better,” Fandral said, clearing his throat and putting a bit more distance between them.

Across the room, Volstagg grimaced, rubbing a warm salve into the blackened flesh of his arm and shot him a look.

“Eir seems to have repaired *you* quite well. Would’ve been nice if she’d saved some of her healing powers for the rest of us,” he mumbled.

Sigyn turned to face him. “Trust me,” she said, raising her voice enough for him to hear and shaking her head, “if you could see his shoulder, you wouldn't feel bad about your arm.”

Seated in front of the center firepit in the room, Sif glared at her and asked, “Why are you even here?”

Sigyn opened her mouth to answer, but the woman cut her off. “I saw you and Loki in the observatory. He had a death grip on you as though he should never let go. Shouldn't you be with *him*?”

Ever since the Vanir sorceress burnt her to a crisp accidentally (supposedly), Sif only *tolerated* her. It mattered not that Loki's little lover had gone to great lengths to repair the damage she did. Sigyn could have been upset over her cold tone, but she was too tired to care.

“I *was* with him, yes, but I am here now,” she said, shrugging. “He just needed a bit of solitude after a day such as this.” She dropped her eyes and chewed on her lip, thinking back to the previous few hours she'd spent with him.

### ~EARLIER THAT SAME EVENING~

Loki sighed heavily, trying to steady his breathing, and stared at the ceiling above his bed as Eir personally checked him over for any extensive injuries. He didn't want her here. He wanted to be left alone. He was *fine*.

After that *awful* battle, Odin insisted he visit the healing rooms. Naturally he refused, however, within ten minutes of returning to his chambers, Eir showed up at his doors along with a godsdamn *flock* of younger healers (students?) who trailed her into his room like a line of ducklings behind their mother. He supposed it was better than having to do this examination in one of those uncomfortable healing rooms. He wasn't remotely ashamed of his body- quite the opposite, actually -but that didn't mean he particularly enjoyed lying around shirtless in front of a dozen barely legal and rather clearly *blushing* healers.

At least Sig was here with him. She sat on the opposite side of the bed from Eir, attempting to make conversation with him, talking about the *weather* of all things. She wasn't usually this chatty, and he knew she was just trying to distract him from the incredibly uncomfortable situation that involved a stranger's hands running over every inch of his body.

*EVERY inch.*

*Gods, let this be over.*

"Well, Your Highness," Eir said plainly, standing up from his bed, "you have some rather deep bruises."

He looked sideways at Sigyn and rolled his eyes.

*Well, obviously.*

He hardly needed a healer to figure *that* out. What an absurd *waste* of his time- an overly handsy physical examination that provided no more information than glancing at a fucking mirror.

"But no breaks, fractures, sprains or bleeding," the healer continued, brow furrowed as she shook her head. "Have you any idea why the Allfather was adamant *you* specifically be seen by a healer?"

He swallowed and plastered his most innocent expression on his face. Yes, he had an idea, but he wasn't going to *voice* it, now was he.

"I can only assume that he is simply a bit overprotective of his son."

Much to his relief, Eir did not question him further. She simply nodded and gathered her healing vials and tools, beckoning the others to leave him be. He sat up and pulled on his robe, not bothering to tie the sash. The healer was halfway to the door when she stopped short and turned to face him.

"Would you like a pain ender, Your Highness?"

Eyes sliding to Sigyn, he stood and nodded.

"Yes, thank you," he said quietly and ran a hand through his hair as the woman pulled out a small vial of clear liquid and handed it to him.

"You should only need the one dose," she said with a small smile and then after bowing respectfully, she left without another word.

Once she closed the door behind her, Loki walked to the sprawling balcony. He wanted nothing more than to forget every single moment of what had turned into the *worst* day of his life, and that pain ender would be helpful in doing just that.

*That is, I'll forget it for a few hours.*

Unfortunately, the details would come flying right back when the ender wore off. Staring blankly into the cosmos, he rubbed an ache in his shoulder.

Sigyn remained seated on his bed, questioning whether to follow him out there onto his balcony. Since returning from Jotunheim about an hour ago, he had said little more than five words to her. She still had no idea what had happened, and he still wasn't letting her see it, whatever *it* was. Maybe he just wanted to be alone? It didn't seem like that though, considering he basically *dragged* her to his chambers, refusing to let her go to her own room.

Pressing her lips together, she stood from the bed, and walking to the fireplace, she stared into the green flames. She didn't know what to *do*. She didn't want to press him for information that he wanted to keep private, but she also wanted to help him get through it, again, whatever *it* was, and how could she do that if she had no idea what had happened on Jotunheim? With a heavy sigh, she leaned her forehead against the stone of the mantle.

"How can I help?" she whispered, knowing he could hear her. "Say the word. I'll do anything. I can't stand seeing you like this. Is there anything you want?"

She really hoped he didn't want solitude. She would have complied to his wishes, of course, but she desperately wanted to at least *hold* him. At most, she wanted him to trust her enough to *talk* to her. Turning away from the flames, she looked at him out on his balcony. He was facing away from her, so all she could do was stare at his back.

Loki didn't answer her whispered question immediately. He could feel her desperation, her desire to know the truth, and to some extent he *did* want to tell her, but he just wasn't ready. What if she saw the blue of his skin through the bond and feared what she saw? For Hel's sake, he feared *himself!*

He would run from himself if he could. What would he do if *she* ran from him, if she *left* him? He doubted she would, but *still*. It was a possibility, and it would absolutely *wreck* him if it came to fruition. Setting his jaw, he exhaled slowly, his breath visible in the cold air. He looked down at the vial in his hand and sucked in his cheeks.

*Fuck it.*

He tossed back the pain ender, letting his eyelids slide shut as the warmth went down his throat and filled his stomach. It would be an escape for only a short while, but it would be an escape, nonetheless. Licking his lips, he let his head fall back as a feeling of pure contentment settled deep within his abdomen. Shit, he would regret this.

He was setting sail toward *Happy Land* to bask in the sun and sand for a few hours, then he would return to his boat and come crashing right back into the jagged rocks of *Despair Island*. That's how these enders worked. He knew them well. Not that he could be bothered to care when he felt like he was glowing from the inside out. Frowning, he brought his head back up. Sig had asked him a question, and he'd clean forgotten what it was.

Oh right—What could she *do* to help. Was there anything he *wanted*.

Raising his eyebrows, he pursed his lips. There was one thing he wanted, and it sure as Hel wasn't a godsdamn conversation about his *lovely* tour of Jotunheim. Turning to face her finally, he descended the balcony stairs, taking slow steps in her direction, an eerie calmness surrounding him. He pulled his robe off and tossed it across his desk chair without taking his eyes off her. As he came toe to toe with her, she tilted her head back to accompany their height difference.

Sliding his hand into her hair, he kept his voice low. "I want *you*."

She couldn't help the arousal that shot through her from the tone of his voice and the intensity of his gaze, but she was also a bit concerned. He seemed so emotionally detached, and if there was one thing Loki was not, it was *detached*. Especially from *her*. Their sex life was nothing short of passionate, emotions and sensations heightened to an almost (as ridiculous as it sounded) *transcendent* state. He was always so giving, so anxious to please her.

Granted, that one time he fucked her against his bedroom wall after he saw her with Theoric in the library, he hadn't exactly seemed concerned with getting *her* off. She also had bruises for *days*, but even during that particularly rough session, he certainly wasn't detached. If anything, pushing that hard and fast into her just to prove she "belonged to *him*" was too *attached*.

But right now? His gaze was too calm, his lids too heavy, his breathing too slow, his muscles too relaxed. Impossible though it seemed, she wasn't sure she wanted to sleep with him in this state- whatever *this* state even was.

Even so, her chest rose and fell faster as his fingers trailed lightly down the nape of her neck, his thumb stroking her jaw. Leaning into his hand, she squinted up at him, trying to find the thing that he was hiding behind his strangely serene demeanor. Where was the storm brewing up there in his mind? There *had* to be one. Where were the winds and freezing rain clouds? Then it dawned on her that she felt *incredible*, her insides floating lazily in the gently rolling waves of a perfectly warm sea on a perfectly warm day with a perfectly warm breeze.

*Oh... wait...*

*That vial Eir gave to him ten minutes ago...*

He didn't need it for the *bruises*, did he. Oh, it was clear as day now. His pupils weren't dilated despite the dim light, despite his supposed desire for her. No, they were as beautifully emerald as ever, though a bit redder around the corners.

Face falling, she dropped her head, trying to ignore the good feeling in her stomach. How the Hel was she supposed to know if he *really* wanted to do this or if it was just that damn ender making him *think* he wanted to? In spite of herself, she leaned her head back and moaned, biting into a smile.

*Oh my gods, I might be in Valhalla.*

Her body was glowing from the inside out, and she hated that it was a complete and total *lie*. She never wanted to feel it again.

"Loki, this isn't..." her voice faded, the unintentional smile on her face widening further as he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and gently lifted her head.

She *wanted* him to, but he didn't kiss her, only blinking his *too bright* eyes a few times. With no muscle tension in his jaw, as though he was in a trance, he pulled her toward the bed and carefully slid the leggings of her armor down her legs. Dropping them on the floor, he pinned her beneath him and ran his fingers along the planes of her face.

She sincerely hoped he would remember this in the morning. She hoped *she* would. Because everything about him- his hand on her cheek, his hips between her thighs, his hair around her fingers -felt too good to stop. Unable to help herself, she turned her head and caught his first and middle fingers with her lips. His mouth fell open, breathing harder as she lightly swirled the tip of her tongue around his fingertips.

The energy shift in the room was palpable, his eerie calmness switching to a more Loki-typical cocktail of barely controlled lust and chaotic affection. She released his fingers and let her head fall back and arched up into him, muttering "*so much better*" under her breath as he hardened against her lower stomach.

Nimble unfastening his trousers with one hand, he leaned down to kiss her jaw. He felt her thumbs hooking into his waistband, but rather than push them down completely, she forced them just low enough to expose him. Then, before he even thought to move forward, she grabbed his backside and pulled him into her. Growling softly into her neck, he took it from there.

Not that "taking it from there" meant that he had any *actual* control over the situation whatsoever, since each roll of his hips was merely a slow-swinging sledgehammer destroying the wall, stone by stone, that he'd built to keep her safe from *him*- safe from the pain and anguish rapidly compounding in his mind. Perhaps he had *some* power to stop those swings and spare his hard-built wall from complete annihilation. Likely all he had to do was keep his face buried in her neck and focus solely on his *extremely* heightened physical sensitivity from this ender high. However, he made the mistake of lifting his head

to see her face. He then of *course* lowered his mouth to hers, and his wall came crashing down like *that*. Apparently heated kissing was significantly more destructive than fucking.

*Good to know...*

*...bad way to find out.*

Behind closed eyes, Sigyn saw it then. She saw what happened in Jotunheim. Fair skin turned blue, green eyes turned red, just like that nightmare she'd "shared" with Loki the night they first slept together. She didn't entirely understand what she was seeing, but she didn't need to. She knew it was causing a complete emotional breakdown within him, and that was all the information she needed to feel his utter sense of...of what?

*Betrayal*, her mind supplied.

Gods, she wanted to cry, and she very well might do exactly that. Her heart was *aching* beneath her chest from his pain. She loved him so much more than she would ever be able to express. She felt his hips stutter to a halt, and he shuttered against her. Could she please just hold him here forever? No. Not forever. Not even for two more seconds.

He pulled out of her quickly and allowed her to kiss him as he refastened his trousers. Pushing up from the bed, he walked to the fireplace and settled into the hearth sofa, staring into the fire blankly. Save for the rising and falling of his chest with each steady breath, he was motionless. Feeling positively *empty*, she crawled off his bed, went to his washroom to clean herself up, got dressed, and cast one more glance in his direction. When he only continued his quiet study of the green flames, she left for the healing rooms to see the warriors three and Sif.

## ~THE PRIVATE HEALING ROOM, PRESENTLY~

Sigyn blew out a breath and refocused her thoughts on the present. Her memories of Loki during the last hour were making her too emotional, and she didn't particularly want to fall apart in front of present company. Especially Sif, who was still looking at her with poorly veiled annoyance. It was so *unfair* that the woman was holding a grudge against her. Good *grief*, after all she and Loki went through just to spare her from a bit of early hair loss.

Alright *fine*, she was vain enough to empathize with that angle, but *Sif* started that fight with him. It was her own damn fault any of it had happened at all. She rolled her eyes and pushed her hand through her hair. Ruminating over it would only leave her in tears, and for the love, she might as well go right back to thinking about Loki again if she was just going to cry anyway. She peeked up at Sif who was now helping Volstagg with the healing salve for his arm.



*Must be nice having actual friends to help you.*

Despite caring for them (even Sif...why else would she care what that woman thought of her?), Sigyn didn't think of them as her friends. Well, maybe they *were*, in a way, and she just didn't feel part of the group because they'd treated Loki so poorly in the past. She dropped her eyes and swallowed the growing lump in her throat.

*Wonderful.*

Her mind was drifting back to him. Waterworks were imminent. *Gods dammit.* Crying made her look so *pathetic*. Thankfully, Sif addressed her from across the room, distracting her from the utterly depressing thoughts doing the rounds in her head.

"Did you see Thor in the observatory earlier? Do you know where he went? I checked his chambers, but he wasn't there. I thought he would've come to find us by now," Sif asked, standing up and crossing her arms as a deep frown creased her brow.

Sigyn's jaw dropped, and she looked from warrior to warrior. Wait... they didn't know? Oh Hel, she did *not* want to be the one to pass on the news of Thor's exile. How did they not know that? Had no one seen the Bifrost roar to life?

"Um," she began, clearing her throat, giving herself a few seconds to prepare her words. "Yes, I saw him."

She chewed her lip and let out a heavy sigh. Might as well just get it over with.

"The king banished him. I know not where to," she added with a shrug as they stared at her, eyes wide, mouths agape.

"*What* did you say?" Sif choked on the words, hands fisting at her sides.

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew," Sigyn replied, wincing at the anger evident in the woman's voice. "He took Thor's power, his title, even Mjölfnir."

They gaped at her, as though she was a figment of their imaginations. It was awful. She couldn't have imagined the hurt expressions on their faces. Warriors just looked *wrong* when they were on the verge of tears. She refused to face them one more second and pushed up from her seat. She was done with this sadness. It was *everywhere*. Maybe she could go to the library and lose herself in a book. Yes. That's what she would do.

Rushing after her, Sif grabbed her arm before she reached the doors. "And what of Loki?" she whispered heatedly.

Sigyn pressed her lips together. "What of him? I told you that I left him in his chambers."

Swallowing thickly, she looked at her feet. Did Sif see his transformation on Jotunheim? Did they *all* see it?

“I saw something I did not understand,” Sif said, lowering her voice further as she led Sigyn outside the door. “I thought maybe I imagined it. Loki.... *changed*.”

Furrowing her brow, Sigyn pinched the bridge of her nose, absorbed in the mental image of his Jotun appearance. She didn’t find the change ugly, only *different*. It simply wasn’t what she was used to. It was kind of amazing, honestly. Even with blue skin, he wasn’t ugly.... or *scary*, for that matter. As the thought crossed her mind, she hoped that through the many halls and walls between them, he could hear... or see... himself through *her* eyes.

Æsir had been taught, nearly from birth, to fear frost giants. That they were a race of *monsters*. The question of why his skin had changed remained unanswered. Though she never saw a family resemblance between Loki and his parents or Thor, he was still too small to be Jotun, was he not? Sure, he towered over *her*, but the frost giants were at least *twelve* feet tall!

She went still suddenly, the color draining from her face. What was it she said to him that morning in his mother’s chambers? She screamed at him stupidly, something about idiotic Asgardians: “*You’re not like them! Sometimes I think you don’t even have the same genetic makeup!*”

Covering her mouth, she squeezed her eyes shut, stifling a cry. What painfully wretched and *true* words. Why couldn’t she go back in time and erase them from his memory? From hers? She was a fool, a fool with a tongue too loose for her own good. Feeling Sif staring at her still, she opened her eyes, mulling over whether to admit her knowledge on the matter. She sighed heavily, deciding honesty was the best route, and spoke in a hushed tone.

“I saw it, too. Loki and I have a special,” she hesitated, watching the war goddess carefully before continuing, “bond. Did the others see it?”

Looking around the open corridor and finding it empty, Sif kept her voice low.

“I think not. None of them mentioned it. Laufey grabbed him. His armor broke beneath the grip. Every point of contact between his skin and Laufey’s became Jotun in appearance. If I’d not seen Volstagg’s arm turn black when one had grabbed him during the battle, I would have thought the change of Loki’s skin was a normal reaction to their touch. Never before have I seen him *terrified*. He is always ten steps ahead of everyone, but this? The look on his face was proof that he was miles behind this. Worst of all was the Allfather’s reaction. I saw regret. *Guilt* even. I think he and the queen have been hiding something from him. Something very grave indeed.”

Clutching her stomach, holding back a sob, Sigyn nodded. She was *done* here.

“If you need me, I will be in the library.”

Willing back tears, Sif watched as the Vanir rushed down the hall. She could only imagine the torture it must have been for Loki to discover that he'd been lied to his entire life. She doubted he was still in his chambers. As a man of unequalled intellect, he would no doubt seek out answers, but he wouldn't go directly to the Allfather. Most likely he would visit the casket. Turning on her heel, Sif fled from the healing chambers and hurried to the weapons vault.

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It seemed like a lifetime ago that he last looked upon the casket, and to a very real degree, it was. When he saw the dead guards and listened to his now banished brother talk of *glorious* war that morning, he was a different man living a different life. This morning, before being forced to play a fun little game of “Gods and Monsters” in Jotunheim to indulge his idiot brother's misplaced bloodthirst, he knew where he came from, who his parents were, and what his name was.

However, standing in front of the frost giants' most powerful weapon right now, a mere twelve hours or so later, Loki questioned if knowing the truth was worth it. His previous existence was a lie, but...

*Bloody Hel- it was a FANTASTIC lie.*

Why would he want to live truthfully- whatever the Hel *that* meant -if the lie was better? This morning he was a prince of Asgard. His name was Loki Odinson. The God of Mischief. Brother to Thor, son of Frigga. His eyes were green, his skin fair.

Hanging his head, he scoffed quietly. How ironic that the god of lies desired the truth. Well, it wasn't as though he could just *ignore* what happened on that wretched, wasted ice world. Shaking his head, hands fisted at his sides, he approached the casket.

Standing before the ancient blue box, he whispered, “Just do it.”

Slowly, carefully, he wrapped his fingers around it. Cold rushed through his veins, power along with it. He felt *alive*, and beginning at his hands, Jotun blue spread up and across his body. Salty tears pooled in his eyes, no longer the green hue he knew and loved. Feeling a presence behind him, he turned to see the man he'd called *father* standing at the top of the stairs.

He desperately wanted that man to reassure him. He wanted to hear him say that this was some unknown congenital disease or some Norns-only-knew curse. Either would be

preferable answers over “*you’re a frost giant*”. The blue of his skin faded away as he set the casket back on its pedestal, and he looked at the older man questioningly, desperately.

Odin lowered his eyes and sighed heavily. Despite so often being at odds with his youngest, he did love him. In his own way. He’d almost forgotten that he did.

“You are my son, Loki,” he answered his son’s silent question. “I raised you. You are my own.”

Loki took a deep breath, his eyes closing. That answer was *not* good enough.

“Am I *born* of Frigga?”

Silence.

Odin shook his head slowly before answering a small eternity later.

“No.”

*Knew it.*

To think, all it took was *one* word- “no” -to send his entire world crashing down. If no one was watching, he would fall to the stone floor and legitimately *weep*. For years, for decades- no -for *centuries*, he’d wondered why his “father” judged him so harshly. He’d never understood how simply being a second son made him a *lesser* son.

*The disappointing son.*

From his first memories, he was always on the receiving end of harsher discipline, greater judgment, less kindness, less understanding, and empathy. And now he knew why.

*I’m not the lesser son- I’m just... not his son.*

How utterly simple.

And unfathomably cruel.

Odin steadied himself. He had no choice but to tell his youngest the rest of the story, so he did just that. He told Loki the entire story. Finally, after all these years, he told him the *truth*.

Loki stared blankly, too stunned to believe, more likely *unwilling* to believe the words. *Laufey*, of all those monsters, was his true father. The Jotun king left him to die in the cold after their great war with Asgard. Perhaps the giant discarded him because he was so small, so *unworthy* of the throne of Jotunheim. Imagine that-

He was a disappointment even as a baby. Before he took his first step or spoke his first word, he was a *disappointment*. Asgard defeated the frost giants, and his *fake* father took pity on the runt of his *real* father's litter. Odin secretly brought him back to the realm eternal and suckered Frigga into claiming Loki was some sort of "surprise" pregnancy. The rest of the story was quite anticlimactic really. Long story short, they lied to his face for nine hundred years.

"So, when you said that I was *born to be a king*," he said through his teeth, his jaw clenched, "you meant something else entirely. Such *cryptic* words. Have you any idea what those words meant to a young boy? To *me* as a young boy?! Was I supposed to sit on the throne of Jotunheim?! In what realm exactly was your head when you made that decision?!"

Hanging his head, looking wearier than Loki had ever seen him, Odin fell back on the steps unconscious. Eyes wide, Loki ascended the stairs three at a time and bent over the king's body, splayed across the steps. Looking upon the old man's now sleeping form, suddenly fearful that he would not wake, Loki called for the guards. Running up the stairs after the guards and the man he could no longer call *father*, he did not see the warrior hidden from sight within the shadows of the vault. Swiping at the tears on her cheeks (she couldn't believe she was crying for *Loki*), Sif waited until they had disappeared to take her leave and find Sigyn.

### ~THE PALACE LIBRARY~

Sigyn rubbed her temples and groaned. This blood bond was maddening. She felt ragged, utterly *spent* from Loki's emotional chaos. It was wonderful when he felt anything good, but that was the exception, not the rule. Norns, he was so...what's the word? Hm...oh.

*Broody.*

Of course, after all this Jotun business, she could hardly blame him. He had every right to feel *awful*, and wherever he was at this moment, he was *wrecked*. Truly, she was going to lose her mind if she didn't at least *try* to ignore it, so she willed her thoughts to focus instead on the image from the book in her hands as she sat atop Loki's rafter in the library.

*A little girl is passing through a mirror and meeting a red queen and...*

That was as far as she got before she heard heavy boots approaching. *Oh for-* setting her jaw, she rolled her eyes, knowing full well who had come to pay her a visit.

"I can think of only two *forgivable* reasons why the captain of the hawks would dare to approach me *again*," she said, glaring down at her stalker.

“One: the chemicals in your brain have been thoroughly damaged by a powerful ‘razor sharp metal against your throat’ fetish, thereby rendering you incapable of self-control, or two: you have advanced stage short term memory loss and literally cannot remember that I threatened to char your testicles not *five hours* ago,” she snapped, closing the leather book sharply, its pages slamming together with an audible crack.

The torches throughout the massive hall of books burned brighter, sparks landing on the floor below. Nervously eyeing the sparks and rising flames, Theoric responded calmly.

“I only wish to explain myself further. I feel that our conversation on the Bifrost was left unfinished.”

She snorted, completely humorless, and hopped down from the rafter.

“No,” she said, replacing the book on the shelf, “I made myself perfectly clear.”

Taking a seat on a settee by the main fireplace, Theoric offered a smile, undeterred by her curt tone.

“You told me not to come within a foot of you, which if you will note, I’ve not breached,” he said, gesturing to the space between them.

She sighed as she sat in the armchair across from him.

“That may be the case, but the point remains. I have nothing to say to you,” she said, waving her hand as though a pesky fly was buzzing around her head.

Her anger toward the man had waned significantly since Loki returned *alive* and uninjured, however, if that had not been the case, Theoric would be *roasting* right now. Leaning forward, he held out his hands.

“I would give anything, do anything, for you, dearest Sigyn-”

“I most certainly am not *your* dearest,” she hissed, cutting him off, her grey green eyes flashing in the flickering light of the fire.

Breathing heavily, exasperated, he rubbed both hands down his face. “Well to *me*, you *are*. Do not think to tell me what *I* feel. My parents are both dead, and I’ve no siblings. My soldiers look up to me, but they do not desire my friendship. Sigyn, I assure you that you are the dearest person in the world to me. It may seem rash., perhaps premature, but I know how I feel.”

She gaped at him. He sounded positively *mad*. She momentarily wondered if there was an institution in Asgard for such headcases.

“All you could possibly know is that you find my *appearance* pleasing,” she said, throwing up her hands. “You know nothing of who I *truly* am, captain, and if you did, I would wager that you’d find me *far* less appealing. Valhalla, you are nearly Odin’s highest-ranking officer, *commander* of his finest soldiers. You have fought many battles in the name of Asgard and come home victorious. Your principles are *solid*. You and I are *nothing* alike, Theoric. I am terribly sorry that you’ve no family,” she paused, giving him an earnest look, “but if you continue in your pursuit of *me*, you will *never* have one. I would follow Loki into Hel, and I mean it.”

Tired of the conversation, she rose and retrieved the book she was reading before Theoric showed up. She climbed back up to the rafter, wishing he would just go.

*Please just leave me be.*

He stood and spoke with more authority, the authority of a commanding officer.

“I do know *some* things, Sigyn,” he said, his voice raising in volume as he stood to follow her.

“I know that you are a *fearless* warrior, brave enough to go to Jotunheim, outnumbered. I know that when you love, you love *passionately*. I know that you are fiercely loyal. One such as you belongs in the company of the finest soldiers of Asgard. I’ve seen your magic. It is incredibly powerful. That power could be used for *good*, Sigyn. You are not bound to whatever darkness you think resides within you.”

He desperately wanted her to concede to the truth (it was indeed truth that she could rise from darkness) in his words, but when she merely sighed and shook her head, he felt his stomach drop. She was refusing him *again*. He hung his head.

What had he expected? He kicked himself mentally. Why had he allowed himself to fall for her? —to put this woman who wanted nothing to do with him on a pedestal? For the sake of his own sanity, he had to cease this pointless pursuit. This had been his last-ditch effort, and as much as he didn’t want to believe her, it was clear that she truly would stay with Prince Loki to the bitter end. The second son had his talons in her, and she wasn’t even *attempting* escape.

Theoric didn’t know it, but his words hit her like a ton of bricks, and tears filled her eyes. She could be *good*? What did that even mean? What was *good*? Was *love* good? Was *dying* for love good? If not, then she was far from anything resembling *good*. She looked up from the book.

“It wasn’t *bravery* that lit Sif’s body on fire,” she said, her voice shaking with emotion much to her embarrassment. “It wasn’t *bravery* that set me on the path to Jotunheim. It was love, but it was love only for *Loki*. You don’t seem to understand. Why can you not believe me when I say that I would protect him with my life?”

The look on his face made her chest absolutely *ache*. Gods, why did she have to be cursed with so much *empathy*? It made it *impossible* for her to hate him.

“Theoric,” she continued before he could respond, “I am more sorceress than warrior, and I’ve no desire to fight in the name of Asgard. I am not *good*. Please do not let this unfounded infatuation destroy you.”

Squaring his shoulders, he nodded stiffly.

“He will be the *death* of you,” he said, eyeing her from under his brow, “and I will not stand by to watch. I bid you farewell. You shall not hear from me again concerning this matter.”

Bowing quickly, he walked to the doors where Sif had apparently been waiting. Ignoring protocol, he didn’t bother with a proper salute and brushed past her.

Sigyn stared off into space, taken aback by his words. He’d said *goodbye*, swore he wouldn’t bother her again. She had expected him to continue to pester her, and now she wasn’t sure how she felt. Well, she knew she didn’t want him to pursue her, to love her. She cringed at the thought. Perhaps it was the *reason* he was done with her. “*He will be the death of you*,” he’d said. She feared he was right, and at the same time, she didn’t give a damn. She told him that she would follow Loki into Hel, and by the Norns did she mean it.

Deciding it best not to continue thinking on that, she returned to reading the story. Honestly, it might have been written about *her* for all its similarities. She too was once a little girl passing through a dreamworld turned nightmare. She thought back to her life before Loki. Despite many exceedingly *dark* memories, *that* Sigyn, the playful girl who enjoyed swimming, climbing, playing chess, exploring Vanir delicacies at the market, flirting with suitors just to see them blush, casting small spells....*that* Sigyn was no more. Playing with fire died the moment she first saw Loki. There was nothing *playful* about her magic now.

In truth, however, the transformation began long before they met. It started when she first dreamt of him. Along with the dreams, her magic grew, and that magic led her out the door of her old life.

*It led me to HIM.*

She was a darker version of herself now, and like that little girl in the story, she felt there would be nothing worse than going back, even if it was the practical and safe choice. Freya had always said that she was the darkest daughter. At the time, she did not understand her unkind mother’s words. Well, she understood *now*. Lost in her musings on *dark* things, she didn’t notice Sif approaching the rafter from below.

“You must be deep in thought,” Sif said, her voice somehow deeper and more foreboding since their previous conversation. “My armor is, after all, very loud.”



A smile that did not reach Sigyn's eyes stretched across her face.

“Yes, I suppose I was in my own head,” she said, a bit nervous. Sif would not be here unless she discovered something...disturbing. “Why do you still wear it? You are returned from battle, are you not?”

Jumping up, Sif grabbed the rafter with both hands and swung over it, gracefully positioning herself across from her.

“I could ask you the same, *Vanir* girl,” she said, slightly defensive.

Sigyn rolled her eyes- yet another example of Asgardian arrogance.

“My armor is pliable wool and leather,” she countered, shrugging one shoulder. “Yours is uncomfortable metal.”

Rubbing the back of her neck, she yawned. It had been an *exhausting* twenty-four hours, and she had no interest in *chatting*.

“What do you want, Sif?” she asked, fully aware of the petulant tone of her voice.

Sif nodded to the book in Sigyn’s hand. “Nothing is more fitting for your prince than that story. Loki is not who he was this morning.”

“I know that,” she snapped unintentionally. “Do you not remember our conversation outside the healing room?”

“That’s not what I’m referring to,” Sif said, shaking her head. “You knew that his skin changed, but you do not know what I just witnessed in the vault.”

Hesitantly, Sigyn leaned forward, her brow furrowing from worry. “Tell me.”

### ~THE ALLFATHER’S BEDCHAMBERS~

Kneeling by her husband’s bed, Frigga held his motionless hand, but she kept her eyes on her son. Loki sat across from her on the other side of the bed, his jaw set painfully tight. He had run into Odin’s bedchamber a few minutes prior, shouting at the guards to be careful with the unconscious king, and hadn’t said a word to her. Working up the courage to say his name, she took a deep breath.

“Loki?”

She wanted to drop Odin's hand and just run to her son and hug him until, well...until *forever*. He was her *baby boy*, for heaven’s sake, and if she could just hold him and keep

him safe forever, she would. Fear kept her where she was, though. She was afraid. No, she was *terrified* that he would just push her away, and she wouldn't know what to do with herself if that happened. She already lost one son today. Losing Loki would absolutely *devastate* her.

He didn't respond, but merely continued staring blankly at the man who was not his father. The corner of his mouth twitched slightly when she said his name again.

Trembling with anxiety, her voice raised a pitch. "Loki, please? You *must* speak to me."

He finally raised his eyes to meet hers, emerald to azure. "I do not even know how to address you properly anymore," he whispered, eyes shining.

Her face crumpled as she choked back a sob. "I am your *mother*, Loki," she managed between painful breaths. "I *have* been since the day he brought you back, the day I first *loved* you."

Her words cut him. He looked at his chest, searching for the gaping wound, to no avail.

"Then why did you lie to me?" he asked, eyebrows knitted. "Did you or Odin honestly think it better for me to find out like *this*?"

She frowned, words failing her, tears filling her eyes. She had never wanted to lie to him. That had been Odin's decision. Odin's *awful* decision.

"Loki..."

"I always knew that I was different," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

"At the basest level, one could not, upon looking at us, see even a *slight* family resemblance," he said, his voice raising just as surely as his anger. "And the *heat*. I know now why Asgard has always been so gods damn *hot* for me."

He ripped off his outer jacket. What purpose did the heavy princely garb serve anymore? Was he even still technically a prince? Gods, this was the most wretched feeling of his life. *This* was true pain. True *sorrow*. An actual knife to the back would have hurt less. Sliding off the bed to sit on the floor, he held his head in his hands.

Frigga clambered to her feet and ran to him, desperate to ease his suffering. Was that even *possible* now after what they'd done to him? No longer caring that he would probably push her away, she dropped to her knees next to him and threw her arms around his neck. He *attempted* to push her away, just as she thought he would, but he gave up quickly when she refused to let go. Protective arms holding him against her chest, she sobbed into his hair.

"We made a *mistake*, dearest."

He looked up at her, astonished by such a *simple* excuse.

“*Mistake?* That’s a fucking *huge mistake!*” he scoffed, wishing he didn’t love her at all, wishing he could *hate* her for this.

She didn’t think for a moment to correct his language. She didn’t care. She rather felt like swearing herself. Shaking her head, she opened and closed her mouth. What could she possibly say? Staring at him, she came up with nothing, settling for just stroking his hair instead.

He held her gaze as a tear ran down his cheek. “Loki *Laufeyson*.”

The name tasted horrible on his tongue. His entire life was a *sham*.

“How could you? How *could* you?” He choked on his own words.

Not letting loose her hold on her son, Frigga pulled him further into her embrace. Never had she been unable to comfort him. Any time something had upset him, whether it being children mocking him at the academy, or Odin scolding him for something *beyond* ridiculous, or any other number of things, Loki always came to her first.

Now here she was. A mother who couldn’t provide a haven for her beloved child. She’d never felt more useless, more guilty, more of a failure in her long life. If she couldn’t help him, who could? Closing her eyes, she continued crying into his hair. Indeed, there was someone who *could* help him, and it was akin to being stabbed in the heart knowing she was no longer that person. Finally lifting her head, she shouted to the guards at the door.

“Fetch the Lady Sigyn. *Now.*”

Tears running down her cheeks, she tightened her hold on him. Hopefully, the young Vanir could do what she could not.

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Still seated on the rafter in the library, Sigyn mulled over Loki’s true name, rolling it around on her tongue, her taste buds finding it bitter.

*Laufeyson. Laufeyson. Laufeyson?*

She shook her head. No, he was an Odinson. Through and through. He was and *always would be* Loki Odinson. She didn’t give a damn about his true parentage.

Sif had relayed the entire scene from the weapons vault before announcing that she was exhausted and disappeared to her chambers. Sigyn at once both loved and hated Odin. On one hand, if it hadn't been for him, Loki would have died without having the chance to live more than a few days. On the other hand, the king lied to him, and it was no *little* lie.

Loki was the son of Asgard's mortal enemy. Had Odin really meant to one day just announce to his son that he was taking the throne of Jotunheim? Was Loki that *dispensable* to him? Had he really intended to just send him away to live on a frozen rock and rule a race he'd been raised to despise, after believing, throughout his entire life, that he was an Asgardian prince?

She didn't know if it was her overwhelming sadness or his, but she jumped from the rafter, needing to find him. However, as soon as she grabbed the door handle, it swung open from the other side, and several guards burst through. She stumbled back in shock, clamping her hand over her mouth to stifle a small cry. The guards seemed out of breath, and surprisingly upset for such typically stoic soldiers.

"Lady Sigyn," one of them said, his eyes wide with concern, "your *urgent* presence is needed in the king's chambers."

Needing no further explanation, she ran past them and bolted for the east wing of the royal corridor, the sounds of their hurried footsteps attempting to catch up to her echoing through the hall.

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Frigga heard the clatter of fast heels out in the corridor growing steadily louder, and she sighed. A part of her feared it might be upsetting to see Sigyn, that it might be the epitome of *'you've been replaced'*. Instead, she only felt relief wash over her at the sight of the petite dark-haired woman turning the corner and running down the hall straight for them. Two guards, posted at Odin's doors, spears crossed as a barrier, stepped aside for her. Loki looked up at the sound. As soon as he saw her, he pushed to his feet, just in time for her to throw her arms around his waist.

"Sig, I—"

"Don't speak," she said, putting her fingers over his mouth. "I already know. You don't have to say *anything*, love."

Removing her hand from his mouth, she slid both arms up around his neck and pulled him as close as possible. His breath hitched in his chest when she called him "*love*", and he

almost said it back, but she released her hold on him, and the urge faded at the shocked look on her face. He followed her eyeline to Odin.

She gaped, horrified at the corpse-like king lying on his bed. “Dear gods, is he *dead?*”

Loki shook his head and rubbed his eyes to remove the evidence of his crying.

“No, it is the Odinsleep,” he explained, running a hand through his hair. “It is a preservation method of sorts. That’s the best way to describe it, I think.”

Her eyes slid from Odin back to Loki. “How long does he need to be.... *refreshed?*” She’d never heard of such a thing.

Frigga rose from the floor then. No doubt it seemed rude, but she hadn’t bothered to get up when Sigyn arrived. She felt the need to correct that.

“We do not know,” she answered, sighing heavily. “Days, months, years, it is unknown.”

“*Years?*” Sigyn shrieked, hating the sound of her own voice.

She grabbed Odin’s hand, shaking it a bit, willing him to awaken. Despite her distaste for the old man, he had kept peace throughout the realms for millennia, and she was none too happy that he was *lying down on the job*, so to speak.

“But Asgard cannot hold its place within the realms without its king,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Frigga placed a hand on her shoulder, and Sigyn looked up at her.

“Asgard is not without their king,” the queen said, nodding to her son.

Rhythmic steps sounded from the hall then, and Loki, brows raised, mouth agape, turned to see the entire Hawk guard, all two hundred of them marching toward him. Leading the charge, Theoric held Gungnir out horizontal before him. Loki turned to Frigga as the Hawks came to an abrupt halt at the door and dropped to their knees in front of him. Bringing their fists over their chests, they bowed their heads to him. Solemnly, like the guards, the queen bowed her head, gesturing for Sigyn to do the same.

“Odin sleeps,” Frigga said, her voice strong. “Thor is banished. *You* are the rightful king of Asgard, my son.”

Loki couldn’t believe his ears. He was king now? After this awful, dreadful day, he was now suddenly supposed to take the throne of Asgard? He didn’t remotely know how to process this, but that didn’t matter now. Closing his mouth and squaring his soldiers, he composed himself quickly. He nodded to the woman he would continue to call “*mother*” and then

turned to face the Hawks. Theoric presented him with Gungnir, and pursing his lips, Loki closed his hands around the spear.

All he ever wanted was to be Thor's equal. Being king was always an impossible dream, one that he was abruptly roused from earlier in the vault. He'd never considered what sitting on the throne entailed because it was never to be his. It was perhaps why, at least in part, he played so many tricks, why he was so mischievous all these years. But now, holding Gungnir, feeling its weight, its *power*, which was as potent as the magic that flowed through his veins, he was determined to do right by his parents. The two people who he wanted to, once again, claim as his own. He reveled in the energy pulsing within his hands, and tongue sliding across his bottom lip, he turned slowly back to face Sigyn. Her eyes met his, and moving the spear to one hand, he held the other out, palm up, beckoning her to come to him.

Smiling, relieved to see her son taking on this responsibility despite knowing the painful truth now, Frigga went to him and hugged him.

"I trust that Asgard, under your rule, is in good hands, my son. If you need me, I will be here at your father's side."

Loki nodded once and said goodbye. With a wave of his hand, the guards parted for him, and he pulled Sigyn through the two long rows of soldiers, Gungnir at his side.

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## CHAPTER 13: FOR THE LOVE OF SIGYN

### ~THE FOLLOWING MORNING, THE OBSERVATORY~

Ominous and deep, Heimdall's voice bounced off the golden interlocking gears of the Bifrost observatory as Sif approached him early the next day before dawn.

"Lady Sif," he greeted her.

She felt the floor vibrate under her boots.

"Good Heimdall," she said, bowing her head to him as she around him to peer out the opening of the observatory.

Stars, comets, moons, planets, all distant lovely shapes, shone in the deep dark of space. Beneath the observatory, the Eternal Sea roared, falling over the edge of the realm, disappearing into that deep dark. Approaching the gatekeeper, seeing the glow of his golden eyes, she straightened her shoulders, intimidated. It wasn't often that she went to him with a request for his sight, but after Sigyn informed her of Thor's banishment, and worse, that his location was *unknown*, she couldn't help herself. Despite being exhausted from the battle in Jotunheim, she didn't sleep even a wink last night. She just tossed and turned, wondering where her *almost*-paramour was, if he were injured, and if he would ever come home.

"He is well," Heimdall responded to her unspoken question, eyes forward, unmoving from his post.

She sighed and hung her head. Of *course*, he was well. She should have known. Thor *always* adapted quickly to any environment, no matter his familiarity with it. Rocking from one foot to another, she nervously rubbed a smudge from her vambrace.

"I am glad to hear that," she said, turning to face the gatekeeper. "If I may be so bold, I should very much appreciate knowing *where* he is doing well."

He glanced at her from his periphery before returning his eyes to the cosmos. Ever since the Allfather banished his son, Heimdall kept his all-seeing gaze on Thor. Painful as it was to hear the prince scream up at him- "*Heimdall?! I know you can hear me! Open the Bifrost!*" - upon first gaining consciousness after his fall to the mortal realm, the gatekeeper obeyed Odin's command, refusing passage back home for the young Asgardian. All he could do was watch Thor from the Bifrost observatory, and he saw every moment the *once-golden-son* spent with the humans. Choosing to leave out the details of a blossoming relationship between the eldest Odinson and a mortal woman, Heimdall spoke finally.

“He is on Midgard.”

Cringing, Sif scoffed. “Of all the realms within Yggdrasil the Allfather could banish him to, he chose the *mortal* realm?”

Rather than merely glance sideways at her, Heimdall turned his body to face her *completely*- a rare occurrence indeed.

“Lady Sif,” he said, staring directly into her light hazel eyes, “there is always purpose behind the king’s actions. You know this. Would you prefer he spend his sentence in Muspelheim?”

Turning away from him, she rolled her eyes. Well *obviously*, fire demons were worse than humans.

*Technicalities.*

Unable to deny her own curiosity, she asked, “Must his exile continue if the Allfather sleeps?”

Perhaps the further questioning irritated him, but at least she refrained from stomping her foot like a frustrated child. He should be grateful. As should she, considering the likelihood that somehow word of the “war goddess throwing a temper tantrum” would reach her fellow soldiers.

“I know he has fallen into Odinsleep,” she added, holding his steadfast gaze. “I saw it myself. Thor *must* return now. Asgard needs a *king*.”

“Thor need not return,” he countered, looking away from her to focus once more on the nine realms. “Asgard is now under the protection of King Loki.”

Her jaw dropped. *Say what?* She brought her hand to her mouth. A frost giant was now sitting on the throne of Asgard?

*Loki is the ruler of the nine realms...this can't be true...it MUSTN'T be true.*

Despite her empathy for him in his current situation, she still only trusted him as far as she could throw him- in other words, not at all. She once kicked him in the chest, which blew him back maybe...ten feet? Honestly though, Thor’s younger “brother” was solid as a rock, *much* heavier than he looked. She was stronger than many men, sure, but no way in Hel did she have the upper body strength to lift Loki enough to *throw* him. All that to say, she didn’t trust him with the throne one bit.

From her first memories, he was always jealous of Thor and his status. Also, lest anyone forget his vicious nature, Loki stabbed her, twisted the blade, then broke her back without a care for her life in a moment of rage. Oh! – *and* in addition to that heartless, cold-blooded,



altogether unforgivable deed, to this day, he *still* consorted with the woman who magically set her broken body on fire!

She rolled her eyes at her own adolescent refusal to just *let it go*. They paid the price for their actions, and to be fair to Loki, he fought alongside her as her brother in arms. She rarely *saw* him throwing daggers, but she always *heard* those blades piercing unseen enemies coming up behind her. He'd no doubt saved her life and her friends repeatedly throughout centuries of battles.

*Including yesterday...in Jotunheim.*

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that Loki shouldn't be trusted with the throne. Scowling at his new title, which he'd been vying for from day one, she jumped on her horse and rode back to the palace, shouting "*Thank you, Heimdall!*" over her shoulder.

### ~SAME TIME, LOKI'S CHAMBERS~

Loki rolled over and rubbed his eyes as the first light of the day streamed through the thin opening between the dark green drapes drawn across his balcony. Stretching his long body beneath the black sheets, he grimaced as a sharp pain shot through his core. Not only was the bruising from the battle causing the pain, but after fucking Sig a good five times the night before, his hip flexors were positively *screaming*. Yes, he got a bit carried away, but how could he not? She'd dropped to her knees in front of him and said, "*allow me to serve you, my king.*"

*Godsdamn.*

Running a hand down his face, he closed his eyes, the memory of her dark red lips on him making his head spin as all the blood drained out of it. He slid his eyes over to her. Her back was to him, her bare shoulder peeking out from under the sheet. Biting his lip, he reached over and ran his first finger down her shoulder, dragging the sheet that much lower. She shivered in her sleep, and he scooted up behind her. He moved her hair aside and leaned in to kiss her neck, stopping himself when he remembered that the *king's* servants would be arriving shortly.

Rolling his eyes, he kissed her shoulder and pushed up from the bed, pulling on his trousers-not wise to be seen naked on the first day of a... new job.

*Wouldn't want them to see my crown jewels.*

Chuckling quietly at his silent joke, he plucked her underthings from the floor and pushed the sheets off her. Dear gods, he would most certainly *not* allow them to see *her* naked.

Waking with a start thanks to the cold air, she curled into a ball, trying to warm herself.

“Loki!” she cried out, reaching down, ferociously grasping the covers. “What are you *doing?*”

Shooing her hands away from the blankets, he pulled her up, looking her up and down appreciatively. Dammit— if only he had more time.

“My quarters are sure to be overrun with servants soon, and *obviously* I can’t have anyone else seeing you in this...” he trailed off, then cleared his throat and gestured to her body “... this... *mouthwatering* state. It is a sight for my eyes alone.”

Raising an eyebrow, she smirked, letting him slide the thin garment over her head. He finger-combed her hair then kissed her nose.

“There,” he sighed, “You may now curl back up under the covers if you wish.”

Covering her mouth, she yawned and fell back, yanking the sheets up.

“Thank you for your *generous* permission, my king,” she whispered with a wink.

Eyes narrowing, he leaned over her.

“You *must* stop calling me that, Sig. Unless you wish to be ravished immediately,” he insisted, catching her lips with his before walking to the drapes to pull them aside.

“As if you would be able to perform such a task,” she said around another yawn and rolled over. “It’s obvious in your gait. You are just as sore as I am.”

Her mumbling was nearly lost in the pillow, but he heard it nonetheless and laughed quietly. She had a point. Strolling to the ledge, he gazed at what was now *his* realm. Snow covering every surface still, Asgard shimmered white. The usually golden luster was still lost under the frozen blanket, and he snorted at the irony of the situation he now found himself in. The coldest days in the history of the golden city had come under the ruling of a frost giant.

*Well, HALF frost giant... I hope.*

This was not how he would have chosen to acquire the crown. Had it been an option, he would have requested an official coronation ceremony and a celebratory feast worthy of Volstagg’s stomach. This would do, though, and he couldn’t deny the joy it brought him when the spear was handed to him by none other than Theoric himself. When the hawk backed away from his new *commander* last night, the look on that poor bastard’s face was one of sheer devastation.

*It’s fine. I’ll put him out of his misery soon enough.*

Out of his periphery, he saw Sif astride her stallion, Dori, galloping down the Bifrost. Sighing, he frowned at the time-consuming responsibilities of the crown. He returned to his room, and just as he expected, it was now bustling with servants. The throne could not be empty when Sif and the warriors arrived. No doubt, they would ask him to bring his brother out of exile.

*They won't like my answer.*

## ~THE THRONE ROOM~

Elbow resting on the arm of the most powerful chair in Asgard, Loki leaned sideways and set his chin in his hand. He was already bored (nearly to tears), and it was only *morning*, for Hel's sake. He ran his finger over his lips and listened, uninterested, as the director of mead production discussed the honey shortage due to the freeze.

*Dear gods, WHO cares? let them drink liquor!*

Good thing he didn't say *every* thought that floated through his head. Flippantly telling a citizen "who cares?" in response to a concern that affected their livelihood wasn't exactly the best way to foster good relationships with the people. But really, just put the damn beehives in warming units. Was that not an obvious solution? Why would anyone bother the *king of Asgard* with this shit?

He turned his head away from the director at the sound of steps approaching the throne, watching with narrow eyes as Lieutenant Gylfi, second in command of the Hawks, came to a stop at the base of the dais and knelt, right fist over his heart.

"Your Grace," the man said humbly, "Freya of Vanaheim requests audience with you."

Bringing his hand to his forehead, Loki hid the roll of his eyes. Of all the people in the nine, that woman was his *least* favorite. She was even worse than *Theoric*, for at least the hawk never actually *harmed* Sig.

When she first told him the story of her visit to her home realm during Odin's completely unfounded "*no touching*" probation, Loki heard two things: Freya denied her own daughter access to her home even though it was dark and freezing and raining, *and* Freya lied about providing the silver for Sif's hair. Perhaps it was an overreaction on his part (he wasn't exactly known for honesty himself) after Sig recalled the details for him, he very nearly flew off to Vanaheim intent on chopping off that woman's golden hair then slicing up her face so thoroughly that none would even recognize her.

He took a moment to phrase his answer to the request in his head. Hmm, as much as he *wanted* to, he couldn't command Gylfi to "*drag that bitch back to the Bifrost and throw her off it.*" His response needed to be firm, not *rude*. After a beat, he leaned forward. Elbows on his knees, knuckles under his chin, he pursed his lips.

"I have far more urgent affairs that require my attention. Have a guard escort her back to the Bifrost. Tell her *King Loki* sends his regards."

Good gracious, nothing was more urgent than a *honey shortage*. The merriment of their people was in grave danger! He sighed. All jokes aside, it *was* a bit overwhelming. The amount of requested council bemused him. Annoyed from being pulled in every direction, he set his jaw. If he was to meet with the director of every single industry in the realm every single day, he feared he would resort to throwing *himself* off the Bifrost.

Gylfi bowed and took his leave, exiting the throne room. Freya stood just outside the door, tapping her foot impatiently. Scowling, she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Well?" she asked when he did not immediately usher her in to see the king.

Glaring at her, the hawk lieutenant spoke curtly, hiding how much he enjoyed the opportunity to refuse her.

"I regret to inform you, Lady Freya, that King Loki is unavailable for council but sends his regards," he informed her. "You are to return to Vanaheim at once."

Hands on her hips, she fumed. This was unconscionable! She came all this way only to be refused entry? She understood that Odin did not hold any great affinity for her, but since when did he just downright...

*Wait...*

Her eyes went wide, replaying the soldier's words in her head.

"Did you say *King Loki*?" she asked, and he nodded once.

What sort of *evil* was this?

"I will see Frigga immediately!" she shouted, pushing past the guard and storming into the throne room.

Upon seeing a green caped raven-haired man seated, legs splayed wide, on the throne, her hand went to her mouth.

"So, it *is* true," she whispered.

She had to be seeing things! Sigyn would *never* escape from him now— not that she ever believed for a second that her darkest daughter wanted to escape. The stupid girl fell head

over heels in love practically the day she *met* that damn prince...or king, as it was now. This was a nightmare.

Seeing Sig's *awful* mother barging into *his* throne room like she owned the place, Loki had to stop himself from sending a lethal burst of magic right into her chest.

"Lieutenant," he growled, standing to his feet. "*What* is the meaning of this?"

Rushing to the throne, Gylfi bowed humbly. "Your Grace, I beg your pardon."

Rubbing his jaw, Loki waved his hand, disgusted by the mere presence of that woman. Good gods, he *despised* her.

"Just get that *thing* out of my sight," he sneered.

Suddenly desperate, she rushed forward, bowing at the base of the dais, nervous after her serious misstep. She never feared approaching Odin, but his son was an altogether different story. Despite his rather handsome face (and the rest of him, as far as she could tell), she was *terrified* of the dark prince. Dark... *king*.

"Your majesty," she pleaded, her voice shaking as she clasped her hands together, "I understand that you have *many* other duties, but I've traveled such a *great* distance. If it is possible, I would like to speak with my sister since you are quite overrun."

Narrowing his eyes, he gripped Gungnir more tightly, his fingers itching to make her *howl* in pain.

"Have you gone *deaf*, Freya? You will return to Vanaheim at once. And the queen, who is most certainly *not* your *sister*, is not accepting visitors in her present state of grief."

Lip trembling, she bowed lower.

"May I see my daughter, at least?" she stammered, her eyes filling with tears.

He inclined his head, looking at her from over his nose as he considered her request. Likely, Sig would burn the woman alive, pissed off as she was with her pathetic excuse for a mother, which would relieve him of the task. Smirking slightly, he shrugged one shoulder.

"You'll find her in the training arena. However," he paused, raising a finger, then spoke through his teeth, "if any harm should come to her, I will scatter your parts throughout the nine."

He turned to Gylfi then. "Take her to Sigyn. If she allows this woman to talk, fine. If not, fine. Either way, promptly return Freya to Heimdall when Sigyn is done with her."

The young hawk bowed. "Yes, Your Grace."

## ~THE TRAINING FIELDS~

Sigyn smiled gleefully, the satisfying *thwack* of her arrow hitting the bullseye of her burlap enemy from fifty yards.

“Did you see that, Fenrir? Nailed it. Like *Mjölnir*,” she joked, looking at the wolf sitting at her right expectantly.

When he only laid his head on his paws, she raised her eyebrows. “Nothing? Oh, but that was by far one of my best puns! Come now, show me your version of a laugh.”

He offered a quiet bark and licked her fingers as she tickled his chin.

“Good enough, I suppose,” she said with a shrug.

Setting another arrow to her bow, her eyes narrowed and the hair on the back of her neck stood up at the smell of fresh evergreen and sage—*Vanir* evergreen and sage. Only one person smelled like that, and she had no wish to come near that scent again. Anger building in her chest, she turned to see her “mother” gingerly descending the stone steps at the edge of the grounds.

“Now *that* is a *real* target, Fen,” she said, her voice low as she pulled the arrow taut and aimed it at the quickly approaching woman.

Without hesitation, she released the arrow. Fenrir took off after it, catching it in his teeth right before it planted itself in Freya’s shoulder.

Slipping on the ice at the sight of the giant wolf leaping at her, she screamed and fell, twisting her ankle in the process. She watched in horror, one hand clutching her throat, the other holding her hurt ankle, as Sigyn and her accompanying black smoke stalked toward her. She scrambled to her feet despite the pain and put her hands out in front of her, palms out, genuinely terrified that her daughter might kill her.

“Sigyn! *Please!*”

Sigyn took the arrow that Loki’s wolf offered her and checked that the tip was still sharp.

“You have some nerve coming to Asgard,” she said coolly, returning the arrow to her quiver. “Or perhaps it isn’t ‘nerve’ so much as it is sheer *idiocy*. Perhaps you are actually foolish enough to assume I would never *truly* consider matricide.”

“Imagine the *desperation* it took to send me here,” Freya said, her voice trembling and her body shaking from both the cold and her fear of her daughter.

Raising her eyebrows and tilting her head, Sigyn put a hand over her chest dramatically.

“Desperation?” she repeated, lacing her tone with *extreme* concern. “Oh dear...oh *no*... are you in need of monetary assistance? Is that what you mean? Do you believe your daughter has some sort of sway over King Loki’s pocketbook because she has *exclusive* rights to his bed?”

“Sigyn, *no* I-”

“Hm... well... let’s see here,” she cut Freya off and tapped her chin. “Your *daughter*-” she made air quotes “-has yet to test his financial generosity, but if she *were* to ask him for such a thing, how much *help* do you need? Will two hundred gold pieces do? Oh, but that is too much. How about *silver*? Will that do? Or is this about something other than money? Are you desperate to claim a higher social status? Do you now think yourself better than your noble *Vanir* birth? Do you require a tiara now that you have close ties with *Asgard’s* crown?”

“NO, if you would just listen to-”

“Would you like to formally request a warm bed within the golden halls of the palace? Since your daughter only makes use of the king’s bed, you might be able to use the guest chambers that Queen Frigga provided her upon first arrival. Oh, you poor thing, just look at you shivering over there. I imagine the unusually frigid Asgardian weather is getting to you. Would you like a seat in front of a nice hot fire?” She winked and flashed a dazzling smile. “If fire is what you’re looking for, you came to the right place.”

Wringing her hands, Freya's golden hair whipped about her face as a cold gust blew across the field.

“You have every right to be angry, but I have reason to fear for your life,” she said, her voice raising a pitch from fear.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, do shut up,” Sigyn snapped, giving an exaggerated eye roll.

Freya looked nervously across the empty field. “Why are there no other soldiers here?”

Sigyn raised an eyebrow, smirking *just* a touch. No doubt that sniveling golden-haired whore meant to ask why there were no *witnesses* here. She snorted quietly under her breath, then sighed, very tired suddenly. Any amount of time with Freya was exhausting.

Running her hand through her long raven locks, she spoke plainly. “King Loki-”

*Also known as the love of my life...*

“-has decreed a grief holiday for the Allfather,” she explained, “but since I am not of Asgard, I am not required to abstain from my usual activities.” When Freya only continued to stare at her, she shrugged and threw up her hands. “Why are you here?”

“Please, Sigyn, I am your mother. Call me as such,” Freya pleaded, hands clasped in front of her.

Turning on her heel, Sigyn started walking back to her archery post then shouted over her shoulder, “I am not worthy of the name Freya, if you will kindly recall!”

The woman shook her head at her daughter’s stubbornness.

“I am here because I’ve had terrible dreams of your death!” she called after her. “I wake *screaming*, Sigyn!”

She wasn’t making it up. The nightmares haunted her, and even though she held no affinity for her darkest daughter, she didn’t wish her *dead*. Nervous, she approached the dangerous younger woman.

“You do not have the gift of foresight,” Sigyn pointed out as she readied her bow, “therefore I don’t give a damn about your dreams.”

Crossing her arms, Freya huffed. She *knew* it would be a pointless journey to Asgard, but after she told Nanna of her dreams two nights past, the girl *insisted* that she bring Sigyn home. Unfortunately, she legitimately liked her *other* daughter, which meant she couldn’t just ignore her request. Angry, the faint lines in her forehead deepened into a hard scowl as she thrust her finger at her daughter.

“To think I came all this way because your sister wanted to protect my most pathetic, dark, and *evil* daughter! *You* aren’t worth the trouble,” she shouted, “so enjoy rotting here with your *bastard* king!”

Sigyn's eyes blew wide.

*Bastard?!*

Oh, bloody *HEL* NO- Freya was welcome to insult *her* all she wanted, but she refused to allow such an *awful* word to be said about Loki. *Especially* after Jotunheim. She gave in to her instincts and unsheathed the dagger at her thigh, then lunged at her mother. The *wretched* woman screamed, clawing at Sigyn’s hand wrapped around her black blade, which was now seated in her shoulder, blood pouring out of it.

“I *knew* you would never come of your own volition!” she hissed through her teeth as Freya sobbed and fell to the ground. “Of *course* Nanna sent you! You couldn’t give a damn about *me*,” she continued, lowering her voice, “and if you *ever* speak ill of Loki again, I’ll cut out your tongue.”



Tears continued to stream down Freya's face, not only from the agonizing pain in her shoulder, but in hopes that the sight of the tears would grant her mercy.

"Are you so far gone in your obsession with the dark son that you've gone blind? He is *killing* you, daughter! Slowly, bit by bit. And you are *letting* him!"

Sigyn's eyes slid from Freya's face to the dagger in her shoulder, then back to her face. She sighed and dropped her head. There it was again...

*Empathy.*

She was disgusted with her own weakness at the sight of her *not*-mother's tears. Freya didn't deserve her pity in the slightest, but she was giving it anyway. *Damn it.* She wrenched her blade from the woman's shoulder and placed her palm on the wound.

Freya screamed as scorching heat traveled from Sigyn's hand through her skin and into her muscle. Trying to pull away, she sobbed, trapped suddenly within a wall of burning, poisonous smoke. Sigyn dropped her hand, eyeing the now cauterized wound and inspected her work. Satisfied, she let the smoke cage dissipate. At her mother's awed expression, she raised an eyebrow. Freya had no idea of the power that flowed through her veins.

"I couldn't have you flying back to Vanaheim with a gaping wound, now could I?" she said and stood, Fenrir joining her once again now that the smoke was gone. "We're *done.* Come, Fen!"

With Loki's wolf at her feet, desiring nothing more than solitude after this horrible run in with her cruel mother, she ran for the forest.

Freya tested her shoulder, and finding it quite healed, returned to the waiting Gylfi at the base of the steps, and headed for the Bifrost. She knew that when Sigyn said "we're done", it was final. She would never see her daughter again.

*Good riddance, you little fire witch.*

### ~LATER THAT EVENING, THE THRONE ROOM~

Marching down the long aisle to the throne behind Lieutenant Gylfi, Sif leaned over to Fandral who was holding a hand over his still healing shoulder.

"What did I tell you?" she whispered harshly in his ear. "*Now* do you believe me?"

“I never said I *didn't*,” he whispered back through his teeth, grimacing when he twisted the wrong way and pain shot through his shoulder.

“Well, it’s only natural that the next in line to the throne should now sit on it,” Volstagg offered, keeping his voice low as he came closer to them from behind.

She glared back at him- the man had no clue just how *unnatural* it was.

The warriors plastered smiles on their faces as they came to the base of the throne, kneeling before Loki who was smirking at them (mostly at Sif). He kept his eyes on them as he dismissed the director of such-and-such, or something-or-other and motioned Thor’s friends forward with two fingers.

“I wondered when I might see my *friends*. You’ll have to forgive me for not visiting the healing room. I’ve been rather,” he paused and gestured to the throne, “*busy*.”

Fandral opened his mouth to speak, but Sif cut him off.

“Your majesty,” she said, a bit of disgust seeping into her tone, “do accept our condolences for your father and brother.”

Volstagg spoke quickly after, his words spilling nervously from his bearded lips at the sight of the tension in Loki’s jaw. “And our congratulations, naturally, of course, on your *well-deserved* rise to the throne, Your Majesty.”

Loki rolled his eyes at the man.

*Kiss ass.*

He tilted his head sideways, looking back at Sif through narrow slits of eyes. Lips pursed, he stood slowly.

“I thank you for your kind words,” he said, not remotely thankful, “but you know that neither Thor nor the Allfather are dead, so condolences are quite premature at this point. Tell me, Sif, what is your purpose for this meeting?”

As though he didn’t already know. Even if he couldn’t read her mind (which he hadn’t been), it was written all over her face what she wanted.

Swallowing loudly, suddenly nervous, she shifted her eyes between the warriors.

“We come humbly asking you to pardon Thor and bring him home.”

Taking a deep breath to ease the surge of anger rising within him, he descended the steps.

“I thought as much. I’m sorry to say that my brother will stay on Midgard until the Allfather says otherwise.”

Without thinking, she rose to her feet, stepping toe to toe with him. “You can’t-”

Her words stopped short when the sharp end of Gungnir touched her chest. Loki stared daggers. Here he stood, as the rightful king of the nine, and she dared to question his authority. He’d never hated her more.

He knew what she was thinking. That he was just jealous. That all along, his desire was to trick his brother into banishment. That he didn’t want Thor to come home because- oh dear! – then he would lose the throne! That this had *nothing* to do with the fact that he truly couldn’t just *undo* Odin’s last command. Bloody Hel, that woman could not be further from the truth, and he wanted to strangle her for it.

After all the trouble he and Sig went to just to restore something as insignificant as her pathetic *hair*? After all the trouble he went through on Jotunheim to save Sif’s neck, to save *all* their necks? Gods, if he hadn’t bothered to stop that Jotun from killing Thor before they departed, Laufey never would have grabbed him and ruined *everything*. He went through that agony *for Thor*. After all that, Sif still had not *one* ounce of gratitude.

Fandral quickly grabbed Sif, pulling her back down to a penitent position.

“Of course, your majesty,” he said, angry with her for putting them in this situation. “We understand.”

Sif yanked her arm away from her blond comrade. “If I may be so bold, your majesty-”

“You may *not*,” Loki growled, feeling his magic pooling in his chest, willing it to settle down. “Thor is *mortal* now and has no place in Asgard amidst the gods.”

He couldn’t believe he had to explain this to her as though she were an uncomprehending child.

*Well, if the shoe fits...*

“My brother has no title, no power, and not even his hammer,” he continued, staring pointedly at her. “As I said, I will *not* undo the Allfather’s last command. Understood?”

Slowly rising, the warriors three nodded and took their leave, while Sif remained in place. She watched Loki carefully, her blue eyes shining with unshed tears.

“But he is your *brother*,” she pleaded, much to her own detriment.

He hung his head, frustrated beyond belief at her incessant whining. Why did his brother like this *infuriating* woman? Looking back up at her, he squatted to her level.

“You worry so much for a man who has given his heart to another. Thor has found a new woman, a *mortal* named Jane Foster,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

Sif squelched the desire to crumple to the ground and sob. She had not considered the possibility of a new paramour, and it gutted her to hear it. Holding her head high, despite her heart breaking, she squared her shoulders.

“I worry more that a *frost giant* sits in the Allfather’s stead,” she whispered just loud enough for Loki to hear it, immediately regretting it when his eyes went wide.

Grabbing her by the elbow, he yanked her to her feet and dragged her to the hidden space behind the dais.

“How the *fuck* do you know that?” he whispered angrily through clenched teeth, hand flying up to close around her throat, his body shaking with barely contained rage.

“I saw your skin. In Jotunheim,” she willed her voice to hold steady, refusing to cry like a little child.

Slamming his fist into the pillar at her back, he snarled, “Have you spoken of this to anyone?”

Shaking her head fiercely, she swallowed back the bile rising to her throat.

“No! I swear it!”

She was positively *terrified* of him. Ever since that day he and his dark sorceress lover nearly killed her, she felt weak in his presence. She felt damn near paralyzed right now. He wielded more strength and power than she and the warriors wanted to admit. She struggled to pull his fingers off her neck.

Eyeing her carefully, he looked inside her mind, and when he found no hint of deceit in her answer, he loosened his grip.

“Good,” he said quietly, checking his periphery for onlookers. “If that information becomes privy to another soul, I swear I will finish what was started in the arena that day. I assure you that I would not require Sigyn’s assistance, and you would lose a great deal more than your *hair*.”

Ashamed by her cowardice, her eyes brimmed with tears. “I will go, if I am still free to do so.”

Eyes narrowing, he hesitated before nodding. “You may.”

He watched as she retreated down the aisle to the exit, not turning her back to him. Once she disappeared from his sight, he announced his retirement for the day, barking at the soldiers to keep their posts and change guards at the usual hours.

~LATE, LOKI'S CHAMBERS~

Pacing across his balcony in his informal leather leggings and tunic, Loki ran a nervous hand through his hair. Sif knew of his true parentage, but he knew she wouldn't dare tell anyone. He made sure of that- of all the sentient beings in the nine, *she* knew he didn't make empty threats. More than ever, he needed to prove his allegiance to Asgard. He couldn't have his citizens become suspicious of him like Sif. He didn't *steal* the throne, but if she believed it, others would too.

Wracking his brain for a praiseworthy act to gain their trust, he ran his hand along the ledge as he walked, painfully aware of the guards below who were casting nervous glances at him. Inspiring fear was not his goal, but he *did* need to show strength and courage since the peace treaty with Laufey was now shattered. He needed to rebuild that peace somehow. War was *not* an option. After all, sending thousands of soldiers to their deaths was a terrible way to start one's reign.

His musings ceased when he realized the moons had been shining for an hour at least, and Sig was still gone. Brow furrowing, he looked over the ledge to see her room- not that she would be there, seeing as how she already moved most of her things to his chambers. As he suspected, her room was dark. He returned to his chambers, nervously looking around the empty space, calling for her in the washroom, dressing room, bedchamber, and antechamber to no avail. He opened his mind to her then, tapping into their bond. Sifting through the garbage of the day, he drained his memory of industry directors and idiotic warriors and Thor.

Finally, he found her deep in the heart of Asgard's forest. As the bond worked its magic, he felt her desire to return home to Vanaheim despite her having renounced it, claiming that Asgard was her home now. No, not Asgard...

*Me.*

*She said that I am her home.*

There was only one thing that could possibly make her miss Vanaheim, and it would kill her. Panicking silently (*oh dear gods, Sig!*), the fear of losing her becoming a very *real* possibility, he grabbed his long leather jacket and yanked his boots on, yelling for the guards. Throwing his chamber doors open, he ran for the stables.

"Muster the Hawks and prepare Sinir!"

## ~SOMEWHERE IN SILVER FOREST~

Sigyn cursed her mother silently for the rotten mood that had befallen her. She'd been having a good day, too. Waking from the best sleep of her life. Spending the morning reading, practicing spells, laughing at Loki's annoyance with his new subjects. The silent snide comments he made throughout the morning made her turn blue in the face from laughing so hard. Then she had the arena all to herself, shooting arrows, laying waste to her targets, and all the while her new ever-present protector Fenrir stayed by her side. She thought it odd at first, when Loki commanded his wolf to "watch over her" in his stead due to his new schedule.

*As though I can't take care of myself...come ON, Loki.*

However, she couldn't deny that his protective instinct toward her was somewhat... flattering. More importantly, Fen's company was comforting. The wolf bonded rather quickly with her, and now she wanted him with her simply because he was *such* a sweetheart. A *ferocious* sweetheart, but a sweetheart, nonetheless.

Petting his head as they trudged through the snow laden forest, she peered up, blinking at the cold frozen drops falling through the trees. She loved Asgard's moons. They were so much more brilliant than Vanaheim's. Or maybe they weren't, and she was simply biased toward this place now because she fell under Loki's dark spell.

No, this wasn't a spell. She genuinely fell for him. No magic necessary. Thinking of her childhood home used to make her homesick. Yet now she was so far gone in her obsession with him that the thought of traveling to Vanaheim, thereby putting a vast expanse of space between them, made her drop to her knees, overwhelmed by waves of nausea. Fenrir nuzzled her neck, and she looked up, furrowing her brow at a strange sight straight ahead.

A hole in a boulder, perhaps ten feet across and ten feet tall, was frozen over. Not the entire rock, just that one spot. She knew it was the Jotunheim portal. She saw it in Loki's mind weeks ago.

Walking to it, she peered into the ice, seeing nothing. Smoke billowing from the tip of her finger, she touched it. The ice melted under her touch, and she put her eye to the opening. Jotunheim shimmered on the other end of a prismatic cave, bending and unbending with the strange physics of the portal. Shivering as it iced back over, she stepped back.

"You know that's where your dad is from, Fen?" she teased, continuing her trek through the trees. "Foliage in Asgard dies every Sólstöður, doesn't it? The trees are barren, unlike Vanaheim. Trees are *always* green there."

She paused then in her walk, eyes widening upon seeing an *actual* evergreen....in Asgard. Well, that was odd. It stood proud, though smaller than the surrounding huge two-hundred-foot leafless ash trees. It was a magnet pulling her closer and closer to its healthy reddish-brown bark, the dark green needles whistling in the frozen wind. Watching as it altered itself, she continued, hypnotized by its beauty. This was not a tree. No, this was another portal. To *Vanaheim*.

Fenrir anxiously bounded to the trunk that pulsed against the air molecules surrounding it. Reaching forward, the illusion shattered under her hand and before her, within the tree, was another prismatic path akin to the frozen rock portal. Smile playing at the corners of her mouth, she cautiously put a foot in. Fenrir barked, biting her dress, trying to pull her back.

“It’s *home*, Fen. Stop that. Come on. I’ll show you. It’s so beautiful.”

All thoughts of Asgard faded in an instant, the enchanting tree seemingly casting a spell over her. There was nothing she wanted more in the nine (*not even Loki*) than to sit on her high perch and hear the roar of the great waterfall tumbling down the cliff. Without another word, paying no attention to the sound of hooves pounding through the maze of trees behind her, she pushed through the tree’s strange substance. With no choice, since Loki had ordered him to protect her at all costs, Fenrir ran after her, his howl echoing through the forest.

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Hearing Fen’s scared cry, Loki kicked Sinir into a full gallop, knowing for certain where he would find her. After the great Æsir-Vanir War, now seven hundred years past, when Odin defeated King Sveigðir’s army, they signed a peace treaty and formed an alliance. In response to what the Vanir thought was an absolute travesty, a thousand strong militia formed. Either they discovered or created the portal (he knew not which or how) and charged into Asgard. Not even Heimdall with his all-sight saw where they came from. Only Odin knew the portal existed before then, but Loki saw the charge with his own two eyes.

He was only two hundred years old at the time, practicing magic in the solitude of the trees when the Vanir stormed into the forest. Hiding in the shadows that day, he watched the Crimson Hawks defeat the Vanir militia, completely baffled as to where the Vanir had even come from. To this day, the rebels remained imprisoned in the dungeons of Asgard, unable to speak of the portal to anyone.

Full of rage over the attack on his home, Loki went to his chambers after he saw the militia that day, and he prepared a death enchantment, then returned to the tree. If the Vanir should venture through it, they would see a Valhalla worthy illusion of their home realm

through the portal, and the spell would put them into a death trance. They would long to return to Vanaheim to sacrifice their own lives for their beloved home- painfully so.

Since he was an incredibly young Seiður at the time, he was careless with the spell. He meant for it to hold any future Vanir *threats* at bay, pulling them back immediately if they found their way through. Unfortunately, the spell worked on *both* sides of the tree as well as on *any* Vanir, non-threatening ones as well, who came near the tree. He didn't consider the possibility that he might one day fall in love with a Vanir woman, nor that she might discover the portal.

Fenrir knew the tree well, and his warning howl pierced Loki's heart as surely as Sig's black dagger would. Speeding to the deadly Vanaheim portal he found long ago, he looked through the pulsing tree. He saw Fen and Sig on the other side, and they were climbing a cliff.

"*SIGYN!*" he called after her, though he knew she wouldn't hear him in her trance.

Tears filled his eyes, and his chest burned the higher she climbed. She was going to jump. She was going to jump off that fucking cliff, and he had maybe twenty seconds to stop her. Sinir grunted and snorted underneath his tightening grip on the reins, pacing back and forth anxiously while his master panicked at the sight of his only reason for living nearing the high peak.

*Oh gods, I can't lose her.*

Setting his jaw, he commanded his horse back into a full gallop through the portal. He couldn't rule Asgard without her. She was supposed to be his queen, and he would bring her back alive. Even if he had to go through *Hel* first.

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## CHAPTER 14: DIE HAPPY (I CAN'T UNDO THIS)

~ REGNELBRÆR FALLS, LEVENDEGRØN, VANAHEIM~

Closing her eyes and breathing in the scent of pine needles and fresh cold water, Sigyn swung her feet over the edge of the two hundred feet high peak.

“This is and always has been my cliff, Fen,” she said, a shiver going down her spine from the wind whipping around them.

She hissed through her teeth, strangely reveling in the feel of the cold air.

“It is the most beautiful place in the nine, don’t you think? Look at the falls,” she whispered, leaning into the wolf, and pointing. “Look at those colors in the mist. *Valhalla*, don’t they just put the rainbow bridge to shame?”

He nudged her shoulder with his nose, whining softly, and she turned slightly to him.

“Surely you’re not scared of *heights*,” she said with a smile, rubbing under his chin as he continued to whimper and nose her shoulder.

“Oh, you’ll be *fine*, silly boy,” she chuckled, giving him a quick kiss on the top of his head before returning her gaze to the water.

From up here she could still see her childhood dwelling. Gods, her *not-mother* was no less cruel now than she was then- inviting man after man into their home, foregoing all her responsibilities to the girls. Sigyn was very nearly taken against her will by any number of Freya’s nameless, disgusting, *perverse* bedmates. Without using the fire under her skin to burn their wandering hands, fighting them off would have been near impossible. She wasn’t close to her seven *oldest* sisters, but she knew every single one was abused by Freya’s visitors. Sadly, they didn’t have her fire. The only sibling she truly adored— the eighth daughter, just above her in age —was of course Nanna, and Sigyn would give anything to go back in time and kill every man the second they walked through Freya’s goddamn door, thereby saving Nanna from the same despicable and unforgivable crimes against *children*. Perhaps some of them were hanged or locked up, but to her knowledge, they got away with *everything*.

Oh, but what if a woman accidentally commits magical arson *one* time, and a few nobles and elected officials unfortunately happen to be in the line of fire? Well in *that* case, the country resorts to lying, shaming, spitting, throwing stones, and calling for a nice old-fashioned “*burn them at the stake!*” public execution.

“WITCH TEMPTRESS SEEKS FIERY REVENGE!” had been the headline of the lead story, along with a few genuinely flattering photos that made her look like every side was her “good” side. The images were *somewhat* revealing, showing off a bit more skin than was typical since all these photos were taken at social gatherings involving alcohol and dancing and good-looking people. Why did it concern them that she sometimes sported lower necklines and higher hemlines? The unknown photographer captured her smirking and laughing and dancing with several attractive men, and even though the images were *completely* out of context, they fit the narrative: “witches like *this* one are secret whores who seduce your husbands, and your men pay for their *magical services* with their souls!”

*Mmhm... make sure to either kill or banish ME for a mid-level involuntary manslaughter felony because— good heavens! —a little slut like me ruins “good men” by exposing my neck and knees at PARTIES.*

But what happens to the child abusers? Exile? Prison? Execution? Uh... no. They just keep abusing. Keep *traumatizing*. Keep *genuinely* ruining lives.

*If I hadn't been there to protect her, they very nearly would have ruined Nanna's life.*

She wiped a single tear off her cheek at the memory:

*\*\*\*Her blond-haired sister, red faced and wide eyed with panic, came running into Sigyn's room and silently closed the door and turned the lock. She watched confused as Nanna, the skirt of her dress torn all the way from the hem to the top of her thigh, slid down the wall and put a shaky finger to her lips before burying her face into her knees as she pulled up against her chest, sobbing silently.*

*Sigyn's eyes went wide with fear, letting the schoolbook in her hands fall to the floor with a thud. She'd never seen Nanna in such a state of duress. Hiking up her skirt, she ran to her sister, then dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around her. Her head snapped up at the sound of fast approaching heavy footsteps, and soon a heavy fist was pounding on her door, a male voice shouting for the “pretty little girl” to open the door. Nanna clung to her, shaking her head rapidly, saying “don't let him in” as tears streamed down her cheeks.*

*When the huge brute of a man kicked the door in, he didn't bother to discern which “little girl” he went after. Terrified as she was to see him come at her, she was grateful that he didn't go after her older sister. Under ANY circumstance, Sigyn would sacrifice herself for Nanna, but that instinct increased tenfold right then because the girl was already in brutal shape, covered in black and blue finger shaped bruises*

*from the man's earlier actions. No way in Hel would her sister be able to defend herself in that state.*

*Shrieking "let go of me!" over and over until she was nearly blue in the face, Sigyn kicked and struggled under his tight hold. She heard her sister pleading "take me instead!" while crawling over to him and latching onto his leg with her teeth through the fabric. He cried out and grabbed the girl by her hair, then kicked her off him and dragged Sigyn to her bed.*  
\*\*\*

She would have shut out that memory long ago if the experience hadn't gone from sheer horror to downright *wicked glee* by the end. In that memory with her sister, Sigyn was sixteen, and it was when she first discovered her magic. Of course, she was petrified for her own body (she was a *virgin*, and he was *huge!*) but seeing her sister assaulted induced a hot rage *far* more powerful than fear. That rage, that *bloodthirst*, triggered the silently lurking fire under her skin.

His hands started sizzling the moment he ripped the dress straps from her shoulders, and within seconds his entire body was in flames. Using all her strength, she managed to push him off her before she succumbed to her own fire. Norns- she remembered gaping at her hands as the smoke billowed out from the tips of her fingers and standing taller when her eyes slid back up to the burning man in the middle of her room.

She still remembered the feel of her tongue sliding over her lips- still remembered thinking she probably looked like a godsdamn Cheshire cat, and wishing a mirror would appear out of thin air to prove it. She would have watched him burn if Nanna hadn't thrown a blanket over him and patted him down. The expression on her sister's face was seared into her brain- a mixture of fear, relief, and most of all, *pain*.

If only that abuser had come to *her* room first, she could have spared Nanna from unbearable trauma. A century went by before Nanna allowed another man to touch her- before she realized that not *every* man was a disgusting monster.

Her beloved sister practically raised her, which was the pattern of Freya's daughters. Each girl was raised by the sister older than her, and that sister, by the one older than her and so on five more times. Their not-mother just popped them out and left them to fend for themselves once they were old enough to walk. Considering each was mostly well-behaved, it was probably for the best that Freya was an absentee parent.

Perhaps it was due to a shared distaste for their mother, or perhaps it was due to their birth order (Sigyn was the "baby" after all) that Nanna let her get away with everything, which included not telling anyone about her newfound magic. No doubt her sister kept her mouth

shut due to the way Sigyn discovered her abilities- it wasn't a particularly *good* look. She spent many years after that day playing with her fire as often as possible, and often for devious reasons. Burning Freya's tongue with still too hot dinner even after blowing on the bite repeatedly was a favorite little trick. Key word being "was" her favorite. Her *current* favorite little trick wouldn't exactly "wow" an audience, but it was no less thrilling for her-

*Maintaining a realm's worth of space and time between that woman and myself.*

Gods, she deserved a bloody standing ovation for *that* one.

Staring at the dangerously beautiful falls beneath her, she sighed, then let her heavy eyelids slide shut. She buried her face in Fen's soft fur and laughed weakly under her breath. With all her *rightly* rebellious tendencies, it wouldn't take the sharpest knife in the drawer to guess that she would fall *hard* for the god of *mischief*.

What *would* take a sharp knife, however, would be envisioning how the Hel she wound up meeting him in the first place. If anyone told her during her "coming of age" years that the same fire that first saved her from the malicious touch of a cruel man would eventually send her to Asgard into the arms of a man whose touch she *craved* every second of every day, she would have laughed at the absurdity. Come now, after experiencing a vicious *introduction* to the worst capabilities of men at such a young age, one would assume that she would be opposed to every biological male coming within five miles of her! Yet here she was, not only physically craving one of them, but downright adoring and loving him with every ounce of her being. To be fair, though, that experience was nearly 900 years so...

*I've had some time to move on.*

Vanaheim wasn't particularly good to her, but when she and Freya first arrived in Asgard, she was still so unbelievably homesick. Asgard was so different. So unknown. Of course, she corrected that "fear of the unknown" part quickly enough. The best way to alleviate fear of most any subject is to immerse oneself in the study of that thing, or that place, or that...person. For instance, learning what hides underneath a certain Asgardian prince's leather trousers constitutes "studying" the subject.

Releasing another heavy sigh, she lifted her head from Fenrir's fur. Her first magic lesson with Frigga was the last time she recalled missing home- no, actually the moment she first saw Loki and his stunning emerald eyes was the moment she all but forgot that the evergreen realm even existed.

Hm. She wondered what he was up to right now, not that she really *cared* what he was doing. She hadn't seen him since early that morning, and it wouldn't bother her if she didn't see him for another day. Or another week for that matter. Or two. Or...or...

*Wait... what?*

She frowned, the line between her eyebrows deepening, and she turned around to look at the portal.

*I don't miss him...*

*...at ALL.*

She didn't even *want* him. No, the only thing she wanted was to stay in this spot, on this cliff forever. No, that wasn't true either. She didn't want to stay in *this* spot. She wanted to be at the bottom of the falls below it.

Chest heaving in a slight panic, her eyes went wide. What the Hel was *wrong* with her? Not only did Loki suddenly mean *nothing* to her, but now she also wanted to hurl herself over the edge of this cliff? Since when was she *suicidal*?! She slid her eyes to Fenrir. He had a death grip on her dress with his teeth, his big brown eyes sad and scared, as if he knew her thoughts.

"Fen?" she asked, voice cracking as he whined, then growled softly, then whined again.

This made no sense. She would never see Loki again. The man that she was supposedly madly in love with would be gone from her forever.

*And I couldn't care less.*

Like being hit out of nowhere with a ton of apathetic bricks, she felt *nothing* for him. Is this why she felt like tossing herself from this cliff? Did it have something to do with the blood bond? Did she feel nothing for herself ultimately because she felt nothing for the man she was now bound to?

No, that couldn't be right. She was supposed to feel what *he* felt, which meant he didn't care *first*. Well, now that was just mean, wasn't it. After all they'd been through together? How dare he not care for her anymore? Again, not that she gave a damn either way.

*Dear gods, what is HAPPENING to me?*

She wrinkled her nose, suddenly overwhelmed with love for *Vanaheim* of all things- the home that she supposedly disowned, or more accurately, the home that *disowned her*. Yet somehow all she could think was that it was the most perfect place in the nine and that she wanted to die in this perfect happy place, and then she would never feel pain again. Loki was the source of *all* her pain, slowly killing her bit by bit, just as Freya said to her an hour ago, and jumping was the only way to escape that pain.

*Has he even expressly said that he loves me?*

*Not even close.*

She said it to *him* a thousand times, but supposedly he just *couldn't* say it. If not for his godsdamn blood magic making her *feel* that he loved her (maybe...possibly...?), she would justifiably believe that he just wasn't bored with her in his bed yet. Then again, he was a convincing actor and liar, so she would be wise to take the lovey-dovey feelings coming through the bond with a grain of salt.

Oh gods, forget it. At this point, what the Hel did it matter? He probably wouldn't even miss her. She felt happy up here on this cliff, and she wanted to *die* happy. Being immortal was overrated. Living forever made time nonexistent and age insignificant. She was nine hundred years old, but she had no less time to live than she did the day she was born.

Loki wasn't just pain— he was *eternal* pain. Setting aside how stunning he was (in every sense of the word) and how much she wanted him— *used* to want him —he was ice, and she was fire. If she had the power to melt his heart, he wouldn't freeze her to death, but the fire in her veins didn't even have the power to warm *her* anymore. He was destined to snuff her out, to turn her into a frigid immortal...just like him.

No no no no no, she could end all that pain right now. At this happy moment, she could end it.

As though her mind wasn't already screwing with her by caving in on any rational thoughts whatsoever, it added to its own madness by replacing those thoughts with the darkest visions she could imagine, and hopefully she was indeed *imagining* them because they were more than a little disturbing. She didn't have the gift of foresight, so these "visions" were nothing to worry over. They wouldn't happen. They wouldn't happen because they were too horrible.

*Loki hangs from the Bifrost, and... oh gods, NO... he falls!*

She rubbed her eyes furiously trying to force them to see only her physical surroundings, but it was to no avail.

*He is naked and alone in a sterile room with no light. His once beautiful hair is too long and tangled. He is emaciated. Strange alien beings strip him and BURN him! And then...*

*Is that Midgard? What is wrong with him? His once emerald eyes are now unnaturally blue, and.... Is he killing mortals?! WHY?!*

With Fenrir still tugging furiously at her skirt, she cried into her hands as one final image flashed across the backs of her eyelids-

*Asgard on fire.*

That was it. She really would jump now. It was too much. She may not love him anymore, but she didn't want to see Loki fall or die or burn. If those things came to pass by

some strike of *terrible* luck, she didn't want to live to see any of it. She was happy here. Her home, her cliff, her waterfall.

*If I go back to him, he'll draw it out, watch me slowly bleed to death, and if I'm going to die either way, I'd rather do it on MY terms.*

She stood to her feet, ignoring Fenrir barking loudly as he looked in all directions, searching for something.

...or *someone*.

Peering over the falls, she hesitated. The pressure at the bottom would most likely rip her apart.

*Come now, it'll be over soon.*

Cringing, she turned her back to the edge and closed her eyes. She didn't want to see it. Just as she started to take that final step backward, Fenrir howled, and she looked up to see what he was on about. At the base of the cliff, she saw Sinir come charging through the portal. Naturally, Loki was in the saddle, and the sight of him gave her pause. Her eyes caught his as he rode full speed up the mountain, the roar of the falls drowning out the sound of his horse's hooves. With his hair whipping behind him and his intense gaze focused on her, he looked almost like.... well.... a dream— an exceptionally *good* dream. She tilted her head sideways, feeling a pang in her heart as he neared.

*Huh, maybe I DO feel something for him.*

She considered taking a small step forward, thinking maybe she might stay a while longer, then she looked away from him and down at her feet. Whatever small desire was growing within her- the desire to hold him, to feel his arms come around her -faded the moment she dropped her eyes. No longer concerned with what's-his-face down there, she stepped back and fell off the edge.

Loki cried out "*NO! SIG!*" just as Fenrir caught her wrist between his powerful jaws.

*"OH... GODS... FEN!!"* she screamed in agony as his teeth ripped through her skin and dug into the bone.

Legs dangling heavily beneath her, blood poured down her arm, and she looked down. As though being lifted from a trance, the realization that she'd just jumped off a cliff hit her like a ton of bricks. What a *brutal* way to end it all.

She grabbed at the rocky face of the cliff with her free hand, wishing she'd put more effort into those rock climbing courses during her academy years. She tried swinging her legs to propel herself forward, but that only made Fen bite down harder on her wrist, his paws sliding further toward the edge as he whimpered around her skin. She heard her wrist bone

cracking under his sharp fangs, the excruciating pain stealing her breath in the worst way. Reaching for the rocks, stretching *just that much* further, the tips of her fingers only barely grazed the stone, not enough to get a good grip.

*Oh fuck- how do I FIX THIS?! I DON'T WANT TO DIE.*

She heard Loki then- more than that, she *felt* him again, the bond burning brighter within her core when he appeared on Sinir, out of breath and panting, at the top of the cliff behind Fen. Seeing him *so close*, only a few feet from her, she felt every inch of her body, even the parts that were now breaking apart, ache with love for him, and *by Hel* did he love her back—She could hear him *screaming* it in his thoughts. He wasn't "pain" incarnate, nor was he death. No, he was just Loki, and he was the only thing in the entire universe that she wanted.

*And now I'm going to lose him.*

The tears streaming down her face no longer stemmed from the pain in her wrist, or her shoulder dislocating, *or* her blood-covered fingernails ripping off from scratching at the rocks. No, it was from the wretched reality of knowing this was the last time she would ever see him.

"Hold on!" he called down to her, his voice cracking as he dismounted.

"I... can't..." she managed, nearly suffocating from the strain on her ribs and lungs.

Through blurred vision, she watched him drop to his knees, then to his chest, and finally reached his long arm to her.

"I've got you, Sig, come here," he said through his teeth, his forehead beading with sweat.

His fear swelled to a fever pitch, and he gasped, trying to push himself far enough down to grab her without falling over the edge himself and killing them both. Fuck, he couldn't stretch far enough. One more inch, just one more, come on, come on, please!

*Please don't leave me, Sig!*

"*Reach, love!*" he shouted, his heart pounding as he glanced with wide eyes at her wrist in the wolf's powerful jaws.

Oh gods, her arm was shredded, tearing apart like a rope with too much weight, and he watched in horror as Fenrir lost his death grip, her wrist whittling away with nothing for him to hold onto.

Nonexistent though it was, time came to a standstill, and suddenly only she and Loki lived...

*...in all our pathetic TRAGEDY.*



She stared, absolutely *shattered* as his face disappeared behind the freezing mist that quickly enveloped her body- her soon to be *corpse*.

*I can't undo this.*

The fall was so long, so horrendously far down, that she had enough dreadful time to remember that he called her "*love*". He'd finally *voiced* it, blatantly and fearlessly admitting that he really did love her. And, honestly, that made everything so much *worse*. Her agonized scream was drowned out by the falls as they tumbled over her.

Stomach in his throat and heart breaking into a thousand pieces, Loki yelled "*SIGYN!!*" at the top of his lungs, and without a moment's hesitation, he jumped after her. If she was going to fall, then *by Hel*, he would be there to catch her.

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The Frigid Immortals Trilogy continues in Part 2:

FALLEN IMMORTALS