

# FALLEN IMMORTALS



2121 FRIGID, FALLEN, FEARLESS.

JENNIFER RUTHERFORD • FRIGID IMMORTALS.COM

JENNIFER RUTHERFORD

THE FRIGID IMMORTALS TRILOGY  
PART TWO:  
FALLEN IMMORTALS

BY JENNFIER RUTHERFORD

Houston, TX

2021 © Frigid, Fallen, Fearless.

[www.frigidimmortals.com](http://www.frigidimmortals.com)

# Contents

- ..... 1
- THE FRIGID IMMORTALS TRILOGY ..... 2
- PART TWO:..... 2
- FALLEN IMMORTALS ..... 2
- BY JENNFIER RUTHERFORD..... 2
- Houston, TX..... 2
- 2021 © Frigid, Fallen, Fearless..... 2
- www.frigidimmortals.com ..... 2
- Chapter 1: Come Back to Me, Sig..... 5
  - ~ Regnelbrær Falls, Levendegrøn, Vanaheim~ ..... 5
  - ~Same Time, Wrong Place~ ..... 8
  - ~Regnelbrær Falls, Once More~ ..... 10
- Chapter 2: I'll Protect You from Everything (Even if You Don't Need Me To) ..... 15
  - ~ Regnelbrær Falls, Levendegrøn, Vanaheim~ ..... 15
  - ~Six Hours Later~ ..... 19
- Chapter 3: Let's Just See How This Plays Out ..... 23
  - ~The Silver Forest Border, Asgard~ ..... 23
  - ~The Bifrost Observatory~ ..... 25
  - ~Fandral's Chambers, The Upper Court South Wing Of The Palace~ ..... 26
  - ~Sigyn's Chambers, The Guest Wing Of The Palace~ ..... 28
- Chapter 4: When Did I Get So Soft?..... 35
  - ~Loki's Chambers In The South Wing, The Royal Corridor Of The Palace~ ..... 35
  - ~The Throne Room~ ..... 36
  - ~The King's Official Business Quarters~ ..... 37
  - ~Silver Forest, The Jotunheim Portal~ ..... 40
- Chapter 5: Bring Me Home (But Not to This)..... 46
  - ~New Mexico, USA, Earth~ ..... 46
  - ~Jotunheim Portal~ ..... 51
  - ~The Bifrost~ ..... 52
- Chapter 6: Death is Everywhere ..... 53
  - ~Loki's Chambers, The South Wing~ ..... 53
  - ~The City Lowlands, A Mile Outside The Palace Gates~ ..... 57

~The Allfather's Bedchambers~ .....	60
Chapter 7: The Bridge .....	63
~A Private Healing Room in The Palace~ .....	63
~The Jotunheim Portal, Silver Forest~ .....	68
~The Observatory~ .....	69
~Sigyn's Healing Room~ .....	71
~The Bridge~ .....	72
Chapter 8: The Desert .....	79
~Deep Space, Unknown~ .....	79
Chapter 9: Remember Remember (This Hurts Like Hel).....	89
~One month later, Asgard~ .....	89
Chapter 10: Green is for Life .....	95
~Loki's Prison Cell, The Desert~ .....	95
Chapter 11: Don't Make Deals with Monsters .....	110
~Loki's Cell, The Desert~ .....	110
Chapter 12: Rain Rain, Go Away .....	119
~One month after the funeral (also since his proposition in the desert)~ .....	119
~The Healing Halls, East Corridor, North Wing of The Palace, Asgard~ .....	123
~Loki's Old Chambers, Royal Corridor, South Wing of The Palace~ .....	129
Chapter 13: Are You Ready? .....	132
~Asgard, One month later (3 months since Loki fell)~ .....	132
~The Desert~ .....	135
~The Midgard Portal, Silver Lake, Asgard~ .....	139
Chapter 14: I Will Find You.....	145
~Tony Stark's Catalina Compound, California, USA, Earth~ .....	145
The Frigid Immortals Trilogy concludes in Part 3:.....	165
Fearless Immortals.....	165

## Chapter 1: Come Back to Me, Sig.

~ *Regnelbrær Falls, Levendegrøn, Vanaheim* ~

Jumping from a cliff was a terrible way to die, and it was made especially so by the two hundred foot waterfall that Sigyn had unwillingly chosen. She was positive there had been death enchantment cast over that tree portal because never in her nine hundred years had she been suicidal. And why the Hel would she suddenly become so? She was in love with a man who also loved her. She was healthy and strong. She had magic. She lived in a palace. The future had looked *good*.

Not that it mattered now, since she couldn't do a damn thing but let gravity do its brutal job. Sigyn had hoped the fall alone would kill her. Unfortunately, as an immortal Vanir, her body was far too resilient to receive such splendid mercy. No, it would be a far more harrowing death. Oh what she would have given to be *human* in that moment. Any death, it seemed, would have been preferable to crashing into the tumultuous water.

Her lumbar broke upon impact. Thank goodness for her thick skin, which managed to hold together, keeping her broken bones underneath its pale surface. If she was going to die (and she most certainly *was* going to die), she didn't want her parts to be scattered throughout the river bottom. Water flooded her nose and mouth, filling her lungs. She would have screamed if she could. Never could she have imagined the excruciating pain of that amount of pressure on her body. As though drowning wasn't bad enough, she was also being crushed to death. The pressure was flattening her, squeezing the blood out of her eyes, her nose, her ears, her mouth. Tumbling beneath the waterfall, she suffocated and felt her body snapped apart, bit by bit. Darkness appeared in her periphery and closed in slowly, her consciousness drifting away with her vision.

---

Loki dove after her, Fenrir along with him, rapidly closing the distance between himself and the now bloody water beneath him. Despite the wind pressure drying his eyes out, he couldn't close them. He needed to see her, see where to aim to get to her as fast as possible. Not that he *wanted* to see the horrific image of Sigyn's body tumbling chaotically beneath the water one hundred feet below him.

*He* had done this. This was his fault. He may as well have been her murderer, ripping her to pieces. Seven hundred years may have passed since he'd cast the death spell on the tree,

but it was *his* magic nonetheless that had done this to her. But it hadn't been meant for *her*. How could he have known that his perfect match would be a beautiful *Vanir*, let alone that he would fall in love with her when he'd been only two hundred years old at the time he cast it? Gods, if his eyes weren't so bloody dry, he'd be *sobbing*. What was it she had once said to him?—*Your end is my end*.

Nothing could be truer. And it couldn't have come at a more inconvenient time, not that Sigyn's death could ever be *convenient*. He'd *just* been crowned king, though, and there was no one to take his place. Selfish as he had been, desiring to have the favor of Odin, desiring the throne to prove himself, he truly did fear for Asgard. Thor had started a war with Jotunheim, and Laufey would rip Asgard apart if they had no king. None of it mattered without her though. She'd become his everything. He had been telling her the dead honest truth the first night she spent in his bed. Asgard was no longer his home—*She* was.

Only forty feet separated him from the water now, and he had no idea how he would survive it. His body was probably hardier than hers, but he wasn't confident that those falls wouldn't rip him apart, too.

Thirty feet.

Son of a *bitch* this was going to be excruciating.

Twenty feet.

But she was worth it.

Then the water froze over. Completely. The falls and the surface water. Like glaciers. From liquid to solid in all of two seconds.

*What the Hel?*

He barely had a chance to see the ice that was bursting from his now blue fingers.

*Well, would you look at that.*

If he was motivated enough, if he was in dire need, could he change to his Jotun form of his own will? He'd thought it possible to transform only if he'd made contact with another frost giant or the casket of ancient winters. Clearly, that was not the case. He had no idea how he'd done it.

He had only a second to ponder his Jotun heritage before crashing into the frozen surface, the weight of his five hundred pound body combining with Fenrir's three hundred pounds breaking the ice as easily as a sharp knife would flesh. Adrenaline coursing through his veins, seeing her unconscious and contorted body sinking, he swam to her, despite his exhaustion and injuries from the fall. Wrapping a strong arm around her waist, he pulled her to the surface opening he'd crashed through.

He couldn't believe it. He wasn't dead. He'd not been torn apart. He'd been able to get to her. And she was still in one piece. Heart racing, he shouted at his wolf, who had jumped from the water onto the ice easily.

*"QUICK, FEN!"*

The canine caught the wet hood of Sigyn's cloak in his teeth, and with the aid of Loki pushing her up, Fenrir dragged her limp body, her face nearly bloodied beyond recognition, out of the frigid water. Loki pulled himself up quickly, fearing the ice would melt at any moment and kill them with it. Without hesitation, he picked up her lifeless body and ran across the frozen river, yelling for Fenrir to follow him to the cave behind the falls.

Large cracks formed under their feet as they ran, the ice giving way beneath their heavy steps. Loki leapt onto the rocky bank and continued running until they were safely stowed away in the cave. Unsure how he did it, he returned to his Æsir form. He thanked the Norns that he had, though. It would be impossible for a frost giant to warm her, and he had very little hope of bringing her back to life frozen as she was currently. He rid himself of his wet clothes, and stripped her naked.

"Gods, Sig, if only I had that fire of yours right now," he hissed through his teeth, shivering painfully.

Wrapping his body around hers, he vigorously rubbed her back and wracked his brain for the resurrection spell Frigga had taught him, despite it being *extremely illegal* black magic. There was a very real possibility that the spell would kill him, but he didn't care. He was already dead without her. He continued rubbing her back, and Fenrir paced around them, whining and nudging Loki's back with his nose. He lifted her face and put his ear to her mouth, hoping against all hope that maybe she was breathing. She wasn't, of course, and he could only continue trying to warm her as time continued cruelly without a thought for his dire situation. What was the spell? What was it?

*WHAT WAS IT?!*

Oh gods, he couldn't remember! He was going to lose her! Every second that passed was one step closer to an eternity without her. Holding his hand, palm up, he spoke an easy fire spell. It wouldn't be much, only a small flame, but it would be enough for her to ignite when she came back, if she came back. She *had* to come back! He spent another *awful* ten seconds rocking her in his arms before the spell finally came to him—*YES!* Scrambling to lie her prone on the ground, he leaned over her. One hand cupping the back of her head, the other pulling her poor bloodied lips apart, he spoke the words into her mouth.

*"Prjóna sára, þráður fyrir þráð. Beygja beinin, rétt rangt sínum. Slá, hjarta, enn og aftur. Komdu aftur. Komdu aftur. Komdu aftur, Sigyn!"*

His tears fell onto her cheeks underneath him, and he repeated the spell over and over, his voice hoarse. Lifting her to lean against him, cradling her head, he continued to breathe into her mouth. He wept against her, his body heaving with each choked sob, her lifeless body becoming heavier in his arms with each passing second.

"Please, Sig! I cannot lose you!"

*~Same Time, Wrong Place~*

Staring at Asgard's *should-be-golden* palace in the distance, Sigyn furrowed her brow, her eyes roaming over her surroundings.

*Asgard isn't supposed to be grey*—The same sickly grey hue enveloped the entire realm. As if in a dream, her feet were heavy as lead, rendering her immobile. An ashen forest of thorns loomed ahead of her. If she wanted to go to the palace, and despite its deadened appearance, she *did* want to, she'd have to brave the sharp thorns. First she had to move though, and trying hard as she may, she found that it was impossible. Disconcerted, she scanned the colorless horizon.

*At least the pain is gone*—Pausing at the thought, pure terror filled every cell in her paralyzed body—*Wait, the pain is gone? The pain is GONE?*

She was most certainly *not* dreaming. And she was most certainly not in *Valhalla*. She would have hung her head if she could move at all. What had she expected? Of course her final *resting* place would be Hel. Any previous thoughts she'd had of Helheim and what it would look like had been *entirely* wrong. It wasn't crawling with rotting souls. There were no sobbing corpses scattered across piles of skulls. It wasn't dark, nor was it a lake of fire as some mortals thought. It was just grey. Unending *grey*. And empty. And silent. And she



couldn't move. Was this it? Was her punishment for the darkness in her heart, for the lives she'd taken, an eternity of unmoving, silent, lonely, greyness?

She attempted to speak, but her voice was gone. She tried to lie down (right, as though *sleep* would be an amenity in the realm of the dishonored dead), but found herself completely incapacitated save for the movement of her eyes. Maybe it wouldn't stay this way. Maybe she was just stunned or in a dead woman's version of shock. Either way, she wished it would end, because something or rather, *someone* had just come out of the forest. And whoever she was, she was terrifying in spite of her strange beauty.

Was this Hela? Sigyn couldn't help but stare at the skeletal black haired female approaching her slowly. Hela's silver eyes shimmered against her pale skin, her dark red lips the only color within the entire landscape, and they curled around beautiful words. Lady Death was calling to her, and the sound was the most beautiful sound, save for Loki's voice, that she'd ever heard. Hela finally came to stand beside Sigyn, and she crouched down to whisper in her ear.

"Welcome, Sigyn, to your new home. I know how you love Asgard, so I recreated it just for you. You'll see it for eternity! Isn't it just wonderful?" Hela swept her bone thin arm out, gesturing to the grey expanse, before stroking Sigyn's face.

Seeing the realm, *Loki's* realm, and yet it being out of her reach for all time was the worst imaginable agony. She would have preferred razors under her nails. Paralyzed she may have been, but Sigyn's tear ducts worked just as they always had. This really *was* Hela—  
*Welcome to your eternal damnation, Sigyn.*

"A kiss for you, my sweet," Hela said, her sing song voice laced with poison.

Her dark red lips brushed across Sigyn's gently, just a ghost of a kiss, and it left her lips burning and yet freezing cold. Like some sick shadow of the last perfect kiss she had. Sigyn sobbed silently, unable to move her mouth or make a sound, Loki's face haunting her. She would never see him again. The image of his face screwed up with fear and the sound of him screaming after at the top of the cliff would be her last memory of him.

Lady Death smiled (a terrifying sight indeed) before screaming suddenly and wrapping her arms around Sigyn, pulling her off the ground. Dragging her toward the thorns, Hela struggled as Sigyn became heavier. Something, no, *someone* was pulling Sigyn back.

Turning to face the invisible force clutching her new prize, Hela screamed, "She is *mine* now, Dark One!"

Sigyn wanted to cover her ears. Hela's pretty voice had transformed into a shriek, piercing her eardrums, blood pouring down her neck and jaw as a result. She was grateful that she couldn't cover them though. That voice, the one Hela was responding to, the voice echoing somewhere on the stale air, her *favorite* voice, stabbed through her consciousness.

*"Komdu aftur. Komdu aftur, Sigyn!"*

No longer were the dark red lips of Lady Death the only color against the grey. Blessed, perfect, redemptive *green* light coiled like a snake around Sigyn's paralyzed body. Hela continued her high pitched shrieks as she fought against the growing force pulling Sigyn back.

*"NO! You cannot have her!"*

The green light became solid, *tangible*. Strong arms that shimmered green and blazed like fire encircled Sigyn's waist, forcing Hela to let go lest she burn herself. Lady Death's screams faded as Sigyn disappeared abruptly from the realm, the arms tightening around her, the deep sorrowful begging voice of her captor, her savior, replacing the shrieks.

*"Please come back to me, love!"*

*~Regnelbrær Falls, Once More~*

Barely revived, Sigyn's mind struggled to regain consciousness, but when it did, it was to the sound of rushing water. Her fingers twitched as she became aware of the cold hard surface underneath her. She could taste the dried blood in her mouth, and she breathed through her nose, first shallow, then becoming deeper with each breath. The air was cold and smelled like peppermint and woodsmoke. *Oh bless*—She wasn't sure where she was, but she *did* know that Loki was with her. Her eyes fluttered open, awakening the last of her senses. She continued to breathe slowly, giving her lungs a bit more time to adjust as she looked around as much as she could without moving her head.

It was dark save for the light of a dying fire close in front of her. She knew this place. She'd been here before, long ago. This was the cave behind the falls in Vanaheim. She was *alive*. She'd been in Helheim, that she knew for sure. She had actually *died*. And Loki had brought her back. He had literally pulled her from Hela's grip. She blew out a shaky breath, her heart clenching in her chest, and she focused on the sensations of living again. Breathing again. Feeling again.

She was naked and lying on her side under a covering of sorts. A blanket? Maybe fur? The stone underneath her was digging into her hip. Her arms were curled into her chest. She eyed them. Gods, her wrist was covered in dark purple bruises. Was that from Fen's teeth? Probably. A well defined arm was stretched out under her head much like a pillow, another arm was wrapped around her waist, and a long leg, bent at the knee, was shoved between her thighs. The front of a firm warm body was flush against her back. Everything hurt, but she felt amazing with him all wrapped around her like this. Now if only she could get a good look at him. She wouldn't be able to in this position.

She tried to say his name, but her voice didn't work. She would have touched his arm, but hers seemed paralyzed, or maybe just asleep, curled up as they were at her chest. Somehow she managed to make her abdominal muscles work though, and grimacing, she turned painfully under his arm to face him.

*Shit*—He looked dead, still as he was. His skin was even more pale than usual. His neck and shoulders looked like he'd been in a cage fight with Thor's hammer. An angry cut stretched across his right cheekbone, marring his perfect face. Even battered and bruised, he was still the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. And thankfully, she could feel his chest moving against her. Licking her lips, she tried to speak again, and this time her voice didn't fail her.

"L-L-Loki?" she whispered, hoarse and barely audible.

The water that had flooded her windpipe had done serious damage to her vocal chords apparently. He didn't respond, so she said it again, with a bit more force. Still nothing. Breathing hard, she forced her arm to move and reached a hand to his cheek, stroking his jaw with her thumb. Still, he didn't wake. Frowning, she let her eyelids slide closed. Maybe it was best for him to sleep, so she would let him, despite everything in her bones screaming that he needed to wake up and pull her tighter against him and say her name and kiss her.

Lying there, telling herself to be patient, she realized Fenrir was at her feet, and she glanced down. The wolf was asleep, his fur matted with dried blood, two dead rabbits on the ground next to his belly, his paws clamped down on them. Her eyes snapped up then at the soft shuffle behind Loki. His gorgeous chocolate stallion, Sinir, had risen to his feet and was nudging his master's shoulder. She heard Loki groan then, and she bit her lip, smiling at the sound, hoping he might actually speak now.

His face screwed up, every muscle, every bone aching. "Not now, Sin," he muttered, not bothering to open his eyes.

Pulling her body tighter against him, he was completely unaware that she had moved to face him. He had every intention to fall back asleep. He'd literally been to Hel and back, and he was too gods damn *exhausted* to deal with his horse begging for a ride, or whatever it was he wanted. Loki didn't know. He didn't care. He just wanted to sleep. More than that he wanted her to wake up. His nerves were eating him from the inside out the longer she slept. As if on cue, he heard her voice.

"Loki?"

His eyes snapped open, and his breath hitched. She was looking up at him. Those stunning grey green eyes he'd thought he would never see again were open and staring at him.

"Sig?" he asked, his voice cracking on that one syllable as his eyes filled with tears. She was *alive*. The spell had worked. He couldn't believe it. Her voice was just a whisper when she finally spoke, but no words had ever sounded more loudly in his ears.

"You came for me?"

He scoffed. Was she mad?

"Of course I came for you, Sig! *Of course* I did," he whispered against her skin as he smothered her face with kisses. "I am *so in love* with you."

Her eyes blew wide. She couldn't believe her ears. He'd said it. He'd actually, finally *said* it.

"You're in love with me?" she asked, not because she didn't believe him, but she just needed to hear him say it again.

"*Madly*, I'm afraid," he said around a smile and moved his mouth to hers, not caring that the gash across his lips was still sensitive.

Breathing heavily, ignoring the pain in every joint, every muscle, every bone, she kissed him back fervently before pulling away to speak.

"Why didn't you—"

Her words were lost under his kiss. Shaking his head, he gasped into her mouth, feeling as though he couldn't pull her close enough.

"I should've said it long ago. I promise you, love, that I *felt* it all along."

Running his hand that was on her back up into her hair, he hissed. *Fuck*, his muscles were screaming at him to stop moving so much. So he did. But not because he was in pain, but because if he was in pain, that meant *she* was probably in agony. Hesitant to hurt her further, he loosened his grip, putting some space between them.

"How do you feel?" he asked, biting his lip, fighting the urge to crash his mouth against hers.

Taking a deep breath, she moved her hand from his cheek up into his hair, pulling herself closer, upset that he'd put even an inch of space between them.

"I've honestly never been happier in my life," she said, leaning in to kiss his neck slowly, ignoring the pain it caused.

Fenrir awoke at their voices and moved from her feet. The wolf rolled his eyes, and Sigyn had to smile. She didn't know animals could even do that. Grabbing the rabbits with his teeth, he dropped them near the small flame that Loki had conjured earlier and ran out of the cave. Sinir snorted and followed him out.

"They do know how to take a hint," she said between weak chuckles as Loki rolled them, situating himself between her legs.

Sliding his hand up her thigh, he bent his head to kiss her, his raven locks tumbling down and curtaining them.

"I thought I'd lost you," he rasped against her lips.

Kissing him back soundly, she pulled him into her, not caring that his hips were jutting into her bruised inner thighs.

"You *did* lose me," she gasped, wincing at the pain.

Seeing the grimace on her face, he pulled out and lifted his weight off her.

"Sig, I don't want to hurt you."

Wrapping her legs more tightly around his waist, she wrapped her hands around the back of his neck.

“You just brought me back from *death*, Loki. I *want* this. I want *you*. And I refuse to wait another second.”

Relieved at her words, for he hadn't wanted to wait either, he smiled broadly and did as he was told. With the roll of his hips, her fire finally awakened just as her body had a few moments prior. The small flame that he'd conjured flickered and grew into a roaring blaze.

## Chapter 2: I'll Protect You from Everything (Even if You Don't Need Me To)

~ *Regnelbræx Falls, Levendegrøn, Vanaheim* ~

**R**ubbing her eyes and wincing at the bruises that covered her entire body, Sigyn woke nearly ten hours after the most emotionally wrought sex of her life. Lying prone on the ground, her body now clothed and wrapped in a heavy fur pelt, she turned over and shakily pushed up to sit on her knees. Pulling the pelt more tightly around her, she frowned at the sight of Loki, sweating and shirtless, placing strange objects around the fire.

"What are you doing?" she asked, eyeing the objects.

Smiling, he didn't turn away from the flames. "Ah, you're awake."

She looked down, marvelling at the ridiculously comfortable, yet extremely form-fitting leggings she now wore and tugged on the hem of her tunic.

"I suppose I have you to thank for these clothes and the pelt?"

Still staring into the flames, he nodded. "I did conjure the garments for you, love," he said, running a hand through his hair, "but you have Fenrir to thank for the pelts. He hunted down a bear and brought him back for us to eat. I skinned the beast and cleaned him up. Although conjuring the furs would have been easier in hindsight. It was a rather *bloody* mess." He cringed at the memory.

Smiling brightly, she walked to the sleeping wolf by the fire and leaned down to gently pet his head. "Well I thank both of you, then," she whispered so as not to wake him. Feeling a bit overwhelmed by the heat from the flames, she quickly removed the fur and crawled to Loki, groaning at the pressure of the hard stone under her bruised knees.

"Why aren't you wearing a shirt? Not that the sight isn't *glorious*," she asked, kissing his shoulder.

He finally dropped his gaze from the fire and smirked at her. "I've been awake for hours, hovering over this fire. I assure you, the purpose for my state of undress is only to avoid overheating. I have no other intentions."

"Damn," she said, winking at him. Loki laughed quietly as she trailed a finger down his spine. "What is all this?" she asked, gesturing to the items he had gathered.

Exhaling heavily, he returned his eyes to the flames. "I'm-" he hesitated, not exactly sure how to answer "-undoing a spell."

Furrowing her brow, she narrowed her eyes at the objects Loki was gathering: two locks of black hair, one very long, the other shorter, evergreen needles, a chunk of ice, a raven's feather, a handful of dirt, and ashes.

"And what spell is that?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose, not wanting to admit he'd been the cause of the agony she'd experienced.

"A death spell," he answered quietly, daring a glance at her. Her expression was a mixture of confusion and fear, and before she could respond, he added, "I'm so sorry. It was never meant for you."

Her jaw dropped. "The one on the tree? *You* cast it?" she asked, searching his now glistening eyes.

Shaking his head, he squeezed his eyes shut, and the words tumbled from his lips. "Sig, love, please, you must forgive me. I know it was terrible, to put it mildly, but It was seven hundred years ago. The Æsir-Vanir War had just ended, and it was meant to keep out the Vanir *militia*. I was a young Seiður, and I just didn't think it through. Please, Sig. I'd forgotten the tree existed until you were pulled through it. Otherwise, I would have removed the enchantment sooner. I'm so sorry, Sig, I'm so-"

She cut him off with a chaste kiss. Well, that was a *much* better response than he'd anticipated. He smiled against her lips as she peeled herself away.

"You are forgiven. Now finish this spell or undo it or whatever it is that needs to be done. Asgard can't have its king hidden away in a Vanaheim cave." She paused, brow creasing. "Wait, you are still king, correct? How long was I gone?"

Loki looked at her, squinting. That was a good question. How long *had* she been gone? In the moment, when he'd been rocking her body against his, trying to remember the spell and then finally chanting it over and over, it had felt like days had gone by, but the sun in the sky told him otherwise. Maybe an hour?



"No longer than an hour, I think," he said, looking away, somewhat confused. "I'm trying to recall the differences in time between Vanaheim and Asgard. Come to think of it, I have no idea how time works in Helheim."

She was chewing her lower lip nervously when he looked back down at her, and he reached up to pull her lip away from her teeth so she wouldn't make herself bleed.

"However long it felt while you were there, it was only an hour, and yes, I am still king," he finished with a toothy smile, which she returned and leaned into him. Wrapping his arm around her, Loki squeezed her shoulder and returned his focus to the objects that lay before him.

"I think I've finally got it," he said, releasing her and snapping his fingers. "When I spelled the tree, I combined illusion, mind control, siren, and death magic. The illusion was Vanaheim's perfection. The mind control convinced one that Asgard was deadly. A place of pain and sorrow. The beautiful waterfall was the siren, pulling one back to the final ingredient of the spell, which was of course, death. Suicide had been the goal of the spell. All I need in order to undo the enchantment is remove the first step, then the others will fall apart of their own accord. If the illusion drops, the rest is no matter."

Picking up the long lock of hair, rolling it in her fingers, she whispered, "And what is illusion but a visual lie? The truth is in the elements. The elements are reality and will destroy the lie."

Smiling at her quick recollection of the words he'd once spoken in their magic lesson in the icy garden so long ago, he nodded.

"Someone has been practicing her magic without me," he said, poking her nose as she shrugged. "Earth," he continued, retrieving the tresses that had once graced her own head from her hand, "Two locks of black hair, one from the head of a Vanir and one from the head of the spellcaster."

He tossed them, along with the shorter locks from his own, into the fire. The pine needles and the dirt came next.

"Needles from both sides of the portal itself," he said, tossing them in as well. "Soil from Asgard and soil from Vanaheim."

Squeezing his hand, Sigyn stared into the flames as he whispered words in the ancient language.

*“Jarðarinnar. Frá forstöðumanns Vönum og frá höfði að Seiður, hár, nálum eitt tré og nálar af öðru, jarðvegi Ásgarð og jarðvegi Vanaheimr.”*

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, feeling suddenly weak, his fair skin becoming paler still as he continued. He'd forgotten the warning in the fine print about death spells. Apparently undoing them was painful.

“Air,” he continued, blinking rapidly at his increasingly blurry vision. “The wings of the wise and honest raven. And the breath of a Vanir and the spellcaster.” Dropping the feather into the fire, he bade her to blow into the flames with him as he spoke.

*“Lofts koma á vængi vitur og sannur hrafn og anda Vönum og Ásum.”*

Sigyn held his sagging frame against her, struggling from his pain which she felt through their bond. No longer able to hold him up, she dropped to her knees under his crushing weight. Gods, was he *heavy*.

“Water,” he croaked, his voice hoarse as he held the ice over the flames. Melting in his grasp, he pulled his hand back before the fire burned him.

“From the siren falls herself, ice. *Frá fryst fellur sig, ís,*” he whispered, eyes closing as he struggled to breathe.

“Don’t fail me now, Loki,” Sigyn begged him, holding his head. “You must finish this. You *must*. I cannot return to Asgard with you if you don’t.” Leaning down, she kissed him, and he reached up, grasping the back of her neck, welcoming her mouth on his.

“I *can* finish it,” he said, pushing himself up, “and I will.” *For you.* “Fire,” he said, clearing his throat. Scooping the ashes into his hands, he stood to his feet.

“Engulfed by flames you were. Ashes you became. Into the fire, you return. Earth, air, water, fire. Let them undo your end. Vanir men and women, see the truth for the lies.” Loki grabbed her hand and poured half of the ashes into her palm, and cold sweat pouring down his face, his eyes met hers.

“Do you remember the ancient language?” At her nod, he smiled. “Good. Then finish the spell with me.”

Nervous, she turned to the fire and with him, tossed the ashes into it, sparks flying, the flames growing, burning brighter. She closed her eyes and spoke, the strange words rolling off her tongue as did his.

*“Afeldi. Í eldi þú varst. Aska þú varðst. Í eldinn, aftur þú. Jörð, loft, vatn, eldur. Látum þá afturkalla þinn endir. Vönum menn og konur, sjá sannleikann fyrir lygar!”*

They collapsed to the cold cave floor, both having exhausted their Seiðr. She groaned, cradling her head, hoping the spell had worked. Out of one eye, she saw that the flames had returned to their normal height, and rolling over to him, she pushed his hair from his face. She kissed his cheek and pulled the fur pelt over his chest.

“Are you alright?”

Eyes closed, he smiled and entwined his fingers with hers. “I just need to rest for a moment.”

She held his hand to her face. “Rest as long as you need. A king needs his strength. Is there anything I can do?”

Nodding his head, he pulled her under the fur with him. “Just stay with me. Once we’ve recovered from everything, we’ll make for the portal. Rest assured, Sig, I’ll keep you safe from harm.”

*~Six Hours Later~*

Six hours later, Loki awoke to the smell of roasted meat. Opening his eyes, he saw Sigyn smiling and holding one of Fenrir's catches, cleaned and cooked, up to his mouth.

“I’m sorry I don’t have salt,” she said raising her eyebrows apologetically, “but it’ll fill your belly.”

Grinning widely (good gods he was starving), he sat up and grabbed the meat. “Who needs salt? It’s *food*.”

Biting into the tough game, he made a face. It *did* need salt—*Badly*. Thankfully, he’d had enough rest to restore his magic after the death spell, so he conjured some salt and sprinkled it on the meat, winking at her when she glared at him. He licked his lips then, and sprinkled some on hers, as well. Ravenous as she was, she ignored table manners (who really cared anyhow?) and spoke with a mouth full of food.

“Your tricks have never been more convenient. I don’t suppose you could create some wine as well?”

Holding up one finger, he conjured two goblets and walked to the cave entrance. "Wine is the *last* thing we need, darling," he said and held the cups under the heavy mist from the falls until they were full. "Water is the best medicine." He downed the first cup and refilled it, also downing that one.

"I think that's laughter actually," she said, biting her lip and smiling as she watched him drink. How she loved watching that neck with each gulp.

"Ha-ha," he deadpanned and beckoned her to join him with two fingers. "Drink."

She took the cup and gulped greedily. No beverage having ever tasted more divine, the ice water invigorating her senses. Swiping the back of her hand across her mouth, she handed the cup back to Loki.

"More."

He refilled it, and when she went to grab it, he held it up above his head, just out of her reach. Glaring up at him, she went up on her toes, trying to pull his arm down, but it was of no use. He was too tall. She stopped herself from stomping her foot, settling instead for crossing her arms.

"That is the least fun game ever, Loki."

Raising his eyebrows, he smiled. "Where are your manners, my love?"

Well how the Hel was she supposed to be upset with him in the slightest when he called her *that*? It was completely unfair.

"More, *please*?" she asked, eyebrows raised to mirror his as she held out her hand. Chuckling as he handed her the cup, he leaned down to kiss her. "Thank you," she said against his mouth, "*my king*."

His breath hitched in his chest, and he set his jaw. "Now who's being *unfair*?" he hissed, using every bit of self control he had to back away from her.

Six or seven goblets later, they gathered their few things. His outer clothes, having been laid flat before the fire, had dried, and he pulled the garments on. He saddled Sinir and pulled himself onto the horse. Holding his hand to her, he nodded.

"Come on, Sig, I told you I won't let any harm befall you."

Anxiety turning her stomach, she ran one hand through her hair, the other rubbing her neck.

“But what if the undoing spell didn’t work? What if we reach the portal, and I have that horrible urge to kill myself again? I can’t go through that, Loki. Not again. I just...I *can’t*.”

She had only been halfway done talking when Loki jumped down and wrapped his arms around her.

“Sig, I swear to you that I will protect you from *everything* that would ever seek to harm you. I know that you are powerful and strong and fully capable of fighting for yourself, but in this believe me. From this day forward, you have nothing to fear. Not with me at your side. I’d sooner let Asgard burn than I would let anyone or anything hurt you,” he swore and pulled back to look at her, questioning if she trusted him.

Tears stung her eyes as she nodded in agreement. He’d never said anything truer. Rubbing a tear from her eye, she laughed quietly at the irony. The god of mischief and lies was speaking in *earnest*. He grinned widely, the expression crinkling his eyes. His heart felt as though it might burst from happiness. No one had ever put so much faith in him, and gods, he loved her for it, for believing in him when no one else would.

“Good. Come. We must hurry,” he whispered, and gripping her waist, he lifted her into the saddle. He then pulled himself up, sitting behind her protectively, and snaking his arms underneath hers, he gripped the reins and kicked his horse gently.

“Flýt, Sin,” he commanded, and the dark horse neighed and charged out of the cave and up the rocky bank.

Fenrir was on their heels, and snow flung up under their pounding feet as they neared the tree. Sigyn's stomach turned over painfully, and tears began to build up again. The tree was but twenty feet hence, its bark shimmering as a prism as they came upon it. This was it. It had to work.

*I can't die again.*

Hearing her terrified thoughts, Loki tightened his grip on the reins under her arms, whispering in the ear that was exposed by the wind that was whipping her hair back.

“It *did* work. I promise. Remember. *No harm*. Now, close your eyes.”

Instinctively, she screamed inside the portal, fearing the worst. He clamped his hand over her mouth to avoid being discovered by the Hawks that he'd sent, without thinking in an absolute panic, as a search party before he'd found the tree. He didn't want anyone to know of the secret portals between the realms. The plans he had required those portals to stay secret. He'd deal with the Hawks when they got back. Bursting through the other side, Sinir galloped full speed into Asgard.

"Open your eyes, Sig," he said, smiling against her cheek.

She peeked through slits of eyes, and swiveling to look back at the tree, she laughed out loud. He tried to shush her, since he could hear the Hawks' hooves pounding closer to them, but his own enthusiasm overcame him, and he laughed into her hair.

"It worked, Loki!" she squealed under his hand.

"Did I not tell you it had? *No harm*," he said firmly, kissing her cheek.

Giving a gentle nudge with his boot to Sinir's side, he sped faster through the trees. Fenrir ran ahead of them, and Sigyn could have sworn she saw him turn his furry head and smile at her, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

Loki's mouth hovered over her ear. "A king will always protect his queen."

Grey green eyes bore into his as she turned to look at him. "Was that a *marriage* proposal?"

Winking, he kissed her as they neared the stables. "Possibly."

## Chapter 3: Let's Just See How This Plays Out

~*The Silver Forest Border, Asgard*~

Loki turned at the sound of nearing horses' hooves and rolled his eyes, scowling at his own recklessness. He'd been in an absolute panic when he'd called for the Hawks' aid in finding Sigyn. As though he hadn't already known where to find her! It was unwise, no, it was downright *idiotic* to make portals between realms other than the bifrost public knowledge, and twenty Crimson Hawks (thank the Norns it wasn't all *two hundred* of them) could make the portal to Vanaheim very public indeed.

He was in no mood to deal with the soldiers, but it would've been most odd for the king to have called for a search party and not inform them that he and Sigyn had returned unharmed. He was also far too exhausted to conjure an invisibility cloak in order to avoid the situation altogether, so when he caught sight of the Hawks, Loki waved for the company of soldiers to follow him to the stables. When they arrived at the stables, Loki helped Sigyn down from Sinir and kept hold of her as Theoric approached them, concerned and somewhat confused.

"My king, you discovered the Lady Sigyn on your own? We searched for you for a day with no word!"

Loki, as usual, lied easily. "Yes, I found Sigyn deep in the forest," he said, draping an arm over her shoulder. "Apparently, she had accompanied Fenrir on one of his hunting expeditions since I'd been quite busy with my new duties and had little opportunity to entertain her."

Sigyn bristled at his insinuation that she required *entertaining*. She was perfectly capable of spending time away from Loki. It was only after Freya had shown up that things went downhill. Brushing off his words, she slid a hand around his waist. In all likelihood, the lie he'd just spun would ease Theoric's suspicions.

Theoric continued to stare, not believing. "*Hunting, Your Majesty?*"

"Yes, *hunting*," Sigyn replied, and thinking quickly on her feet, she stepped in front of Loki and held up one of Fenrir's rabbits. "I suppose I was bored and following the wolf around was more interesting than shooting arrows on the training grounds or reading in the library."

Eyebrows raising, Theoric tilted his head at the rabbit, then her, then Loki. Sighing, he nodded, seemingly convinced.

“And what of your injuries? You are both positively *covered* in bruises and cuts. If there is a threat to Asgard, it is absolutely *vital* that we know of it.”

Lowering his head, the captain’s voice was laced with genuine worry for their well-being. Loki furrowed his brow, confused by both Theoric’s tone and his penitent action. Was the hawk actually showing him *respect? Reverence?* Sigyn smiled at the captain, appreciating his concern, as she added another layer to their story.

“As you can see from this marvelous pelt, we had a run in with a bear. We were quite exhausted and fell asleep. You did not worry too much, I hope? You must forgive us for not notifying you and your company sooner.”

Theoric was keeping his word. He was letting her choose Loki. He truly *was* a good man. Hearing her complimentary thoughts about Theoric, Loki leered at her, and she rolled her eyes. *Oh keep your shirt on*, she snapped silently.

Shaking his head, full of shame for his perceived failure, Theoric frowned. “The king does not need forgiveness, my lady. It is *we* who need forgiveness for our inability to find you. Did you make a fire to keep warm? We did not see smoke.”

Unsettled by Theoric’s newly warm behavior, Loki pulled Sigyn tighter against him.

“The pelts were warm enough,” he said, keeping his tone as light as possible.

Frowning still, Theoric nodded. “Very well, Your Majesty. We are relieved to see you and the lady safe,” he said and turned to his lieutenant. “Gylfi, take your company and escort the lady to her chambers. I shall see that the king reaches his safely.”

Eyebrow raised, Loki looked questioningly at Sigyn. Through their bond, they had a short conversation.

Loki shifted his eyes to the captain who was aiding his soldiers in returning their horses to their stalls—*Why is he not being more confrontational? He is usually more protective of you, Sig.*

Sigyn pushed on her toes and kissed his cheek—*He told me that he would leave me alone because I told him that I was in love with you. Simple as that.*



Loki scoffed silently, still disbelieving, but he turned to Theoric and smiled anyway.

“Thank you, Captain. Lead on.”

---

~*The Bifrost Observatory*~

Sif walked around the Bifrost’s observatory, and Heimdall suppressed the desire to roll his golden eyes. The war goddess had been visiting him daily (and they were lengthy visits) since Thor's banishment. He sympathized with her concern for Thor, but it was becoming a bit much to have someone constantly making conversation with him when he was trying to do his job. Watching over Thor wasn't his only duty after all.

Sif hung her head as she continued around the circle. “Is he happy?” she asked, not caring in the slightest that she sounded sad and desperate.

Heimdall glanced in her direction but kept his head forward. “Lady Sif, nothing has changed in the last *day*. Yes, he is.”

She flushed at his tone, feeling scolded somehow by his tone. It wasn't enough to stop her from further questioning him though, because ever since Loki had told her of this Jane Foster person, Sif had become increasingly neurotic, unconcerned with how she came across. And hearing Heimdall say that Thor was happy in Midgard didn't make her happy *at all*. Did that mortal have more of an effect on him than *Sif* had? Had he just completely forgotten about her?

“Does he not wish to return to Asgard?” She felt positively *sick* with anxiety.

“He has no reason to think that he *can* return, my lady,” Heimdall said, setting his jaw, “so he is making the best of the circumstances he currently finds himself in.” It wasn’t often that Heimdall was phased emotionally, but he couldn’t help the slightly exasperated sigh that escaped his mouth.

Biting her lip, Sif furrowed her brow. Making the best of his circumstances? So now Thor was just going to set up shop on Earth, happily getting a piece of human tail until Odin said he could return? No. Thor wouldn't do that to her. He wouldn't start a romance with Sif only to turn around and take off with another woman, and a pathetic mortal one at that. Surely, Loki had been exaggerating, trying to get under her skin. Heimdall had to mean something else entirely about '*making the best of his circumstances*'. Maybe a new friend or two? Discovering which foods he liked?

"Perhaps I could visit him..." she trailed off as she peered nervously at the regal gatekeeper.

When he didn't answer, she resumed her pacing but stopped abruptly as her vision went black. Cringing in horror, she watched Thor kiss a tiny woman, who she could only assume was Jane Foster. *No no no no no....!*—shaking her head, she tried to clear her sight. Heimdall was sharing his sight with her, and it was the worst thing she could have seen in that moment.

"I wish to see no more!" she shouted, and turning on her heels, she ran back down the bridge and jumped on her horse.

She needed the warriors to agree that it was best to go to Thor and bring him back. He couldn't stay on Midgard. She wouldn't allow it. Riding straight to the palace stables, she dismounted and handed the reins over to a young stable hand, not bothering to thank the girl for her service or give her instructions of any sort. She had far more important things on her mind to bother with propriety.

~*Fandral's Chambers, The Upper Court South Wing Of The Palace*~

Running straight to Fandral's chambers, Sif burst through his doors, thinking only in hindsight how awful it would have been if he'd been in a ... *ahem* ... compromising position.

*Ugh, disgusting*—She cringed at the thought. Thankfully, he was just sitting at the small dining table along with Hogun and Volstagg, playing a game. They looked up, shock coloring their faces, at her abrupt entry. Coming to a halt, Sif put her hands on her hips.

"*Cards*, really?" she scoffed. "That's what you block headed morons are doing with your time? When Thor is still stuck on Earth?"

Fandral dropped his hand on the table, scowling at the cards. They had been *good* ones, too. They'd already played four times, and he'd lost *every* round. Leaning back in his chair, he glared up at Sif.

"First off, the only block headed moron is Volstagg," he said gesturing to their rotund friend who was chewing on a leftover dinner pastry noisily, crumbs getting caught in his beard.

"Secondly," Fandral continued before Volstagg could respond, "we *always* play cards in the evening. Every. Day. It's one of the ways we decompress."

"*Fandral*," she growled, taking a step toward him.

"And thirdly," he said, raising his voice as he stood from his seat, "I was about to *win*, damn you!"

Eyes flashing, Sif threw her hands up. "We have far more pressing problems than whether or not you win a silly game of cards!"

"Sif, please," Hogun said, rolling his eyes as he stood up, "you need to calm down," he eyed Fandral, "and so do you for that matter."

Fandral scoffed. "But she-"

"Tell us what you need, Sif," Hogun continued, cutting off Fandral who had crossed his arms and was looking longingly at his cards on the table.

Sif straightened her shoulders. "We must bring Thor home," she said plainly, as though such a task would be easy as pie. The men looked at her with varying degrees of exasperation.

"Should've guessed that one," Volstagg said under his breath, looking sideways at Hogun.

Fandral rubbed a hand down his face and walked over to the tray of fruit on his sofa table.

"We cannot disobey Loki's orders, Sif. He is our *king* now. You have *got* to drop this," he said, rolling his eyes as he popped a berry in his mouth.

Gritting her teeth, Sif pushed Fandral against the table, knocking into the tray of fruit, which then fell to the ground with a loud crash.

"So what, we are just going to *abandon* Thor? He is our friend!" she shouted, angrily holding him by his collar.

Volstagg hurried over and picked up an apple and brushed it off before biting into it.

"Oh come now, Sif! That was a perfectly good snack you just knocked over. Now I have to eat it dirty."

Fandral slid his eyes to him. "You don't *have* to eat it at all," he said, rolling his eyes. "Sif," Fandral continued, shoving her away from him and rubbing his eyes. "Loki wields *Gungnir*. Sigyn wields *fire*, for Hel's sake. Thor is mortal. He would not stand a chance in a fight with either of them, and if we bring Thor home against Loki's orders, you

can expect a fight. Gods, Sif, that Vanir sorceress is the most *dangerous* woman I've ever met!"

Sif shot him an angry look over her shoulder. "You've met other far more *dangerous* women."

Fandral smirked. "Have *you* lit a body on fire with only your mind?" he asked, but held up his hand to stop her rebuttal, and she closed her mouth. "It is of no consequence, Sif. We are absolutely not going to commit *treason* again."

Sif scoffed, looking at Hogun questioningly. "Hogun?" When he simply shook his head, she threw her hands up. "Truly?"

"I disobeyed a king's orders once," Hogun said firmly. "I will not do it again."

"What if we could convince Loki to let him come home?" she asked, desperate.

Exasperated, Fandral glared at her from the corner of his eye. "I do believe we tried that once already."

Eyes narrowed, she crossed her arms. "I am aware of that, Fandral, but I have reason to think he would change his mind. I think Sigyn has made him soft."

Fandral looked askance, fairly certain Sigyn was doing the exact opposite. Gorgeous woman. He exchanged glances with his friends, and they sighed simultaneously. In a hushed whisper, he spoke finally.

"If Loki agrees, then of course we will bring him home. Satisfied?"

"We'll see," she said, raising an eyebrow and left the room.

---

*~Sigyn's Chambers, The Guest Wing Of The Palace~*

Sigyn thanked Lieutenant Gylfi for seeing her safely to her chambers, and quietly closing the doors, she walked to the washroom to examine her injuries. She'd not seen her appearance in days. Looking in the mirror, she wished suddenly that she hadn't.

"Oh shit," shaking her head, she cringed as she examined the yellowing bruises stretched across nearly the entire surface of her skin. Considering every bone had been broken in the fall, she could've looked far worse. Always a silver lining, wasn't there.

Deciding a quick wash was the best course of action, she pulled her hair up into a loose bun, and went into the free standing shower inset into the marble tiled wall. Of all the benefits of living in Asgard's palace, the showers were at the top of the list. Okay well, no, Loki was at the top, but these instantly hot showers were phenomenal. She'd only ever had baths in Vanaheim. Talk about royal treatment. She smirked as she ran the citrus soap over her skin. As though she wasn't already receiving the ultimate *royal treatment* from Loki.

Snorting quietly at her pun, she toweled off quickly. Letting her hair back down, she pulled a thin grey dressing gown and sheer black robe on and hurried to her chamber doors. Eyes wide, she let out a shocked gasp, and stopped abruptly at the sight of Gylfi and two other soldiers standing in her way.

"Oh Lady Sigyn," Gylfi said, bowing quickly, "so sorry for startling you, but Captain Theoric ordered us to stand guard outside your chambers."

Sighing, she pulled the ties of her robe tighter around her waist. "I'm grateful for your service, gentlemen," she said with a tight smile, feeling put off by her lack of privacy. "However, I will not be sleeping in my chambers tonight, so I suppose you are ... dismissed?"

She wasn't entirely sure that she had the authority to dismiss them, but she certainly didn't need them, so it seemed logical enough. With a nervous chuckle, she stepped around them. Gylfi put a hand on her shoulder lightly, and she turned back to him, eyebrows raised in question. Looking left and right, he leaned down and lowered his voice.

"If you wish to visit *his majesty*, my lady, it is my duty to escort you," he whispered, blushing with embarrassment.

Rolling her eyes, Sigyn bit the insides of her cheeks to keep from laughing at how red his cheeks had gone. She almost teased him for it, asking him to further clarify what he meant by '*visiting*' his majesty. It certainly would've been entertaining to watch him fumble around his words like a virginal seminary student. She decided to take pity on him though.

"That would be most welcome, Lieutenant," she said with a toothy grin, unable to hide her amusement now that she wasn't biting the insides of her cheeks.

Gylfi laughed a bit himself and led her to the royal corridor. They stopped short of Loki's chambers, and Sigyn thanked him, waving him off before knocking softly and peeking her head inside. Though she could feel him through the bond, she didn't see him anywhere.

"Loki?" she whispered.

When he didn't answer, she stepped inside and closed the doors quietly behind her. Turning in a circle, she bit her lip and smiled at her surroundings. It was good to be back in his room. The dim lighting from his bedside lanterns and desk lamp and the chandelier over his bed (wow, they replaced that *fast*), the dark cherry furniture, the smell of hundreds of books and leather, the moons shining on his balcony and casting shadows into the room, the tall drapes blowing in from the wind outside, all of it was so *good*. She spotted Fenrir in front of the fireplace and walked to him. His tail wagged as she approached, and he stood and stretched out his legs.

"Hi there," she whispered, kneeling down to scratch behind his ears.

"I thought I heard you come in," Loki said quietly from behind her.

Startled by his voice, she shrieked, her hands flying to her mouth. Once she'd caught her breath, she twisted her body to face him. He was leaning shirtless (bruises *already* nearly gone), against the doorframe of his washroom, hands in the side pockets of his black sleeping pants, ankles crossed, one dark eyebrow raised. Eyeing him up and down, she sighed. *How* she had managed to gain the affections of such an otherworldly beautiful man, she had *no* idea. She could tell he'd just had a shower. His hair was wet, his face freshly shaven, and he smelled like soap. *His* soap—the one that made her want to melt into a puddle at his feet.

"Funny," he said, squinting at her, "I was just thinking the same thing."

"Thinking what?" she asked, pushing to her feet as he walked to her.

Grabbing the back of her head gently with one hand, he dragged her face up to his for a kiss.

"That I could melt into a puddle at your feet," he murmured against her lips.

She smiled and reached up to wrap her arms around his neck. "Oh I could melt you alright," she said with a wink.

Laughing quietly, he nodded. "That you could, but please don't."

Sighing heavily, Loki stepped back to lie down on his hearth sofa. After the past two days, he was *exhausted*. He stretched out longways across the cushions and leaned his head back on the arm. Pulling her down to lay across him, he played with her hair which was splayed across his chest. He winced when her fingers traced the outline of his ribs. She quickly pulled her hand away, sitting up a touch to examine what little was left of the bruises that had formed around the healed over gashes in his side.

“Sorry, love,” she whispered.

“It’s alright, Sig. Just stings a bit.”

Groaning unintentionally, he squeezed her shoulder, shifting uncomfortably under her weight. Taking the hint, she sat up and slid down to the hearth rug.

“How?” she asked, snuggling into Fenrir’s warm fur and pulling her feet up underneath her.

Brow furrowed, Loki peeked through slits of eyes, pursing his lips in confusion at her vague question.

“How what?” He stretched his leg out to poke her shoulder with his toe, and she grabbed his foot, massaging the arch. Moaning at the sensation, he melted further into the sofa.

“How did you survive?” she clarified, admiring his long narrow foot.

Loki slid off the sofa and joined her on the floor, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “What are you talking about?”

Staring into the flames, she leaned into him. “I know that you are stronger than me, but that waterfall should have broken you just as it did me.”

“Oh, I um,” he mumbled, tripping over his words a bit and rolled his eyes, “I froze the falls.” He’d almost forgotten what he’d done, *unaware*, to survive.

With wide eyes, she turned to face him. “You mean to say you turned *Jotun*?”

He nodded slowly, avoiding her eyes, hating the way it turned his stomach to picture his Jotun form.

"I know not how," he sighed and ran a hand through his hair, "but I changed during my descent. I'd thought I could only change if I was touching the casket or another Jotun. Evidently, that is not the case."

Curiosity peaked, she pulled on his chin so that he would face her. "So then, turn *now*."

Surprised at her interest rather than *disgust*, he chuckled. "Truly, love, I do not know how to."

"Oh, well, that's unfortunate," she mumbled and returned her gaze to the fire.

Loki tilted his head, eyeing her in confusion. Was that *disappointment* in her expression? Why? Through the bond, he became distinctly aware of *why* she was disappointed, and he couldn't help but smirk. Moving his mouth close to her ear, he deepened his voice.

"Sig, do you find the thought of me blue *arousing*?" he teased, squeezing her tighter against him.

She knew the heat spreading across her face had nothing to do with the close proximity of the fire. Clearing her throat, she turned her neck to look at him.

"I've yet to actually see you in Jotun form, so I couldn't say. But, if you will recall," she whispered, blushing hotly, "I did find that *double* of yours interesting."

Loki laughed out loud then, pleased with the new direction of their conversation. Like magic, he was no longer tired.

"I'd quite forgotten that actually, but now that you mention it..." trailing off, he flicked his wrist and watched with a fiendish grin as Sigyn jumped at the feel of another pair of arms around her.

"I have one request, Loki," she whispered, breathless as she toyed with his double's long fingers that were digging into her hips.

Both Loki and his double responded in unison. "Yes?"

Shaking her head, she laughed nervously. "Oh dear. That is going to be terribly confusing. I will call your handsome copy '*Two*'. Are we understood?"



Both nodded, and Loki, biting his lip, moved to his knees in front of her as the double pushed up closer behind her. The double leaned down, planting kisses along her shoulder, and spoke.

“What is your request?”

Sigyn had not yet heard him speak, and she couldn't believe the perfect tone that matched Loki's. She leaned back into him and reached her hand up to twist in his hair, excited at the thought of the events that were about to occur. Loki's talents in bed were *astounding*. She could only imagine what *two* of him could do.

“Well, I've never done anything like *this* before, so my request is that you both bear with me. I'm not even sure how this is supposed to work.” She couldn't believe the dark blush that was spreading across her cheeks. She felt like a woman untouched all over again. Loki leaned forward then and kissed her slowly.

“Of course, Sig. Remember,” he said between heavy breaths that made her want to rip his pants off and lick every inch of him, “that I once told you that I'd yet to *experiment* with him. Let's just see how this plays out, shall we?”

He then pulled her to her feet and walked her to the bed, beckoning for “Two” to follow them. Two hugged her from behind, pushing his hips into her backside, dragging a moan from her. He really was an *exact* copy of Loki, and he was hard as a rock. Oh this was good. This was going to be *really* good.

No doubt aware of the effect he was having on her, Two whispered against her neck, “Don't be nervous.”

He planted soft kisses just below her ear as Loki untied the front strings of her dressing gown, letting the fabric fall to her feet. She turned her head up and to the side to look at Two who was smiling at her and reached behind his neck pulling his mouth to hers. Loki knelt before her, rubbing his hands up her thighs, his mouth dangerously close to the ache between her legs.

*Oh gods, just a bit closer.*

He smirked up at her through long black eyelashes as Two moved his mouth down her jaw and neck. Eyes wide, she looked down at Loki as his mouth closed the distance, and at the same time felt Two's mouth come back to hers.

“This is so...*weird*,” she gasped around his tongue.

And deviant. And she *loved* it. One mouth on hers, the other between her legs (*good gods*), her knees were already buckling, and she had to use Loki's head to keep from falling over. Brilliant. She was going to pass out when they'd barely started. Needing to lie down, she shimmied out from their grips and sat down on the bed, scooting backwards toward the headboard. Loki and Two stared heatedly as she slid back on the furs and laid back onto the lush pillows. Confidence building, she bit her lip and curled a finger at them. Loki exchanged glances with Two, and at the flick of his wrist, they both descended on her.

## Chapter 4: When Did I Get So Soft?

*~Loki's Chambers In The South Wing, The Royal Corridor Of The Palace~*

**D**aylight streamed into Loki's usually dark chambers the next morning. He'd been too distracted the night before to draw the dark drapes across the wide expanse of exposed balcony, so now his eyes were being assaulted by awful colors as garish as the bifrost at a sinfully early hour. Alright, it wasn't *that* early, but it had been a very late night.

Groaning, Loki rubbed his eyes and rolled to his side to face Sigyn who still slept peacefully (lucky girl) with Two's arm draped across her hip and twitching at Loki's shifting. Sitting up, Loki winced at the pain that was still evident in his ribs, the bones still healing from his crash through the ice. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he pulled his under shorts on before pushing to his feet. He strolled into the washroom and splashed cold water on his face and hair to tame his bedhead. As he was drying his face, someone knocked on the outer chamber doors.

Scowling, he tossed the towel on the bar and rushed to the doors hoping the noise hadn't awakened Sigyn. Flicking his wrist, Two concealed himself under the covers. Loki opened the door and frowned at the guard standing at attention. Glaring, he ran a hand through his still wet hair and tilted his head.

"What is of such great importance that the king of Asgard should be roused at this hour? Not even the *servants* have arrived," he whispered harshly.

Clearly nervous, the guard bowed his head, reverent as a priest might have been in his house of worship. Appreciating the sentiment, Loki softened his expression. *Slightly*.

"My king, the warriors three and Lady Sif are requesting audience with you in the throne room. They claim that is of utmost importance. They are adamant that it cannot wait."

Loki sighed and closed his eyes. They just wouldn't give up, would they? Did they think he had nothing better to do than listen to their pleading for Thor's return? Did they not realize that he had an *entire realm* to run? Fine. He would see them one last time.

"Very well. You may inform them that I will be there once I am properly dressed," he said, gesturing to his lack of clothing. The guard implored as to whether or not he wished to have a servant arrive early to aid him, and Loki shook his head and closed the door quietly.

“Dammit, Sif.”

He had things to *do*. He’d meant to visit Laufey after first meal, and this was throwing a serious kink in his plans. He flicked his wrist once more, and Two pushed the covers off his head and pulled Sigyn into him. Loki stared at the pair tangled together in his sheets, momentarily wishing to trade places with him. Fastening his armor across his torso, he scowled and shook off the thought. He had far too much to do today to spend it in bed with Sig, no matter how much he wanted to. That, and he could vaguely feel her in Two's arms, so it was kind of like staying there anyway, right? No, not really. Feeling what Two felt required more of Loki's focus than he could give today.

Moving to stand before his full length mirror, he wondered how Sif would attempt to sway him this time as he checked that the straps of his cape were properly hidden. Gods, what the Hel did she expect from him? What if Odin awoke and Thor, mortal as he was and without the hammer, showed up at his bedside? No doubt, the Allfather would take it out on Loki. Of course, none of that was as paramount as seeing Laufey before the day’s end. That mattered more than anything. He crossed the room, and peering down at Sigyn, he ran his fingers across her cheek. Looking at her sleeping peacefully, he knew he would never love another. Sighing heavily, he leaned down and brushed his lips across her forehead, grabbed Gungnir, and left for the throne room.

---

~The Throne Room~

Sif and the warriors dropped to their knees as Loki appeared around the side of the dais. Tired as he was, he simply walked to them rather than ascending the steps to the throne and gestured for them to rise.

“I am none too thrilled to be speaking with the four of you *again*. I’ve told you once already that I *cannot* allow Thor to return whilst my father sleeps. It is *his* command to undo, not mine.” Gungnir at his side, Loki paced in front of them. Patience had never been one of his stronger virtues, not that he had many *virtues*, but what little of it he had was wearing dangerously thin.

Sif blinked at the stinging tears that were forming in her eyes. “My king, please. We have nothing more to say that would convince you. We only ask that you reconsider your decision. *Please?*”

Loki wasn’t sure what made her request seem different from the last time they’d spoken. Perhaps it was the pain he saw in her eyes. Perhaps it was the desperation in her

voice. Perhaps it was the sight of her hands shaking. More likely, he was simply too exhausted to give a damn anymore. He rolled his eyes—*Excellent resolve, Loki*. Hanging his head, annoyed that the war goddess was breaking him so easily, he tapped his boot on the gleaming freshly waxed floor tiles, and with a shrug of his shoulders he met her pleading eyes.

“Sif, I tire of your incessant begging. Bring him home if you wish, but know this. He will remain mortal, and Mjölfnir is lost to him. As such, he will not take my place as king of this realm. Are we quite clear?”

Her jaw dropped. She couldn't believe it. Loki had said yes! She was free to bring Thor back! Despite having the urge to do so, Sif stopped herself from hugging him. She didn't want to lose her head, and she wasn't sure he wouldn't call for a guard to do just that if she touched him. She simply bowed instead, her sad tears becoming joyful.

“Thank you, Loki,” she said, smiling broadly.

Loki raised an eyebrow, his jaw clenching. “What was that?” he warned, staring daggers.

Realizing her mistake, blinking rapidly, she scrambled for words. “Forgive me. Thank you, *my king*,” she corrected herself.

Loki *hated* her in that moment. Her scorn for him had never been more apparent. It would be so easy to slice off that little head of hers. Clearing his mind of the gruesome visuals (he was no murderer, not *really*), Loki rolled his eyes and waved them away.

“Off you go.”

Shit—if Odin woke now, it would be Loki's head served at the next harvest festival.

---

~*The King's Official Business Quarters*~

He needed to get to Jotunheim as quickly as possible, but Loki had to see Theoric first. The captain's sudden change in behavior unsettled him. It was as though the Hawk had decided to show Loki due deference, which had been absent prior to Sig's fall in Vanaheim. Befuddled, his brow furrowed.

She'd been unthreatened and kind to the captain in the stables the day before. If the hawk truly was leaving her alone as she'd said he was, if he was forfeiting his desperate pursuit of

her, then Loki's plans for him needed to change. Sigyn would never forgive Loki, or at least, it would be a *century* before she would, if he had Laufey kill Theoric as he'd originally intended. Strolling into what was now Loki's royal business quarters, he walked past the captain who stood from his chair when entered. Theoric bowed low, and took his seat at Loki's gesture to do so. If he were to give a name to the expression clouding the hawk's features, it would be absolute *terror*.

"You summoned me, my king?"

Loki placed Gungnir gingerly on his desk before unfastening his cape. Running a hand through his hair, he sat in the lavish burgundy and gold chair behind the sprawling desk, one eyebrow raised, lips pursed.

"I did indeed," he said, emerald eyes narrowing slightly. He waited long enough to make Theoric shift uncomfortably in his seat, and the hawk gulped audibly, no doubt fearing the worst. Loki propped his elbow on the arm of his chair, and leaning back, he raised his chin before continuing.

"You and I have a-" he paused to search for the right word "-*complicated* history."

Staring at Theoric, his confusion grew. The captain only nodded and sat up straighter. Loki's piercing gaze intensified, and he shook his head.

"I do not understand what has changed, Captain, and I do not relish being left in the dark. I have enough *darkness* in my life as it is."

Theoric feared his voice would crack. He hadn't yet voiced the truth of his heartbreak to anyone, and here he was, about to spill his soul to the man who was responsible for his unhappiness. Well, if he were to be honest, it wasn't Loki who had made him unhappy. Theoric had done this to himself.

"Your Lady Sigyn," he said, swallowing nervously, "I now understand that she is indeed *yours*, made herself quite clear on multiple occasions, and I was a fool, Your Majesty. I should have heeded her words from the start. Please forgive me. She will have only *you*, my king, and no other. Truly, she claimed repeatedly that she would follow you into Hel. If I may be so bold, your majesty, I wish to have a wife and children for I have no family to speak of. No parents, no grandparents, no siblings, no one, and I allowed myself, foolishly, to fall in love with her in hopes that she would give me that family that I so desire. I have finally accepted that she will not. Never has a woman refused me so adamantly. I have no future with her. I don't even have a *past* with her. I know not what came over me."

Lowering his eyes, Loki frowned. Sigyn had been right. The hawk was a good man. A fool, to be sure, but a good man nonetheless. Theoric had loved her, and from the looks of it, he still did. It wasn't often that Loki felt pity, but looking upon the broken man seated in front of him, it was all he felt. Not a hint of anger, jealousy, rage, annoyance, or any other number of negative feelings surged within him. Indeed, this man sitting across from him had given him many a poor night's sleep, but it had been for naught. He should have trusted Sig. He'd been threatened by Theoric without cause. Loki rubbed a hand down his face.

He'd been far too possessive. He'd treated her as though she was a child. She'd made up her mind long ago. She'd only ever wanted *him*, the man with the green eyes that she'd dreamt of in Vanaheim, from the moment she'd seen him in the throne room. But he'd been insecure, as always. Loki had thought that Theoric would steal her from him, as though she hadn't bound herself to Loki. The Hawk had loved her enough to make her his wife, and what was wrong with that? Did Loki not want the same thing?

He scoffed at his own thoughts. He couldn't believe it. Not only had he finally admitted to himself and her that he was in love after he'd saved her in Vanaheim, but now he was admitting to himself that he wanted to *marry* her. Compassion swelled within his heart at the revelation, and he sighed. First he'd given in to Sif, now this. Since when had he grown so soft?

"Sigyn said you were a good man, Theoric," he said, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "I didn't want to believe her. I hated you for wanting her as I did." Standing, Loki walked around the desk, and Theoric's eyes widened when Loki offered him his hand.

"But I *do* believe her now. You are loyal to those you love, Captain. You are loyal to Asgard. You were loyal to my father. And it would seem that you are now loyal to *me*."

Theoric nodded, and gripping the offered forearm, he stood, not letting loose his hold on Loki. This was *absurd*. He'd been positively *terrified* of the dark prince (*king*, he corrected himself) when he'd been called to the royal quarters that morning. And yet here he was clinging to him like a brother. Maybe he was just relieved that Loki was allowing him to keep his head.

"Yes, my king," Theoric whispered, wishing his voice were stronger, and he blinked back tears. "I swore an oath long ago to defend the king of Asgard. I will never break that oath."

He knew it was foolish to trust the god of *mischievousness*, but surely there was something within Loki that was worth trusting, worth *loving* even, if Sigyn was willing to die for him. It would possibly take a thousand years to discover what that *something* was, but he hoped he would live to see it. Theoric wanted to believe in his king. He'd *always* wanted to

believe in him. He'd wanted to believe that Loki would love Sigyn as much as he did. The fact that he was showing compassion gave Theoric hope that he truly did, and that in all likelihood, the man who was sparing his life loved her more than Theoric ever could. He knew not what bond Loki and Sigyn shared, but whatever it was, it was by far the *strongest* in the nine.

Loki offered his first genuine smile of the day. Maybe he was just relieved that the hawk was conceding. Maybe he was moved by the tears in his eyes. Honestly though, he truly appreciated Theoric's willing transparency. There was no more competition. There never *had been* a competition. Sigyn had chosen Loki from the very beginning.

"Theoric, for your loyalty and dedication to Asgard, I am promoting you," Loki said, gripping Theoric's forearm more tightly. "Lieutenant Gylfi will take your old position. You will start your new rank tomorrow. Your duties will be many. I suggest you get some rest now, while you still can...*Commander.*"

Theoric gaped, and Loki reached up with his free hand to grip his shoulder firmly. "Truly, it will be my honor and privilege, your majesty," Theoric said humbly and bowed, swallowing back a sob of both relief and joy before excusing himself.

Loki returned to his chair and rubbed his hands down his face, jaw clenched, eyes closed in frustration. He needed a new plan for the Jotuns. He couldn't allow Laufey to kill Theoric now. Sighing, he shook his head. Now he would have to appear before Laufey as *himself* (he winced at the thought) rather than the new commander of his Hawks. He took no delight in putting himself in such vulnerable positions. Mischief was one thing. Probable *death* was another. Mustering his courage, for he had no other choice, he stood and retrieved his cape and Gungnir and left for the Jotunheim forest portal.

---

~*Silver Forest, The Jotunheim Portal*~

Sinir snorted nervously as Loki yanked on the reins in front of the forest portal. Hopping off the saddle, Loki led him through the opening. It wasn't often that he felt this level of anxiety, but his stomach was flipping miserably at the thought of exposing himself before his real father. He wondered if Laufey even knew who he was. Considering the fact that the Jotun king had very nearly killed him during the idiotic battle his brother had started before being exiled to Midgard, Loki guessed that he didn't. Then again, Laufey *had* left him to die as a baby, so it was entirely within the realm of possibility that he couldn't care less about his *runt* son. Coming through the other side of the portal, Loki patted Sinir, and whispering for him to stay put, the horse nodded his head and nuzzled his master.



"That's a good boy."

Loki willed his feet to move then, and walking slowly to the Jotun king's throne, he gripped Gungnir tighter, his knuckles turning white. Laufey's red gaze landed on the kingly spear in Loki's hand, and he leaned forward on his throne.

"So it *is* true that the second son has ascended to the throne of Asgard. What happened to that brat brother of yours? And do tell the state of your father."

"My father," Loki said, clenching his jaw at the word, "banished Thor for starting a war with you. He fell into the Odinsleep soon after. I come to you with an offer of peace. Unlike my idiotic brother, I desire to restore the truce that Odin had with you."

"A truce?" Laufey questioned, tilting his head sideways. "Why should I grant you this?"

Loki smiled, all teeth, silver tongue in place. "Because you fear Asgard's army, and because my brother is no longer a threat to you. He was stripped of his power and exiled to Midgard of all places."

Glaring, Laufey stood and descended the steps of his frozen dais. "I do not fear Asgard's army any more than you fear losing your precious throne, Asgardian," he snapped. "I will grant a truce with you *only* if the casket is returned to me."

Somewhat vexed at the laughable request, Loki's eyebrow raised slightly. "You wish me to simply hand over the weapon that could turn Asgard into an icicle?" Loki snorted. "You must think me a fool, Laufey. Your last attempt to retrieve the casket was *gravely* unsuccessful. No, it shall remain in the vault."

Laufey jumped to the ground, creating a rumble beneath Loki's feet. "I was promised by none other than the captain of your Crimson Hawks that it would be ours!" he shouted angrily, fisting his hands at his sides. "Our army is prepared to invade Asgard if for no other reason than to bring his head back!"

Steadying himself on the quaking ground, Loki raised his head to look at the giant. How could he possibly be this creature's son? He had to *crane* his neck to meet the giant's red stare for Hel's sake. His mother must have been absurdly small in comparison.

"I am aware of Theoric's treason, and I have already dealt with him. He is no longer of your concern." Loki winced (discreetly) at the nausea creeping into his stomach. He couldn't allow any harm to come to Theoric. Not now. Not after his discussion earlier with his new commander.

Laufey snarled, "Dealt with? *Dealt with?* You will not offer me the casket nor the soldier who betrayed me? What sort of bargain is this?!"

Jotuns appeared in a wide circle around Loki, and willing himself not to look at them, he kept his eyes forward. If he showed a hint of cowardice, this conversation would be over, and he would be no more than a pile of bones in the snow.

"There is one threat to you. An ancient threat. A *sleeping* threat, but a lethal threat no less," Loki said, holding his head high. "And it shall be yours if you will have it in return for peace."

Gaping, disbelief clouding Laufey's features, he scoffed. "Odin? Do you mean to hand over your own *father?*"

The Jotuns were slowly moving closer, and Loki's nerves were threatening to send the few contents of his stomach back up into his throat.

"He grows weak and is no longer fit for the throne," he said, swallowing nervously, thankful it wasn't audible. "I am the rightful king and desire to end this war. It is a necessary sacrifice for the safety of Asgard."

Narrowing his eyes, Laufey considered the words of the young king. "How is this to be accomplished?"

Loki exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. The giant's resolve was crumbling. This just might work.

"Preparations must be made," Loki answered firmly, his confidence building with each second. "Give me two days, and then I will conceal you and sneak you through the portal, much like that traitor did. He was not a sorcerer as I am, though. Rest assured, you will make it to the Allfather's chambers unseen. When you have accomplished your task, you shall return to Jotunheim, and the threat of war will be no more."

Despite the glee building in his chest at the thought of ending Odin, Laufey narrowed his gaze and rose an eyebrow.

"Asgard will want vengeance for the death of their king, will they not?"

Gritting his teeth, Loki shook his head, irritated. *He* was king now.

“The Allfather *was* their king. Not anymore. *I* am their king now. And did you not hear me? I am a *sorcerer*. It is quite simple to make it look as though he simply died in his sleep. Do you accept these terms or not?”

After what felt like a small eternity, Laufey finally nodded. “I will look for you in two days time then. Once Odin is dead, you have my word that peace will exist between our realms. I suggest that you not allow any arrogant princes invade my realm again, though.”

Loki hid the smile that threatened to spread across his face. It had worked. He would return to Asgard with all his parts, he would kill Laufey when he came to Odin’s chambers, he would be a hero to his people, close the forest portal, and marry Sigyn.

“Very well then,” Loki agreed with false stoic resolve and bowed his head. “*Two* days.”

Watching the young king disappear through the portal, Laufey smirked. “In two days, King Loki, we will have retrieved our casket and your treacherous captain shall be dead,” he said under his breath. He then turned to his fellow Jotuns.

“We will all go through that portal *tomorrow*. There will be no sneaking. Kill as many Asgardians as possible and get that casket. Leave the Allfather and that Hawk to me. Once we have our power back, Asgard will freeze over when we march on it.”

---

Relieved as he was that he’d managed to lure Laufey into his plan and not get himself killed in the process, Loki had to stop himself from skipping to his chambers. It would be all too simple to kill the Jotun king before he could make good on his promise to kill Odin. Honestly, Loki had been shocked that the Jotun had believed him with so little effort. It was clear that Laufey was desperate to restore some semblance of worth to his people, and sadness crept in at the memory of hearing that desperation in his voice. Laufey was, after all, his biological father, and Jotunheim’s history *was* rather tragic. Loki shook off the unpleasant emotion, reminding himself that he’d been left for *dead* as an innocent baby.

Walking through the doors of his chambers, he removed his armor quietly and started at the shifting on his bed. Still wrapped in the arms of Two, where he’d left her that morning, Sigyn slept. Looking upon the perfect likeness of himself lying with her, Loki felt an unjustified but enormous amount of jealousy rise in his chest. He twisted his wrist quickly, and Two dissipated instantly. Sigyn shivered violently awake at the loss of body heat. She sat up, clutching the sheets to her chest and cried out at the sight of Loki, bare chested and

dressed once again in his long black sleeping pants, leaning against his desk with his arms crossed.

She huffed and pulled her tunic over her head. "Wipe that adorable little smirk off your face," she said, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed and stretching.

Grinning crookedly, Loki crossed the small distance between them. "Have you slept *all* day, Sig?" he asked, pulling her to her feet.

"If you will kindly recall, I *died* two days ago," she said stifling a yawn and reached around his waist. "I think sleeping all day is probably in my best interest."

He chuckled into her hair before pressing a kiss to her forehead. "You seemed *alive* enough last night. Did you enjoy the extra set of lips and tongue and-" he paused and dragged his teeth over his bottom lip "-cock?"

Sigyn blushed horribly, hiding her face against his chest. She'd already been somewhat embarrassed by her over enthusiasm the night before. Yes, she had enjoyed it. To say the *least*. His smugness annoyed the Hel out of her though, and squaring her shoulders, she lifted her head and opened her mouth to respond hotly. However, Loki clamped a hand over her gaping mouth, cutting her off. He winked, and she scolded herself for being so easily aroused by it.

"Nevermind that now. I know you did. As did *we*. Come with me," he said winking again.

That godsdamn wink was going to be the death of her. He grabbed her hand and pulled her to the balcony, sweeping his arms out across the view of the dusky realm.

"Asgard is mine to command."

She walked to the edge and grasped the railing. It truly was a magnificent sight. The city gleamed gold, even snow covered as it was. Chuckling softly, she raised an eyebrow at him, unsure of where he was going with this.

"Should I offer my congratulations? I think I knew that already, love."

Loki shook his head, and coming up behind her, he snaked his arms around her waist. "A king needs his queen, Sig. I cannot rule without you by my side," he whispered into her hair.

It felt as though her heart had grown five times too big within her chest. He was *proposing*? How many times could she shout yes before her voice gave out? She could care less about being a queen. All she cared was that she would spend eternity with him. Smiling hugely, she turned in his arms and kissed that gorgeous grin of his.

“Consider it done. If a queen you want, then a queen you shall have.”

## Chapter 5: Bring Me Home (But Not to This)

~New Mexico, USA, Earth~

Fandral swiped the back of his hand across his forehead as he along with Hogun, Volstagg, and Sif landed on the hot sand of the New Mexican desert. "By the Norns, it's hot in this realm!"

Scanning the desolate landscape, Sif sheathed her sword, and shielding her eyes from the red blazing western sun, she pointed to a town twenty miles in the distance at the base of a snowcapped mountain range.

"That appears to be the sole civilization for miles," she said, breathing hard from the heat. "Shall we?"

Nodding in agreement, they ran full speed across the landscape. At the edge of the small town which appeared to be nothing more than one lone street, Volstagg winced at the cramp in his side and whistled an exhale.

"When we return, remind me to ask Heimdall why he dropped us so far from the proper site. I do not care for running."

Carefully watching the stares of the townspeople aimed in their direction, Hogun muttered, "Duly noted, Volstagg. I imagine the gatekeeper will be *shocked* at the revelation."

"I think we might look a touch out of place," Fandral said, so nervous that he didn't even wink at any of the women. "How do you propose we find him? Go through every building?"

Thor's gruff voice from behind them stopped them in their tracks. "That won't be necessary."

Smiles spreading across their faces, the warriors turned and launched themselves at him. Taking turns embracing him, they laughed. Sif held him longer than was perhaps appropriate considering the petite woman looking on was most likely Jane. Thor gently pulled free from her tight hold on his neck sensing the awkward glances between the two women.

“My friends! It has been far too long! I am beyond delighted to see your faces. Though I find it astonishing that my father would allow you to visit.”

He gripped Sif's shoulder and gave it a solid squeeze hoping the gesture seemed platonic. He kicked himself mentally for falling so easily for Jane who stood behind him when Sif clearly still had romantic feelings for him. When Odin had banished him, he'd had no idea when he would see Sif again, and the weight of that knowledge had made him immensely lonely. Jane had saved him from that loneliness.

Eying each other, the warriors frowned, and Fandral spoke first. “Thor, I regret to tell you that the Allfather has fallen into the Odinsleep.”

Thor gaped. Rubbing his hand down his now wet cheek, he consciously closed his mouth and looked at the clouds whispering, “Father?”

Sif, ignoring Jane who had come up and grasped his hand, hugged him once again. She willed herself not to kick the tiny brunette in the gut. How dare that short creature think she was a worthy companion for her golden, albeit fallen, *prince*?

“Your mother watches over him day and night,” Sif sighed against his chest, holding him close. “You *must* come home.”

“What? No!” Jane said, incredulous, pulling Thor not only from his sorrowful thoughts but also from Sif's arms.

Fandral, seeing Sif's anger growing, broke the deafening silence that had come over the group at Jane's words.

“You must be Jane Foster,” he said, bowing and bringing her hand to his mouth for a kiss.

“I am, yes,” she said, offering a weak smile before returning her attention to Thor. “This must mean that gatekeeper you spoke of has passed along my information to your friends.”

Thor hung his head, still bewildered by the news of his father. “Is my brother well?”

Grabbing Thor's hands, Sif spoke first. “He is king now. And we have been begging to come get you since he took over. He refused at first. I don't trust him, Thor. And you shouldn't either. Come home. There's nothing for you here anyway.”

“Excuse me?” Jane turned angry eyes on the much taller woman.

Thor shushed Sif and shook his head. "It pains me greatly to say it, but I have no place in Asgard, Sif. Not anymore. I am mortal. Father, if he were awake, would have refused just as Loki did. You must not hold that against him. He is right to follow my father's last command."

Tears stung Sif's eyes as she gripped his hands harder. "Thor, how can you say that? You *must* come home!"

"If he feels that he should stay here, then he should," Jane snapped, anger clouding her small features. "Like he said, he isn't a god like the rest of you anymore. He would be out of place. Plus," she softened her tone and reached her hand up to his face, "I still have *so much* to learn about you and the other realms."

Before she could stop herself, filled with jealousy and rage, Sif slapped Jane's hand away and gave her a swift kick to the stomach. Jane, as though she were nothing more than a ragdoll, was knocked back fifteen feet. Screaming in pain, she curled around her injured torso as Sif drew her sword and made to run her through. Eyes wide, Thor threw himself over her small frame, shielding Jane from the blow, but Sif was unable to stop the attack and the blade pierced his spine. The warriors screamed '*NO!!*' in unison and watched, horrified, as Thor rolled off Jane and cried out in agony.

Sif sheathed her sword and pulled his massive body into her lap. "*Oh no, no, no, please, no, Thor!*" She stared at the clouds, begging the gatekeeper to bring them back to Asgard so Thor might receive proper and swift healing before his human form succumbed to death. "*Heimdall! Please!*"

"It's too late," Thor gasped, choking on his own blood. He looked up at Sif as tears streamed down her face. He grimaced at the excruciating pain shooting through his upper body, the lower half having been paralyzed by the blow.

"No, it's not! We will save you, Thor!" Sif sobbed, ignoring the hundreds of people who had run into the street at the sound of their screams.

Sputtering around the metallic taste in his mouth, Thor croaked, "Tell Mother and Loki..."

Hogun bent down and gripped his dying friend's limp hand as Thor's voice failed him. "We know. Save your breath, my friend," Hogun whispered.

Sif continued to weep and put her face in his hair. "*What have I done?! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't go where I can't follow.*"



As Thor's mortal body gave in to the fatal injury, the sound of nervous and terrified chatter filled their ears. Looking around, they glared at the townspeople who were running back into the shops and diners, most likely calling for their local law enforcers.

"We need to go," Hogun said, pulling on Sif.

Angry, she pushed his hands away. "We cannot just leave him here! He must return to Asgard for a proper funeral! It is the least we can give him! Think of the queen!"

"Heimdall?" Fandral yelled up at the gathering clouds overhead.

"What is that?" Volstagg shouted, pointing at what looked like a flaming arrow speeding to them.

Fandral's eyes blew wide, and he smiled. "It's Mjolnir!" he shouted over the deafening sound of the famed weapon coming straight for them just as Thor's hand shot up and caught the hammer.

Staring in awe, the warriors laughed gleefully as his armor appeared across his body. He stood, looking every bit the god that he was and pulled Sif up with him.

"Thor," she started, but he shot her an angry look, and she closed her mouth abruptly. She wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole right there. He would never forgive her for this. Or, at least, not for *centuries*.

Glaring at her, Thor snarled, "You and I will have words. Later. For now," he turned and picked up Jane's limp barely living body before continuing, "we must get Jane to our healers."

Not a second had passed when the bifrost opened, sweeping them up to Asgard.

---

Looking on from across the deserted streets of the town, a black suited man wearing black aviators pulled the chirping iPhone from his pocket. Sighing at the number flashing on the lockscreen, he slid his finger across and answered.

"Stark? This is atypical. Returning my calls isn't usually on your to do list. I assume Miss Potts had something to do with it."

Shaking his head and rolling his eyes, he waited through the sarcastic and clever comments of the famed billionaire on the other end.

"Your mocking tone is, as usual, *greatly* appreciated, Stark," he sighed, running a hand down his face. "I am not a scientist. I am a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. Comprehending what I can only describe as the stuff of science fiction that I just saw is not part of my job description. That's *your* job."

Groaning through the response, he continued, "I'm aware of how ridiculous it sounds. It looked like a tornado with beams of light sucked up four huge men, wearing capes and carrying Viking like weapons into the clouds. One of whom was the blond guy we detained for a bit a few weeks ago. They had two women with them. And by the way, you can stop with the nicknames. They aren't as witty as you think. Coulson or Phil will do."

He pushed a finger to the ear that wasn't covered by the phone and furrowed his brow thinking he'd misheard what Tony Stark, also known as Iron Man, was telling him on the other end.

"You want me to what? Fly to Catalina? *Tonight?* I'm flattered by your desire to see me so soon," he deadpanned, his eyebrows creeping up his forehead at the words.

Stark was something of a genius who lived up to his billionaire playboy status. He'd created a suit of iron that allowed him to fly and battle enemies of the state with advanced weapons technology that he, impressively, had created. The world thought of him as a superhero and treated him like a celebrity, but he was usually annoying as hell. He flirted with practically anything that wore a skirt and had slept with the prettiest of said skirts. Hundred of them probably. Coulson wrinkled his nose at the thought. Stark was arrogant (yeah, he'd earned that right but so what?) and owned more real estate than the secret government agency that Coulson worked for did. Sure, Iron Man had been a welcome addition to the agency's list of go to guys for save the world type missions, and yes, he'd saved a lot of lives, but Coulson found it incredibly difficult to work with the non-team player nonetheless.

"You are allowing me to step across the threshold of your colossal vacation house? Should I expect a ring, too?"

Chuckling at his own quip, Coulson ignored Stark's snide retort. All laughing aside, though, Stark must have considered Coulson to be of great importance if he was willing to fly him out on his private jet—*The sky must be falling.*

"I'll be there in a few hours," he said and hung up. He returned the phone to his pocket and walked back to his '62 Corvette and spun off, dust flying behind him.

---

### ~Jotunheim Portal~

Hunched over inside the Jotunheim portal that was far too small for a frost giant to comfortably walk through, Laufey led his army of vengeful Jotuns to the frozen over entrance into Asgard. All it took was one blast of his fist into it and the ice shattered. He turned to face the thousands of pairs of red eyes and nodded his head.

"Asgard falls today. You are to freeze every single living creature you see. I want that casket back! And we will have it! The power it wields belongs to us! King Loki was not expecting us until tomorrow. I will deal with him. And the Allfather."

"And that hawk *Theoric*," he muttered under his breath.

With a sweeping arm, Laufey signaled the giants to charge through the portal. The thousand strong army pummeled through the forest, their sheer mass snapping trees as though they were nothing more than twigs.

As they made their way from the broken trees, the first warning siren boomed through the city. The sound was so loud that their ears bled. It wasn't long before terrified blood curdling screams of the lower-class citizens in the outskirts of the city joined the cacophony of pounding feet, war cries, and horns. Laufey glared at the Asgardian army's boat like gunships headed in their direction as he continued demolishing the first small village with blasts of ice. He saw the blazing yellow shots that had been fired at his fellow Jotuns before he heard them. The Asgardian defense had responded so quickly to their charge that he wondered if their mischievous king had known his plan to arrive a day early all along. *No matter*—They'd all be dead soon, King Loki with them.

A fiery laser from a quickly approaching ship pierced one of his lieutenants running next to him right through the chest, and the giant's body was blown back from the force. Growling, Laufey ran faster, screaming for his troops to press on.

---

~The Bifrost~

Thor had landed in the bifrost's observatory with his friends and Jane in tow, and after having kissed the gleaming floor, he was now walking down the long bridge. He'd asked Heimdall to summon a healing ship for Jane upon arrival. Setting her carefully in the boat, he allowed the pair of healers to see to her as he climbed in and sat across from her. He could have held her and flown to the healing rooms, but it would have taken longer, and he knew these people would tend to her injured body immediately. He was unsure what he'd done to win back his status and his weapon, and furrowing his brow, he decided to press Loki for that information once he'd deposited Jane safely in the healing rooms. Surely his brother, sitting on the all-seeing throne, would know the answer.

Just as Sif and the warriors settled at the stern of the ship, the loud blares from the sirens that stood menacingly at the top of four buildings equidistant from the palace echoed across the realm. As the ship took off at top speed toward his home, he and the warriors stared in horror at the onslaught of Jotuns tumbling out of the forest situated at the base of the mountains. Gunships flew past them, the soldiers shouting orders to the defense troops that had sprung from their bases spread throughout the city. Thinking he might have been imagining it, Thor rubbed his eyes.

"How....?" His voice trailed off as he sprung to his feet.

It was impossible! Where had they come from? There had always been rumors of secret portals to other realms, but none had believed them earnestly. He turned to Sif and barked for her to stay with Jane. Tears in her eyes, she nodded and moved to sit with the all too frail mortal woman, the guilt she felt effectively silencing the biting retort about being as strong as a man and deserving a good fight. Thor, along with the three warriors, jumped from the flying ship, landing squarely on their feet, and he ran faster than he knew he could run.

*"Horses!!"*

The stables not more than a hundred yards from them, he'd forgone the use of the hammer so the stable hands could hear his shouts for them to prepare their horses. He charged through the hundreds of soldiers headed in the direction of the trees and slid to a stop when his white steed was hurriedly brought to him. Grabbing the reins, he jumped swiftly and with more grace than his size would suggest possible onto the saddle. With the forward shout, his horse neighed and reared back before speeding toward the forest alongside the Asgardian cavalry, his red cape flying behind him.

## Chapter 6: Death is Everywhere

*~Loki's Chambers, The South Wing~*

Loki awoke before dawn, an unusual occurrence as of late. He'd always been a bit of a slow riser, preferring to attend to his personal business during the darkest hours of night. The dark suited him, unsurprisingly, and he found it made his work more tolerable. The downside of being king, however, was that he was forced to do a realm's worth of work during the daylight hours, and since he refused to abandon his magic studies at night (a Seiður could lose his abilities if he didn't wield magic regularly), he was exhausted.

Perhaps he wouldn't have been so tired if it wasn't for the woman sleeping in his bed, but despite his exhaustion, he couldn't help himself. Ever since he had brought her back from Helheim, he found it impossible to keep his hands off her when she was in his presence. He desired her more than ever, and she was a more than willing participant in their love life. The sex was intense, to say the least, and his stamina had not wavered, and that meant that the few precious hours that allowed for a bit of shut eye were spent instead burying himself inside of her until he finally found release.

Groaning, he rubbed his eyes and ran a hand through his inky locks. He'd not cut his hair in *months*. When he'd met Sigyn, it had been just below his chin, but she liked it at his shoulders as it was now. She was always playing with it, twirling her fingers in the soft ends. It was endearing the way she admired something as simple as his hair, but it was a pain to maintain. He had to spend a solid fifteen minutes washing and conditioning it in the shower every day. It was absurd how much time it took him to prepare himself for the day. He pulled a face at the thought as he pulled out a tangle.

Turning to face the dark-haired beauty curled up on her side next to him, he ghosted a finger along her jaw and cupped the back of her neck with his hand before moving it down her spine and resting it on the small of her back. Fingers splayed, he pulled her flush against his chest and kissed her forehead. She mumbled something incoherent, still in a light sleep, and shivered against his cold skin.

He wanted to stay there. He didn't have any desire to remove himself from his bed, from *their* bed. *Ever*. The day loomed before him, as it had since his all too quick and private coronation, and he pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. He had far too many people to see, too many requests to listen to, too many bills to sign, too much fretting over

Jotunheim to do, and too little time to do it in. He'd delegated well enough, but he had an entire realm under his care, and he could have used a hundred more advisors and military strategists. He could have used *Thor*.

It was unbelievable how much he had missed the brute lately. He loved Sigyn, but his brother, despite their strained relationship, had been his closest ally and friend since he could remember. Even if not by blood, he would always be his brother. And, in truth, in a moment of weakness, Loki had considered handing over Gungnir to Thor once the warriors three returned with him. He'd seen his brother's powers restored the night before. No doubt it had something to do with Thor's love for his little human and sacrificing himself to save her. It had been an admirable act, one that his big brother would have been commended for in battle. Loki wasn't sure that it made him worthy once more of *Mjölfnir*, but apparently Odin thought so. Even in his sleep, the Allfather had the power to make such a decision.

He was pulled from his musings when Sigyn's fingers combed through his hair. His vision readjusting from a glazed over stare, he looked at her. Grey green eyes glinted as the first signs of dawn appeared at the edge of the balcony, and she spoke quietly.

"You're awake early," she said, her usually smooth voice cracking a bit, the vocal chords not quite awake.

"Unfortunately," he sighed heavily. His hand moved from her back to her hip, and resting there, his emerald eyes blinked a few times before closing again.

Frowning, she stroked his cheek. "How long did you sleep this time? Two hours?"

She moved closer, if that was possible, and buried her face in the crook of his neck, inhaling the scent that she adored. She'd been to only three realms, but she doubted that in all the nine there was a better smell than Loki. Keeping her nose at his throat, she exhaled slowly as his voice rumbled against her cheek, his adam's apple bobbing with each syllable.

"One. *Maybe*," he whispered and pushed a lock of hair behind his ear, groaning quietly as she placed a kiss at the hollow of his throat.

*Dammit, Sig*—How could he be *this* tired and still want to fuck her until she couldn't walk? The effect she had on him was absurd and defied all reason. His body needed a solid week of sleep to recuperate from, well, everything.

Pulling away from him to look in his eyes, she spoke flatly. "You are *king*."

Closing his eyes, he fisted the hand on her hip. As though he wasn't hard already, and now she was going to pull the *'you're a king'* line? Was she trying to *kill* him?

"Don't tease me with your words, Sig. I love you. I *adore* you. You don't have to remind me of my status throughout the realms in order to get in my trousers."

He pulled her back to him and ground his hips against hers weakly, his muscles sobbing at the movement. *Huh*—maybe his body was finally succumbing to the exhaustion after all. Rolling her eyes, she stilled him, the strength in her arms, for once, beating his.

"You misunderstand the purpose behind my words. I simply do not understand that, as king, you can't choose to take a day off. A week would be better. Loki," she paused, empathy pulling at her features as she rubbed her thumb across the bags under his eyes, "you need rest. *Proper* rest. I'm shocked that you haven't fallen asleep on the throne, yet. And," she pushed his roaming hands away before continuing, "I need to give you some space. *Physical* space. I think it best that I return to my chambers for a few days. I am still a distraction, amazingly."

Sighing, he slid out from underneath the dark sheets and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Hands gripping the edge, he hung his head and furrowed his brow, pondering how to push up from the bed and get through the day. Laufey would arrive tomorrow, and he needed to make preparations. Reminding himself of the frost giant's impending arrival and the subsequent end of that situation was enough to spur his legs to work properly.

He pushed up and strode to his desk chair, retrieving his loose black sleeping pants, and tying the drawstring around his hips, he eyed the bifrost. He wondered idly when it would light up, signaling his brother's return. Maybe he could pass off his duties to Thor for a bit. Scowling, he shook his head. Until Odin awoke, *if* he awoke at all, there would be no throne swapping.

He toyed with the tips of the horns of his helmet on his desk as he continued blankly staring in the distance. Sigyn's arms came around his waist from behind, and he leaned into her, caring not if his weight would send them falling backward onto the floor. She handed him a towel and shoved him toward his washroom. Taking the fluffy white thing, his shoulders slumped, and he whined as he stumbled onto the tiles and turned on the water.

"Must I *do* today?"

Eyeing him, she smirked. "I think that should be your opening line at court today. The nasal sound of your voice will be so off-putting that you'll be dismissed from your kingly duties and sent back to your room for being so pettish. Perhaps with no dinner."

Grinning sleepily at her humor, he loosened the tie at his hips, shaking his head. "I don't know why I bothered to put these on if I was just going to take them right back off."

It was at that moment that the warning sirens interrupted their hushed tones. Sigyn's hands flew to her ears as Loki dashed back to the balcony. Emerald eyes squinting, he gaped at the sight of the Jotun army bursting through the trees of the forest as Sigyn ran up next to him. She jumped back though when he slammed his fist into the closest pillar, teeth bared, jaw clenched.

*"For! Fuck's! Sake!"* Each word was punctuated by his fist repeating the action.

She stared in horror at the scene playing out in front of them. Citizens screamed and ran through the streets. Soldiers appeared at the base of the palace, the commanding officers shouting orders to remain in their lines until Loki had given them the charge. The sirens were deafening as she looked to the bifrost, the sight of a red cape having caught her attention.

*Thor*—Her heart soared at the thought of the warrior's return. She snapped out of her haze at Loki's booming voice.

*"SIGYN!"*

Turning, she caught the Vanir warrior gear that Loki was flinging at her. He yanked on his boots as his servants bolted into the room, military officials barreling in after them. Everyone was yelling. She'd always pictured Asgardians as being calm during an attack, but these people were stumbling around like drunkards. One of the servant's bowed in front of Loki with a shiny gold object for him, and he sneered at the sight, ripping the thing, which when her vision cleared, she realized was his helmet, from the servant's hands.

"I don't need my godsdamn *horns!* Nothing more than ceremonial garb!"

She finished buckling her armor, fumbling more than usual, and made for the door. Her bow, her quiver and arrows, and her black dagger were, inconveniently, in her chambers. Just as she reached the exit, a strong arm wrapped across her shoulders from behind, and Loki spun her around, pulling her into a tight hug before kissing her firmly. All too soon, he pulled away, and she blinked away the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks at the loss.

"Go to my mother," he whispered against her cheek. "Use *whatever means* you must to protect her and my father."



She nodded and kissed him again, fear coursing through her. She'd planned to fight next to him. She'd wanted to charge through the frost giants by his side. Their shared magic would have been more deadly than Gungnir, but it was his call, and there was no time for an argument.

"I will," she promised, squeezing his shoulders, more terrified than she'd ever been in her life. She couldn't lose him.

His eyes darted between her eyes and her mouth. He knew her fears, for they were his, too.

"I *will* return to you. You have the trickster's word." Winking, he smirked and planted a final kiss on her lips before running past her and down the corridor.

She stared after him for a moment, listening to his commands for a cavalry charge led by Gylfi, soldiers pouring out from other corridors to follow their king. He disappeared around the corner, and she steadied herself. *Run, you fool*, she screamed at herself mentally before racing in the opposite direction to her chambers. If she was going to fight, and she most certainly *was* going to, she needed her weapons.

---

~*The City Lowlands, A Mile Outside The Palace Gates*~

It was, much to Thor's relief, easy to spot his younger brother alongside his newly appointed captain leading the horses that were charging toward the Jotun army. His green cape was a stark contrast to the yellow clad soldiers trailing closely behind him on horseback. Thor was both proud and devastated at the sight. His little brother was nearing the frost giants so fast that Thor had to kick his steed in order to catch up, something he hated doing to the beast. The thought of losing Loki, of possibly seeing him impaled by a blast of sharp ice made him physically ill. Holding the reins and Mjolnir, he twisted his head and leaned over the saddle, retching dryly. Leaning forward on his horse, he encouraged the stallion to run faster, hooves pounding heavily beneath his weight.

*Please be strong, brother*, he begged silently. Eyes wide with hate for the monstrous race that was invading his home, he passed through the wall of horses, vaguely aware of his warrior friends falling back, their horses unable to keep up with his speed. Fear and guilt engulfed him when he heard Loki cry out to the soldiers, the first blast from Gungnir slicing the head of a frost giant clean off.

This was *real*. This was a torturously real attack on his home, and his brother was paying the price that Thor should have paid. *He* had caused this with his idiotic war mongering

trip to Jotunheim after his ruined coronation. He knew that Loki had always desired the throne, but surely his little brother hadn't expected to immediately fight a war upon his ascension.

Thor bared his teeth at the Jotuns that were nearing him, but it wasn't just an intimidating expression. In truth it was a smile, a proud smile for the warrior that Loki had become. For the swift justice he was bringing. For the courage his brother had to run headfirst into a dangerous battle, not even of his causing, if it meant defending his home. The overwhelming love Thor felt at that moment for Loki as he pummeled the first giant with Mjolnir gave him more strength than his powerful muscles. Thor swore a silent oath to himself as he watched his brother struggle against the onslaught of giants surrounding him, blasts from his spear hitting each target with expert precision. If Loki was killed, Thor would destroy Jotunheim. By *any* means necessary.

"LOKI!" he cried out, the hammer destroying Jotuns easily with each swing of his arm.

After screaming his brother's name twice more, Loki finally swiveled his dark head, his pale face flushed and gleaming with sweat as he registered that Thor was with him. Nodding toward the golden prince, Loki reared back when a giant sliced Sinir's hind leg, the horse neighing from the pain. Seething, he butted the offending Jotun in the nose with the blunt end of Gungnir, his thighs gripping the saddle with strength he didn't know he had, and yanked the reins toward Thor. Loki pushed through the battling armies, continually slicing into giants with his spear.

"Flyt, Sin! Flyt!" he yelled at his injured horse, despite the pain the stallion was no doubt experiencing with each stride, to move faster toward his brother.

He silently thanked the Norns for Thor. That damn hammer could bring down the entire Jotun army. It was the most amazing weapon, as much as the kingly spear Loki wielded. If only the spear could make him *fly*. He finally caught up to Thor and between blows to the giants, he spat his greetings, huffing between the words with each attack.

"Hello....brother....so....nice....to....see....you."

"Indeed!" Thor shouted, smiling wide and nodding as he thrust his fist into an oncoming giant.

"What....took....you....so....long!"

Bursts of green light flowing from his fingers, Loki slammed four oncoming giants with his powerful magic in their chests, their bodies flying back from the impact. A Jotun came at

Loki from behind, ice streaming from its fingers and pierced through the weak spot just below the underarm of his golden armor, the brown leather beneath the metal ripping apart. He cried out as blood poured from the wound, and he put all the strength he had into his arm and elbowed the giant in the jaw. Yanking on Sinir's reins, he turned the horse and slung a dagger into the giant's throat.

*"Loki, NO!"*

Thor's panicked cry was muffled by the sounds of battle and the blood that was rushing through Loki's ears. His dark head fell forward, his body slumping over, and he cringed at the searing pain coursing through his side, gripping the wound just below his left ribs. He cried out when Thor's heavy hand landed on his shoulder trying to pull him from his horse, Mjolnir ready to fly them from the battle, but Loki shoved his hand away.

With shallow breaths, Loki spoke through clenched teeth. "I will not....abandon....this fight."

Thor pummeled an oncoming Jotun in the chest as it nearly crashed on top of Loki who was bent over, the pain becoming more unbearable with each breath.

"Your lung....has been....pierced....Loki. I am....sure....of it. I must....get you to....Eir!" he shouted, yanking on his brother's slumping form just as Loki shot up, his eyes wild, his jaw clenched.

*"Sig."*

He spoke her name so quietly that Thor could barely make out the word. Rearing back on Sinir, both Loki and his horse cried at the pain their injuries were shooting through them, and Thor yelled at his brother's back as he continued sending blows to Jotuns.

*"What? Loki?!"*

Loki turned his head to him, fear written across his features. *"Finish them!!"* he called back to Thor, then faced forward and took off in the direction of the palace yelling at Sinir to run faster.

Thor watched, momentarily stunned, as the flash of green and gold disappeared from his sight. Returning his attention to the moment at hand, he continued to wield Mjolnir, finally feeling worthy of its weight. He refused to allow his brother's efforts against the Jotun army to go unrequited.

---

Loki would have teleported to Sigyn if he could, but the distance was too great. As Loki charged through the horses, the dead bodies, the still fighting soldiers, he felt the sting of guilt overtake the sting in his side. He'd left her *alone*. He'd promised he would return, and he was keeping that promise, but *she'd* made no such promise. She had told him that she could keep his mother and father safe, but she hadn't given her word that she would stay alive. He'd just left her there. Standing in the doorway. *Alone*. She was a powerful sorceress and very good with both the bow and blade, and clearly, in that moment when the sirens had gone off, he'd trusted her to protect his parents and herself, but he'd been so terribly wrong to leave her.

She was *dying*. He could feel it through the bond. How could he have left her *alone*? He'd known that Laufey had every intention of killing Odin himself and would probably be in the Allfather's chambers within the hour, and yet he'd ordered Sigyn, the *love* of his life, to go to those very chambers! Tears streamed down his sweat drenched face as Sinir finally pounded into the stables. Jumping from the horse, he barked for the stable hands to see to the stallion's injuries, and with every ounce of strength he could muster, he willed the magic coursing through his veins to move faster. Green light swirled around him, and he disappeared from their sight.

---

~The Allfather's Bedchambers~

Hissing at the sudden sting just under her ribs, Sigyn dropped her bow and felt for an injury. When she found none, her eyes went wide with fear. *Oh no*—Loki had been wounded. It was the only explanation for the pain. There was no blood, and not a soul had come into the chambers and attacked them.

She didn't have even two seconds to concern herself with Loki's wellbeing, however. Her ears rang suddenly at the deafening sound of the doors bursting open with such force that they came off their hinges and crashed to the floor, and something stabbed her right in the middle of her lower stomach. Screaming in agony, she clutched her torso, dark red blood streamed from the gaping wound that Laufey had delivered when she'd drawn her dagger instinctively from its holster.

The Jotun king had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, ice blasting from his hands. It all happened so quickly. Frigga yelled and swung Odin's sword only to be struck violently, her body flying back into the wall. She was doubled over, clearly in too much pain to defend her sleeping husband. Angry tears poured down Sigyn's face, her efforts to stand proving fruitless, as one by one, soldiers ran into the chamber attempting to kill Laufey who was

now seated at the foot of Odin's bed. He reared back when a sword slashed the dark blue skin of his back and roared, the sound deep and hoarse. Before the other guards could move in on him, he swept his large arm across them, encasing their bodies in ice. Another blast from his hand and the door was frozen over.

Sigyn choked on the blood in her mouth, her heart shattering at the sight of so much death. She'd *failed*. Protect Frigga? Protect Odin? She couldn't even protect *herself*, for Hel's sake! What a pathetic excuse for a warrior. Gripping the bow that she'd dropped, she attempted to reach up for one of the sharp black arrows in her quiver, but a torturous wave of pain rolled over her entire body, her face screwing up at the sensation, and her hand fell.

Frigga was still crying but had pushed to her feet and was moving in on Laufey. He turned his head, his hand stretched toward the queen. Sigyn didn't think. It was *impossible* to think. Her head was pounding, and her ears were probably bleeding from the sound of the doors not even sixty seconds ago, but her eyes worked well enough. *Loki's mother was about to die*. The woman who had been his rock, his entire support system. The woman who had taught him magic. The woman who had loved Sigyn like her own daughter—that woman was about to die at the hands of the Jotun king.

*Absolutely not*—Sigyn hadn't willed it, but black smoke poured from her fingers, nonetheless. All this time she'd been training her magic, learning to control it, to bend it to her will. Yet here she was, a loose cannon, and for the first time since protecting Nanna *ages* ago, the rage within her, the slow burn that boiled just below her skin, was going to *save* someone other than herself. Theoric's earlier words echoed in her mind.

*"That power could be used for GOOD."*

Laufey bellowed in agony when his body was engulfed by a fire so hot it turned white, and he writhed under the flames, his blue skin charring in the intense heat. Behind the flames, green light slithered across the floor, and Loki appeared, blood seeping through his armor, Gungnir at the ready. He didn't see Sigyn, but his mother was at his feet, clutching his legs, trying to stand, and wrapping a strong arm around her waist, he lifted her, wincing as the muscles in his abdomen rebelled against the effort. She kissed his cheeks and held him tightly, and he felt as though she might crush him.

When black mist enveloped the flames surrounding Laufey's body, Loki looked across his father's bed. Spotting Sigyn smiling weakly at him and whispering his name, he tossed his spear and ran to her, Frigga at his side. He dropped to his knees before her and pulled her limp body into his lap—*Oh gods, Sig!* Blood was *everywhere*. She was *covered* in the sticky

substance. Shaking his head, stunned by the entire scene (*what had he expected?*), he turned to his mother and kissed her cheek quickly.

“Stay with father.”

Frigga nodded and rose to her feet. Turning her head slightly, wincing at the small movement, Sigyn tried to speak. Loki brought his ear to her mouth to hear the nearly silent words.

“The guards can’t pass through the door,” she whispered, swallowing thickly as her words registered across his face.

Calling for Frigga to throw him the spear, Loki pointed it at the iced over opening. He yelled for the guards to move away from the door before the blast struck the ice, and soldiers poured into the room as Loki put an arm under her back and knees. Hissing as more blood pooled under his ribs, he lifted her and struggled to the door. A team of healers with mobile healing beds nearly ran them over, their steps halting at the sight of their wounded king and the nearly dead Vanir in his arms.

They went to work instantly. Pulling Sigyn onto a bed, they ripped at her armor as Eir barked orders. They tried to move Loki onto one of the beds, but he refused. Grasping her hand as the team pushed her from the room, he pressed a medicinal cloth into his wound and wiped sweat and tears from his eyes. She was at least breathing more steadily, the healers magic working tirelessly to mend her body. Grey green eyes focused on Loki’s face as they came into the corridor, and he gripped her hand harder as she sobbed.

Death was *everywhere*. Soldiers, nobles, servants, frost giants. Lifeless bodies littered the floor, the tables, the chairs, and sprawled across one of the lavish cushioned benches was the broken and bloodied body of Theoric. Loki turned away, guilt wreaking havoc on his insides, and he retched as Sigyn’s tormented cries echoed through the hall.

## Chapter 7: The Bridge

~A Private Healing Room in The Palace~

**H**ow could this have happened? How could *he* have *let* it happen? Why did it have to be *her*? Why not *him*?

Loki, his emerald eyes swollen red with fatigue and glistening with unshed tears, was seated in the plush armchair next to Sigyn's private healing bed, mulling over the hows, the whys, the why nots. He didn't have the energy to attempt to answer those questions. Every bit of energy he had was focused on Sigyn. Just ... please *stay alive*.

She looked so small lying there on her back, arms flat at her sides, Eir personally seeing to her critically injured abdomen. Sighing heavily, he brought her hand to his mouth and placed a firm kiss on her fingers, willing her to wake up. Ever since they'd been rushed through the main hall strewn with dead and dying people, Sigyn had been asleep. It was a good thing, he supposed, since the rest would aid in her healing, but it didn't change the fact that he desperately wanted to see those stormcloud eyes that he loved amidst all this tragedy.

Eir had wanted to put him in a bed, too, saying his ribs needed immediate attention. *Ha!* There was no way in Hel that he would leave Sigyn's side. He'd promised himself that he would never leave her again. The last time he'd left her alone, *this* had happened.

Not letting loose his hold on her hand, he allowed another healer to remove his side armor so she could better clean the wound. There had been no time for an anesthetic, so he'd just had to bear it. After being told, thankfully, that the ice hadn't impaled his lung, that it had only cut a small gash an inch in length, they went to work cauterizing the wound. As they worked, he was vaguely aware of the healers whispering to each other.

"I can hardly believe that ice didn't injure him more extensively."

"He must have a tougher skin than most."

"*Tough skin?* That's putting it lightly."

"The stab wound in his side was four inches wide when he came in and yet the lung had barely a scratch."

“His bones took the brunt of the attack. Two broken.”

“He is *freezing*. Get some warming blankets.”

“How is he so *cold*? He’s sweating buckets!”

Loki bit down on his hand to keep from screaming ‘*STOP!*’ at the controlled scorching dragging slowly across the gash. It only took five seconds to cauterize, but it was agonizing. They then set his two broken ribs back into place, smearing a salve, some potent combination of plants native to Vanaheim and magic, around the bone. Again, it was like torture. It was as though he could feel each cell destroying itself in order to allow new ones to form and fuse the marrow within. Nimble fingers stitched him up quickly, and he was told that the area would bruise badly and be sensitive, but it would take no more than a week to be fully restored.

He rolled his eyes—*Tremendous*. As though the frost giants would just *sit down* for seven days before striking again. Exhausted, he laid his forehead on the cerulean sheets. He would be utterly useless in battle in his current state. Thor and the others would have to manage the giants without him for the time being. *Speak of the devil...*

Heavy footfalls sounded behind Loki, pulling him from the sleep that his body was begging for. Knowing who his visitor was, Loki didn't look up. His brother slowed his steps as he approached the bed. Thor's gruff voice, weary from battle, broke the silence.

“How is she?”

It was Eir who answered. “She was hemorrhaging, but we stopped it. She is at a disadvantage due to her Vanir heritage. She is healing properly, just more slowly than we do.”

Frowning, Thor nodded. “Brother?” he asked.

Annoyed and utterly *spent*, Loki mumbled into the sheets that he’d buried his face in. “*What.*”

Thor knelt beside the young king and adjusted the blankets that had been draped over him. “I imagined I would find *you* in a bed as well, Loki. What of your injury? Did it puncture your lung as I’d suspected?”



"More like a scratch," Loki said, raising his head just enough to rest his chin on the mattress. Wincing at the sharp pain that shot down his side at the slight movement, he hissed, "Damn giant broke two of my ribs though."

Pressing his lips together, Thor stood. "Is the pain very great?"

Loki glared up at his big brother before rolling his eyes. He didn't have the energy to make sarcastic quips right now. The simple truth was all he could manage.

"Yes, actually."

Nodding, Thor left the room, and Loki stared after him momentarily, surprised that his brother didn't have more to say. He quickly returned his gaze to Sigyn though. The healers had removed her armor and wrapped her in a thin soft blue robe. Her hair had been freed from its pins and brushed. They'd washed her face, neck, chest, and arms clean of blood, sweat, and ash. Her features were relaxed and as beautiful as ever.

"I've brought Sif to look after your Sigyn. You need to sleep brother. Not here. In your bedchambers."

Thor's voice startled him, and without thinking, Loki swiveled his body to glare at him, his face screwing up at the sharp pain. Loki stared daggers at the black-haired woman who stood behind Thor.

"Surely you *jest*," he said through his teeth.

Stepping forward, Sif walked to the other side of Sigyn's bed and pulled up a chair. "It is no jest, Loki. I have been watching over Jane, and now that she is in stable condition, I will do the same for Sigyn. It is the least I can do for the woman who killed Laufey and saved your parents' lives," Sif said in earnest, giving him a pointed look at the mention of his true father.

Eyeing the war goddess, Loki smirked, completely humorless. "Changed your stripes, have you now, Sif? Looking after Thor's little human companion? And now *my Sig*?" Losing the bite in his tone, choking on her name, his eyes darted to Sigyn's face. Fighting to keep his lip from trembling, tears in his eyes, he looked back to the war goddess, sorrow etched into his features. "You might consider lowering the price for your forgiveness."

Guilt wreaking havoc on her insides, Sif struggled to keep her expression calm. "Consider this a peace offering, Loki," she paused, considering her next words. "I *truly* am sorry."

Unwilling to argue with Sif, and somewhat moved by her genuine apology, Loki hung his head.

"Come, Brother," Thor said stepping around the bed to help Loki to his feet. "Let us get you to your room."

Loki draped his arm across Thor's shoulders and shot one more look at Sigyn's sleeping form. He blew out a deep breath as his brother's arm wrapped around his waist, pain shooting across his torso from the sudden and too tight contact. He looked to Thor then.

"Was the day ours?" Loki had expected an immediate response. An affirmative nod, at *least*.

Instead, Thor frowned, shaking his head. "We counted their dead and took the rest to the dungeons, but the numbers didn't add up. A thousand, at least, must have retreated unbeknownst to us. Some of Gylfi's men said they'd run back to the forest, but our search through the trees proved fruitless. They'd iced over their tracks, and the hounds couldn't pick up a scent." Spying two healers in the hall, Thor beckoned them with two fingers.

"Pain enders for the king," he ordered them. "*Now.*"

Loki swallowed the shot of clear liquid they gave him in one gulp, relaxing as warmth started in his stomach and spread out in all directions, the stabbing pain in his ribs disappearing. He hadn't ever taken an ender when he *really* needed one, and now that he had, he was angry that no one had offered him one. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and released his hold on Thor, standing up completely straight now that he could. He turned on his heel, glaring at the healers and spoke through clenched teeth.

"Why was I not supplied with that vial as soon as I was stitched up? No—before I was examined at all!"

He rolled his eyes at their stammering before waving them off. Chastising healers was hardly worth his time. The pain in his side was gone. Now he could focus on the matter at hand. Thor was looking at him expectantly, waiting for an answer. Jaw set, Loki scratched the back of his head, pacing.

"I imagine whatever portal they found was also their point of entry when they snuck through to get the casket on your coronation day," he said, snapping his fingers.

Not a hint of guilt crept into Loki's mind as he glazed over the finer details of the story. Everything he'd spoken was technically true. What purpose would telling Thor that he'd been a *slight* accomplice have served?

"If what you say is accurate, Thor, that the Jotuns escaped, then there is a thousand strong Jotun army regrouping right now. They could come back through at any moment. They must be positively *desperate* to retrieve that casket. With their king dead, they'll want it more than ever."

Thor rubbed his temples and asked, "So what do we do then? Send a regiment to find and defend this secret doorway?" Scowling, Thor threw up his hands. All this was *his* fault. If only he hadn't gone to Jotunheim that day. He'd been an absolute fool.

Loki shook his head vigorously. "No no no no. The Jotuns would only continue to attack the portal until our men were too exhausted to fight. The peace treaty is broken. Their king is dead. They know they have a fighting chance to have their power restored if they attack now. They have nothing to lose. We must end them, Thor. *For good.*"

Loki gave his brother a pointed look, and Thor shut his eyes and sighed, frowning his brow.

"You mean to open the bifrost on them," Thor said, gulping audibly before continuing, "and leave it open until its power destroys Jotunheim."

"It is the only way, brother," Loki said with a nod. Yes, he would obliterate the frost giants using the bridge, and with it, his true heritage.

Frowning, Thor shook his head, confused. "And what of the portal? What if they charge through and retrieve the casket? What will destroying Jotunheim matter then?"

Loki stopped his pacing and rubbed his chin. The answer came to him, and he smiled, clapping his hands together once.

"I will cast a shield over the forest portal. You must go to Heimdall. Have him open the bridge and keep it open until that frozen rock is done for."

"But how do you know where to find it?" Thor asked, one eyebrow raised. "I told you there were no tracks."

Loki sucked in his cheeks. *Shit*—he'd walked right into that one. Recovering from his misstep quickly, Loki smirked.

"I may be a wise old king now, brother, but I'm still the God of *Mischief*. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve yet."

He relaxed as a smile tugged at the corners of Thor's lips. Thor chuckled, easily charmed by his brother's playfulness, and seemingly satisfied with the vague and cryptic answer, he nodded.

"How is the pain?" Thor asked, eyeing Loki's ripped armor. "Are you sure you have the strength to do this? Perhaps I should go with you."

He grabbed Loki's forearm, squeezing a bit too tightly. Rolling his eyes, Loki shrugged out his grasp. As though he needed the brute to perform a simple spell.

"You think too little of me, brother. I'll be fine. Now hurry!"

With a curt nod, Thor took off, hammer thrust forward, flying to the bifrost observatory, and Loki blew out a heavy breath. Determined to put an end to this, his magic raced through his veins, and closing his eyes, he disappeared from the healing hall and reappeared in the stables. Sinir stomped his front hooves at the sight of his master before charging toward him. Gripping the horse's mane and putting his boot in the stirrup as he ran, Loki threw his other leg over the saddle and raced to the forest.

---

~*The Jotunheim Portal, Silver Forest*~

Wincing at the pain seeping back into his ribs, Loki crouched low at the base of the Jotunheim portal in the forest. Eyes shutting tightly, the ancient words of shield enchantment tumbled from his lips as surely as the green light from his fingers. Gods, this was so frustrating. If only he could have cast a death spell over the portal.

Not possible—it would have taken too much of what little time he had, and how could he possibly cast a Jotun death spell if he were *himself* Jotun? It might not have killed him, since he was almost certain that he was only half-Jotun, but he was hardly willing to risk it.

No, sadly, the shield over the stone doorway would have to do for now. It wouldn't hold the frost giants back permanently, but it would hold long enough for him to destroy their realm with the bridge. Even if the Jotuns managed to break through the shield then, they would have nowhere to retreat to. Gylfi's regiment was posted just outside the edge of the forest and would kill any who managed to get that far.

It would all be over soon. All this Jotunheim nonsense would be over. He would be a hero. He would finally have the respect that he deserved. No longer would he play second fiddle to Thor. His true heritage would be ancient history and of no consequence. And most importantly, he would make Sigyn his queen when she was healed. If she was healed. He sniffed back a choked cry—*Please, Sig.*

A decidedly *unpleasant* thought crossed his mind then. What if Odin awoke and gave Thor the throne? What then? His big brother may have won back his powers, he may have become worthy of that damn hammer once more (according to the Allfather, at least), but that didn't make him a capable king. Loki had no desire to simply *advise* his brother. He didn't want to be the neck who turned the head. The head received the accolades. The head had the power. The head had the final say. Being king was exhausting, of course, but Loki would adjust to the workload. And look at what he was already accomplishing!

He was ending the war that *Thor* had started. Laufey was *dead*. Surely defeating the frost giants and bringing peace back to the realms was of higher worth than just sacrificing his life for *one tiny human!*

The shield now in place, shimmering green and gold over the portal, he jumped back on Sinir and yanked him toward the bifrost.

---

~*The Observatory*~

*What the fuck*—Galloping past his brother into the golden observatory, Loki barked at Heimdall, "Why is the bridge *closed* still?!"

Thor glared at the gatekeeper. "He said he would only take orders from *you* directly! I am still a *prince* of Asgard, Heimdall, and I deserve your—"

"Enough!" Loki growled, cutting him off. "There is no time for your mewling, Thor!" He ignored the scowl on his brother's face and turned to Heimdall.

"Open the bridge on Jotunheim," Loki ordered him, "and keep it open until that realm is *no more.*"

Nodding in obedience, Heimdall thrust the sword down into the stone rudder, and the walls spun slowly, the golden gears of the observatory roaring to life. Picking up speed, the walls blurred around them, the blazing bridge bursting open, beams of light blasting from the gateway.

That was when they heard the sirens. Loki didn't see it. *None* of them did. Sinir reared back as a frost giant pounded into Loki from behind, and falling from the horse, he landed on his back. Crying out as his freshly stitched wound ripped open, he rolled sideways, barely avoiding the jagged ice of the attacking Jotun. Thor slammed giant after giant with the hammer. It felt like a hundred frost giants swarmed into the observatory within the span of two seconds. With a sweep of its huge arm, a giant struck Heimdall, and the blow sent him flying back, his now unconscious body knocking the sword in the rudder, an audible click echoing menacingly as it twisted one notch to the left.

"*NO!!*" Thor and Loki shouted in unison.

The walls came to a sudden stop and began spinning in the opposite direction, and rather than feeling the gravity pulling from the observatory, they felt the rush of air coming *at* them. The bridge was in reverse, now pulling *from* Jotunheim. Jotuns poured into the observatory through the beam of light while those who had clearly broken through the forest portal continued to surge from the other side. The brothers were trapped.

*Two men against hundreds of frost giants*, Loki panicked silently.

"Ice the rudder!" The roar of the Jotun commander rose above the cacophony.

Gripping the sword, still locked in the rudder, a giant froze it in place. Eyes blown wide, Loki's jaw dropped, genuinely terrified at the sight. There was no closing the bridge now. No stopping them. Once again, Sigyn's fire magic would have proven useful. His sorceress lover would have melted the ice and set the giants on fire with barely a thought. He *needed* her but she was lying on a healing bed, unconscious, far from the bridge. No, he and Thor were woefully on their own.

Setting his jaw, he sent a burst of magic into three giants barreling toward him, the green light blasting into their chests, their huge bodies flying back into the spinning walls. The brothers fought with vigor, adrenaline pumping through their veins. No more than ten seconds had passed since the first hit, but it felt as though they'd been fighting for an hour at least. Loki lost count of the limbs and heads he'd sliced off with Gungnir, twisting his body to face each attacker, despite his ribs screaming at him to stop.

He had to get out of the observatory. There was no way that he and Thor could fight them *alone*. Where the *fuck* was Gylfi's regiment?! Had the giants just barreled over them?! How could this be happening?!

“*THOR!!*” He cried out as he cast ten illusions of himself scattered throughout the observatory, confusing the giants, their attacks now aimed at the fakes. Loki ducked, just barely missing an ice dagger to his throat. “*Get us out of here!*”

Remaining silent save for angry grunts and yells, Thor turned at the sound of his name just as sharp ice pierced Loki’s thigh, his agonized scream echoing in the battlefield that was the observatory.

“*LOKI!!*” Thor yelled, fear gripping him at the sight of his younger brother falling to the ground.

### *~Sigyn's Healing Room~*

Blaring sirens reverberated through her private healing room, and covered in a cold sweat, Sigyn shot up from the healing bed, shaking and gasping for breath.

“Wha...?” Sif said, confused as she jarred awake. She'd been sleeping at the foot of Sigyn's bed. She rushed to Sigyn’s side, trying to calm her to no avail, and called for Eir.

It wasn’t the sirens that had woken Sigyn. Pain—*torturous* pain—had pulled her from deep dreamless sleep. Lifting her arm, wincing at the effort, she looked down at her side. She felt as though the skin across her ribs had ripped open. Every muscle in her body burned as though she’d been sparring for hours, and a stabbing sensation was shooting down her thigh. Crying, she clawed at the throbbing limb, and despite the agony, she pushed herself from the bed, her wretched sobs nearly as loud as the sirens.

“Sif...need...my armor!” she gasped, choking on her words, hissing as she pulled her thin and useless robe off.

Sif grabbed the armor draped across the chair at the window and helped her into the still bloodied and somewhat shredded material. Eir, along with a team of healers, dashed into the room with pain enders and checked the stitches in her stomach. The excruciating pain subsided as the enders surged through her veins, and grabbing Sif, she ran through the door ignoring the protesting cries of the healers.

“Loki and Thor,” Sigyn croaked, trying to catch her breath, willing her legs to run through the palace, “are on the bifrost. *Loki...is injured. I can feel it.*” Fire coursed through her veins, her magic pushing her forward when her muscles begged to stop. Loki had saved her life repeatedly. It was high time that she saved *his*.

“The Hawks!” Sif, struggling to keep up with the faster Vanir, pointed at Gylfi’s regiment chasing a few hundred Jotuns running to the bridge.

The women stared wide eyed as they ran. Frost giants were also coming *through* the bifrost, it’s blazing light shooting into the observatory. She saw a flash of green accompanied by a fiery blast of light, her heart stopping in terror at the sight. Loki and Thor were surrounded—*Oh dear gods, NO!*

Seething, she ran faster, and bursting through the gates, running for what felt like hours, they finally caught up to the Hawks at the edge of the bridge. Murder in her blackened eyes, she let go of the control she’d been using for two months to keep her dangerous magic in check. Nostrils flared, smoke pooled at her feet and seeped from her fingers. She was absolutely going to *roast* those giants.

---

~The Bridge~

Loki had been stabbed not once, but *twice* in the same thigh, and it was taking everything in him to stay on his feet as Thor pummeled through the twenty Jotuns that stood between them. Grabbing hold of his big brother, Loki breathed a shallow sigh of relief as Thor flew them out of the observatory, landing them just in front of what was left of Gylfi’s regiment who had finally made it to the bridge. A part of him, the weaker part, wished that Thor would have taken him back to Sigyn, but he was no coward. He wouldn’t run from this fight.

Yanking Gylfi by his gold cape, nearly doubling over in agony, Loki hissed, “What the *Hel* happened?! How did they get past you?! You are *Crimson Hawks!* The fiercest warriors in all of Asgard! And you let them just...” his words trailed off at the sight of twenty or so giants running for the palace. “The *casket!* Send a platoon after them!” He yelled, pointing at them.

Nodding, the captain turned and barked the order before answering. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty! They came in waves, and after each wave, they iced the ground behind them! Our horses kept slipping! We had to abandon them and run on-foot! We would have used the gunships if we’d had any pilots still alive!”

Jaw set, Loki fought the urge to roll his eyes. What had the captain expected? Had he thought the giants would just walk up to them and *surrender*? There was no time and no need for a lecture or an argument as Jotuns continued to flood the bridge. Was their *entire realm* charging into Asgard?! For Hel’s sake, if only Heimdall would have followed the



order from Thor rather than waiting for a direct command from him! What precious time had been lost? *Twenty minutes?* Jotunheim could have been *ripped apart* in that amount of time! The portal shield could have actually worked! His body shook with a torturous combination of fear and anger. They were all going to die.

He pressed his lips together, so no one would see how badly the bottom one was trembling—*Keep. Fighting.*

Ramming the blunt end of Gungnir into the bridge, he made the silent call to the destroyer to defend the vault. Hopefully, the Jotuns headed for the casket wouldn't make it that far. Hopefully, the hawk platoon would kill them before they could breach the palace walls. He refused to think that his mother could still be killed after all she'd been through.

*And Sigyn!—oh gods, Sigyn!*

He shunned the thought of his would-be queen lying in a pool of her own blood. Sif would protect her. Wouldn't she? She'd said she would. He hoped she would keep her word. He absolutely would *not* lose Sigyn. But what could he do? They couldn't close the bridge! Every time he'd attempted to melt the ice encased sword in the rudder with a hot blast from Gungnir, the giants had refrozen it!

He cursed under his breath as the Jotuns who had been running toward the observatory to take down the king and his brother turned around and charged back toward them. The well-trained Hawks were *finally* fighting like the remarkable warriors that they were, but the frost giants were too many. Loki continued his seemingly never-ending plight of impaling and beheading and shooting bursts of magic from his hands and casting illusions, exhausting every bit of strength he had, and just when he thought he would succumb to fatigue and his agonizing injuries, he felt *her*.

Intense heat sent an overwhelmingly euphoric sensation through his overtaxed muscles. His ribs, his lung, the gash in his side, the stab wounds in his thigh, the utter *torment* of it all faded in an instant. Searching for her smaller frame amidst the sea of giants, dodging attacks from every side, he spotted her easily, her telltale black smoke swirling around her. Frost giants went up in flames, their deafening shrieks filling the atmosphere, with every step she took. They couldn't even *touch* her. It was the most breathtaking display of power he'd ever seen. She didn't have to *do* anything! The magic was just *flowing* out of her effortlessly.

Her power became his, the heat of her magic now in *his* bones, giving him the strength to keep fighting, and he ran after her, blasts of green light killing each Jotun who stood between them. The number of frost giants swarming around him was staggering. He lost

his balance momentarily, nearly falling to the ground, when the bridge shook beneath his feet. Was their weight so great that it could do that? How was that even possible? He'd thought the bridge was an *immovable* structure! Then it happened again. And again. And *again*.

Boom.

Boom.

*Boom.*

It felt like an earthquake, powerful aftershocks rippling over and over under his feet as he struggled through the battling armies to reach her. What the Hel was happening. What—were they all jumping up and down at once?! It was absurd and terrifying. Was the bridge going to break and send them crashing into the sea?! It continued trembling beneath him as he finally caught up to her, keeping just enough distance so that he wouldn't go up in flames with the giants.

*"SIGYN!"*

Hearing her name on the lips of her favorite voice, she turned to see Loki, his soldiers battling with him not ten yards from her. Her fiery rage halted briefly, the smoke ceasing, and a Jotun grabbed her from behind. It was agonizing, and her resulting scream was louder and shriller than any sound she'd ever made.

*"PLEASE!"*

Her skin blackened beneath its touch, searing frostbite covering the exposed flesh of her arms through the weak spots in her armor. Still shrieking in anguish against the giant, she thrashed and kicked wildly. Panic started to set in the longer she struggled against the Jotun. She couldn't set the creature on fire because it was wrapped around her, absolutely *crushing* her.

Eyes on her, Loki roared, *"SIG!"*

His voice rose above the battle. He was close, but not close enough to free her of the tightening arms around her body. There were two more giants to get through until he could rip apart the Jotun that was killing her. *Just two more —come ON!*

His tormented cry for her broke through her panic, and shaking her head, gathering her wits, teeth clenched, she grabbed the black dagger from her thigh holster and thrust the

blade into the giant's side. Howling in pain, it released its hold, and spinning to face it, she stabbed it through its temples. When Loki's arms came around her waist suddenly, she cried out, the wound in her stomach sending shooting pain in all directions. Everything blurred for a second.

Those beautiful emerald eyes piercing her own. That mischievous (and ridiculously out of place) smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. He was there. He was *alive*. They *hadn't* killed him. She wanted to kiss him, to throw her arms around him and bury her face in his hair, but there were still Jotuns (*hundreds of them!*) to kill. Reality was a *terrible* thing. Nodding once at each other, they spun around, now back-to-back. Gungnir in his hands, her dagger at the ready, black smoke and green light swirled around them. They could end this. They *would* end this. A flash of red, accompanied by the hollow heavy sound of Mjolnir, and the bridge convulsing under her feet pulled her mind from the fight.

One boom.

Two.

Three.

Each tremor building in strength steadily, she scanned the battling bodies for the source, and seeing the thunder god pounding the bridge with the hammer, she gaped. *That's* what had been shaking the bridge?! It had been *Thor?! What was he doing?!* The Hawks' strength had combined with their magic to give them the edge, and the giants' numbers had been dwindling. Asgard actually stood a chance to win this battle (a *good* chance) and yet Thor was going to break the bridge—*He was going to break the fucking bridge*. Loki had seen it, too, and throwing each other pointed looks, the pair charged toward the golden prince, shouting for him to stop. Either Thor didn't hear them, or he was blatantly ignoring them.

One final pound of the hammer...

*BOOM...*

and the bridge broke.

The explosion sent them two hundred yards into the atmosphere, shards of jagged prismatic rainbow bridge slicing through the skin of their cheeks, limbs, and torsos. Their ears bled from the ultrasonic boom as the observatory caved in on itself before falling over the edge of the Eternal Sea. Everything moved in slow motion then.

She and Loki were falling, their backs to the space below them. Her stomach now in her throat, she choked, unable to breathe from the pressure. Loki was *so close* to her. If she had reached out, if she'd *thought* to, if she'd been able to *think* anything other than '*oh gods, we're going to die,*' she might have been able to grab his hand. Frost giants and Hawks alike had been tossed as though they weighed no more than dried leaves into the deep dark abyss of space.

Crying out in anguish (*something had to have broken!*) she caught the spearhead of Gungnir just as she crashed onto the edge of the shattered bridge. Eyes struggling to focus, she saw Loki, hanging below, desperately clinging to the other end of the spear, knuckles white, blood seeping from deep cuts in his face, watery eyes squinting. He was mouthing her name, fear rolling off him in waves.

Barely breathing, she gripped the spear tighter and pleaded, "*Pull....up....*"

It was only a whisper. Her voice had been spent on screaming. She'd screamed enough in one day to last a lifetime. No—Longer than a lifetime. Her screams could have spanned the length of *eternity*. She never wanted to make the wretched sound again. Holding on to Gungnir with all the strength left in her wounded and exhausted body, she tried to scoot back further on the bridge. If she could pull the spear back, and if he could just *hold on*, then she could drag him onto the bridge. Then they could go to Eir. Everything would be fine then. They'd live to fight another day.

*Die* another day.

"Don't let go, Loki....hold on."

She looked around desperately. She needed help. He was too heavy. She couldn't do this alone. Below her, she saw his legs kicking as he tried to use the momentum to pull up. The movement only yanked her further down.

*Dear gods, no!!*—she wasn't going to be able to save him.

*"Help! Someone please! Help us!"*

Her *too weak* screams fell on deaf ears. Only corpses littered the bridge as far as she could see. Where was Fenrir?! Had he been killed at some point during the battle in the palace unbeknownst to her? Or Sinir? Either beast could have pulled her back, Loki with her! *Or Thor?! Where was that fucking blond brute?! That bastard had done this! It was his fault! Every single moment of this vile day had been his doing, and he needed to fix it! If only he would fly by and grab his brother before it was too late!*

Face screwing up in pain, Loki clenched his teeth, trying to move one hand over the other and climb the two feet (*just two godsdamn feet!*) of spear that stood between him and his salvation. But the muscles in his arms were spent. He'd never felt the weight of his own body to this extent. His injuries were too great. He shook his head, tears spilling down his cheeks. *This is it*, he thought as his eyes fixed on hers. He couldn't do it....and she couldn't do it for him.

*"Please, Loki....don't let go, love...."* It was barely a whisper, her lip trembling as she met his hopeless gaze. He was going to fall, and there was *nothing* she could do. He was slipping. Inch by *cruel* inch. His silent words echoed in her thoughts as his grip failed.

*I love you.*

In that moment, her entire world shattered around her. Everything came crashing down as each second that she'd spent with him flashed in front of her.

The eyes she'd seen in her dreams in Vanaheim. Their first meeting in the throne room. The night meal when he'd told her she was no match for him. The sight of him standing, heartbroken, in the shattered library window. The fight with Sif in the arena. The way he'd defended her to Odin. Saving her from rock trolls in Niðavellir. Seeing Sif's new hair fanned across his fingers in Eitri's dungeon. The all too brief first kiss before Odin's ridiculous '*no touching*' sentence. The night they'd finally slept together. And *every* time after. Magic lessons in the snow. Riding with him on Sinir. Laughing and tipsy at night meal. When he'd confronted Theoric in the library. Dancing at the ball. Attacking him in his chambers, her anger melting his chandelier. Him standing on the steps at the disastrous coronation and finding her in the queen's chambers after. When he'd struck Thor because he'd called her his '*pet.*' Comforting him after he'd discovered his true parentage. Watching Theoric hand Gungnir to him. When he'd appeared at the top of the cliff in Vanaheim, trying to save her from the fall that would kill her. Waking in his arms after he'd brought her back from Helheim. When he'd finally told her that he loved her. The moment he'd asked her to be his queen. Seeing his face over the flames in Odin's chambers after she'd killed Laufey and saved Frigga. Fighting back-to-back with him on the bridge.

And *this*.

This horrifying image of him hanging weakly from his kingly spear, his body bleeding and broken, his face stained with sweat and tears and dried blood. *This* would be the last time she saw him. She found her voice then, the force of her tormented scream burning her chest, her hand reaching for him.

*"LOKI!!!!"*

Sobbing, she watched, utterly devastated, as he fell from her, arms stretched up toward her, his body fading from her sight, becoming smaller and smaller until the blackness of space overtook him. She couldn't close her eyes. She *wouldn't*. Staring into the dark that had swallowed him whole, she shook uncontrollably. She would never see him again. Never hear his voice again. Never touch him again. The great love of her immortal life had died right before her eyes. *Her* Loki was dead because *she'd been too weak to save him*. Unable to move, she listened to the deafening roar of the Eternal Sea falling, just as Loki had, over the edge of the realm and into darkness.

## Chapter 8: The Desert

*~Deep Space, Unknown~*

**W**hy why why *why*? Why did it have to end this way? And end so soon? After everything he'd done for Asgard? After everything he'd done for everyone? After everything he had been through? After everything Sig had been through?

Her face haunted Loki. Her screams as he'd fallen played like a broken record in his mind. It was the last thing he'd heard. The distorted twisted sound had rung in his damaged ears, the explosion having practically destroyed his eardrums. Not even the tumultuous sea roaring beneath him, nor his panicked thoughts of being unable to climb two pathetic feet to save himself from the miserable death that surely awaited him in the deep unknown below had drowned out her devastating cry for him.

How could that be his last memory? What unspeakable injustice was this? Gods, the hours he'd wasted trying to save this realm! The sleep he'd lost! Trying to do good by his parents. By his halfwit of a brother.

Thor.

Loki had been so happy to see Thor come home, but now? Now all he could think was that his big brother was just an insufferable fool who had taken everything from him. So Thor had killed the Jotuns (brilliant!) but who cared when along with them, he'd flat out murdered Gylfi's entire regiment with that idiotic stunt he'd pulled. To think, that blond cretin would replace him as king of Asgard. It was appalling. Asgard's future was quite bleak now. And his beautiful Sigyn would be an unwilling part of it—nothing was more tragic.

He'd struggled and fought endlessly to crawl out of the dark. The self-pity. The rage. The jealousy that had plagued him. The loneliness of the unwanted son. The lies. The devastating lies. He'd made such great strides out of that darkness with Sig's help. He was no longer unwanted. No longer worthless. Finally worthy. Finally strong. Finally loved. Her love had been his saving grace, and he had loved her in return. Gods, had he been in love with her. With every cell in his body, he had adored her.

Now here he was. Falling. Falling forever. Just falling right back into that darkness, quite literally. Oh, the wretched irony.

Despite the lack of oxygen...no not the lack of, but the complete absence of it, he could still feel everything. His senses hadn't given up yet. He wished they would. His lungs burned, and his heart still thudded brutally within his chest.

At what point would his vital organs finally throw in the towel? What were they even running on? He could go without oxygen for about two hours. He'd tested it at Silver Lake with Thor and had beaten him. That had been a most glorious day. Besting Thor. His murderer. How he hated him. With every fiber of his being he hated him.

But it had to have been more than two hours now, and he was still falling. Not floating. No, he most certainly was not floating because he wasn't weightless. He was heavier than he'd ever been. When the tips of his fingers had grazed the end of the spear at that final dismal moment, when all he could focus on was Sig's face, drained of all its color and drenched with tears, he'd thought that the fall would slow eventually, and his body would pass into Helheim since Valhalla was an impossible dream.

But his descent was as speedy as ever. The abuse his body was suffering from was endless. It wasn't just the gash in his side or the broken ribs or the stab wounds in his thigh anymore. Now he also had the pit of his stomach in his throat—it had been for what felt like ages. If there had been anything in his gut, he would have expelled it hours ago. Of course, it constantly felt like he was going to. He had that horrible sensation, that moment when his mouth filled with saliva, ready to vomit, but without relief. As though that wasn't enough, his head also felt like it was in a vice.

How great was the air pressure in this never-ending darkness? Was that the right word? Could he call it air? He'd been able to catch a breath, but he'd wished he hadn't. Whatever it was, it was the most toxic thing that had ever entered his lungs, and it was of such an unbearable heaviness and thickness that it was pressing in on him from every direction. Positively bone crushing. He'd been taught that space was a vacuum. Absent of all chalcogens, halogens, and noble gases.

*How am I possibly able to recall those terms RIGHT NOW?*

Why was his brain still functioning at all? It was absurd. His mind was tormenting him. He didn't want to see anymore. Hear anymore. Breathe anymore. Think anymore. He didn't want to feel anymore. He just wanted it to be over. He needed this to be over. But it wasn't over. Deep space was not a void. The darkness had an atmosphere. It was an atmosphere. A deadly one at that. What noxious mix of elements surrounded him? This



was torture. Was this death? Shouldn't death be an event. One event? Apparently not. This was one long stretched out eternity of dying over and over.

He wished he would just land. On something. On anything! He didn't care where because the fall was becoming even more unbearable, the agony intensifying. He was no longer just falling fast. It felt like he was being pulled (dragged, more accurately) through the black abyss, which was somehow becoming blacker. Why wouldn't his brain shut down?! For mercy's sake, just die already! Whatever force it was that was drawing him down was impossibly stronger at his feet than it was at his head, and the rest of his body couldn't keep up with the gravity at his feet. It was as though he'd been bound to a rack, his body being stretched too thin.

*Please just fucking die!*—Each cell was slowly being torn from the one next to it, and he could feel every single tortuous moment of it. He would have screamed if he could. Sigyn's face continued to flash across his darkening vision. This was the worst possible end to his existence. Never could he have imagined something so atrocious being inflicted upon his body. When would he finally break apart?!

*MERCY, PLEASE!!*—His consciousness finally gave up just as he smashed into something solid.

---

Something was tugging on him. Dear gods, was he still alive? How the fuck was that even possible? Had he finally made it to Hel?

He didn't care what horrors might await him. He wasn't falling anymore, and that was all that mattered. He was still in an unbelievable amount of pain, which subdued the relief of no longer falling through the unending expanse of space. He wanted to see himself. He needed to see that his body hadn't been stretched to the point of legitimately *ripping* apart. That had been the sensation, but he felt as though he still had all his parts.

Black eyelashes barely fluttering, he struggled to open his eyes. Amazingly, rather than opening them to pure blackness, a faint blue light glowed behind a shadow that was kneeling before him. He couldn't make sense of anything that his brain was attempting to process. The shadow was moving and making... disturbing sounds. He now knew for sure that he had all his parts for the shadow was rubbing itself all over him. If he'd had the ability, he would have cringed.

It ruffled his hair. Its breath was on his cheek and moved down his neck. Loki wanted to push it away, to shout at it to stop. If only he were strong enough to send a burst of magic

into its throat. Its hands (was that what to call them?) slid down his chest and around his waist. He felt paralyzed. All he could do was lay there on his back, unable to speak, and feel everything this thing was doing to him.

Oh shit, maybe this was worse than falling. It was unclasping his armor. Why was it undressing him?! His mind went to the worst places, thinking of what this creature might be about to do to him. His torso now exposed, he determined that the thing was reptilian. Skin like snake scales ghosted over his stomach. What was that sound? Ah—It was the sound of his own retching.

Brilliant. Dry heaving would make this experience that much more pleasant. Although, if he was capable of gagging, then maybe his other muscles would start to work, too. Silver linings.

It tugged his cape forcefully from his shoulders, the movement jostling his ribs which were clearly still shattered. He yelped at the sudden sharp pain. There. His voice was coming back. At the sound of his weak cry, the thing jumped back. It was probably too hopeful of Loki to think that maybe he'd scared it off. Maybe it had only wanted him if he was dead. He was clueless as to what exactly it did want from him. Well, not clueless. Stripping him of his garments was a pretty solid clue.

Oh no—That was an awful thought. Maybe it just wanted his garments because they were gold. Maybe it was a little harmless thief. In this place. Wherever he was. Whatever this thing was.

He sniffed at the air. He could breathe. It didn't smell like a bed of roses, but it wasn't toxic or nauseous like the abyss had been. Where had he landed? The surface he was splayed on felt like rock, and that dim blue light, as his eyes were able to focus more, looked vaguely like a moon. Maybe. Ugh—He cringed. It was making strange grunting sounds. What the Hel was this thing and what was it doing?! It was now yanking off his boots. He tried to kick at it, but it was useless for he couldn't move his legs. Now barefoot, he shivered as it walked its fingers up his legs. How could this be happening to him?! The once king of Asgard was being assaulted by whatever this thing was without any hope of defending himself!

Its hands now at the waistband of his breeches, attempting to tug them over his narrow hips, something in Loki snapped. This shadowy, snakish, beast was not going anywhere near the parts of him that gave evidence that he was, without a doubt, male. Absolutely not. He may never see Sigyn again, but she was the only person who would ever have access to that region of his body. His brain shifted into the final gear, his palm colliding

with what he hoped was its nose. It was, and it spurted disgusting black sludge all over him when it broke. Now he most assuredly *could* cringe.

A voice came from behind his head. "Ah, so you can move."

Loki looked out the corner of his eye to see the person who was speaking to him. It was standing upright. Two arms. Two legs. One head. Grey flesh, very ugly, but manlike in its build.

"You are trespassing," it said, sounding unbelievably bored.

Loki wanted to spit a sarcastic slight at the speaking creature, but his energy was spent, and he needed to conserve it. He didn't know when that grotesque shadow creature would try to put its hands back on him, and he needed to be able to deliver another blow if it did.

The gravelly voice continued, "Can you speak, Asgardian?"

His eyes blew wide, and Loki hoped the thing hadn't seen it. It knew who he was? How? What was this place? He decided it best not to question its calling him Asgardian, and clearing his throat, he managed a raspy reply.

"What is this place?"

"Welcome to the desert," it snorted and swept its arms out.

Loki glared sideways at it. Did it think he was in the mood for jests? He aimed his gaze back at the shadowy thing that had touched him. It was keeping its distance—Good. It had better stay that way. Brow in a deep furrow, Loki winced, hissing as he rolled over, now prone. His hair was soaked with sweat and hung in clumps around his face as he raised his raven head to get a better look at the voice that was mocking him.

"Does this desert have a proper name?"

He stopped himself before calling the grey thing 'monster.' After all, this creature made the frost giants look like beauty queens. The thing was positively repulsive.

"It does," it replied with a nod.

Rolling his eyes (was it just stupid or toying with him?) Loki sighed. "And?"

It tilted its head sideways and clucked its tongue. "You did not ask what the name was. Only if it had one."

Loki prayed to the stars above (not that they gave a damn) for his muscles to function properly. He was quite sure that he could snap its gruesome neck with no effort at all if his body were firing on all cylinders. He pushed up, his arms no longer feeling like rubber, and managed to get to his knees. How much more energy would it take to stand?

"Very well," he said, speaking through his teeth. "What do you call this desert?"

The thing shook its head and showed its teeth. It might have been a smile. It was too dark for Loki to tell. What he could tell was that they were pointed and yellow.

"You must earn the right to that information," it said, inclining its head.

Loki tried to push to his feet, but the weight on his arms was too much. The gravity was greater here than in Asgard. His five hundred pounds felt like seven hundred. Even his hair seemed to weigh too heavily on his shoulders. It was hard to hold his head up. Jaw set, nostrils flared, he swallowed thickly. If he'd been able, he would have launched himself at this savage being and torn its heart (did it have one?) right out of its chest. Infernal thing was clawing at his nerves. It was lucky that he wasn't at full strength. Out of the corner of his eye, the shadow creature came back into view.

Face still down, Loki turned his head, snarling, "Do not touch me again, or I will end you."

It backed off slightly. His voice, deep and smooth, though laced with a throaty edge to it, was returning to him. And thank the Norns for that, at least, since his voice was his most useful (and only) weapon now. Mesmerizing. Terrorizing. Alluring. Menacing. His voice combined with his intense emerald stare made it easy to get exactly what he wanted, or what he most certainly did not want in this case. It was reminiscent of his standoff with the rock trolls. When he'd saved Sigyn.

*Oh gods, Sig*—He shook his head, fighting back tears. Eternity without her would be a greater punishment than any tortures they could concoct.

"It has orders, Asgardian," the grey thing said, nodding in the shadow's direction, and Loki felt a twinge of panic.

Orders? Orders to do what? It had been stripping him of his clothes because it had been ordered to do so? Ordered by who? Or what? And why? To intimidate? To disgrace? To torture? He shuddered at the other possible 'whys' roaming through his thoughts. Maybe he could turn Jotun and give the thing a solid taste of frostbite if it attempted to remove his breeches again. How had he done it when he'd dived into the falls to save Sig? Had he been able to because he'd been supremely motivated? Well, he was plenty motivated now, but it

wasn't working! This was madness! He'd never been so vulnerable in his life. He wiggled his fingers, hoping to see a little green spark at the tips, but his magic was still too tired. He trained his eyes on the shadow. Every little move it made, Loki's eyes followed.

The grey thing continued, "It is to remove your garments."

"Clearly," Loki replied tightly, and still watching the shadow, he managed to plant one foot on the ground. "For what purpose?" Just a bit more and he could use the strength of his legs to stand upright. From his estimate, the grey thing was a good foot shorter than he was. Nothing like a little height to intimidate.

"You shall see," it said and nodded at the shadow.

Loki couldn't react fast enough as the thing barreled into him, pinning him supine beneath it. No, his ribs! —They'd started to set only to be rebroken at the blow. He gasped, unable to breathe, at the agony. The muscles in his legs roared to life then, adrenaline doing its job finally, and he kicked at it wildly. It had its disgusting claw like fingers on the waistband of his pants again. He spit in its face as he twisted his hips out of its grasp, and like some sort of miracle, his magic surged in the pit of his stomach. Headbutting the thing, it staggered back, and he scrambled to his feet sending a burst of bright green light at its chest. It flew back twenty feet into a rock, the gratifying snap of its spine echoing joyfully in his ears, before slumping forward and falling to the ground. From behind him, the grey creature laughed and clapped its hands slowly.

"Yes. There it is. He said you were a sorcerer. Apparently, you just needed a bit of motivation."

Its laugh was an awful sound, somewhere between a newborn's cry and a hacking cough. Loki winced and pressed a hand to his side, blood seeping from the open wound again.

"Who?" He wanted to be more eloquent. One-word responses were far below him. Pathetic.

It punctuated each word of the cryptic reply slowly, showing its hideous teeth. "You shall see."

Pissed beyond belief, Loki leered at the monster. "Fuck—" he took a raspy breath before finishing his less than clever retort "-you."

It made that horrible sound again before approaching him, and Loki fought to stay standing. Yes, it was far shorter than he was, but something about its demeanor was more threatening than he'd expected. It reached for him, and he reeled back violently. He most certainly did not want its leathery grey hands anywhere near him. Every one of his senses was overwhelmed with disgust.

It shook its head and said, "It did not serve you well to kill a bestia."

Loki sucked in his cheeks, rolling his eyes. "Is that what you call that thing that was intent on removing my breeches?"

The grey man, or thing, whatever it was gestured for him to follow. "Come."

Still gripping his side protectively, Loki huffed, "And if I refuse?"

It shrugged, its mouth turning into something resembling a smirk. "I wouldn't suggest it."

Loki nodded to the dead bestia. What a dull name. That was the best they could come up with? Midgardian latin for beast? He rolled his eyes—Simpletons.

"I won't ask what it had intended to do with me."

"Nothing sexual if that's what you are insinuating. Bestia are created in a lab and do not have the parts to mate. They are genderless."

It laughed again causing Loki to cringe, though relief flooded his veins. "Considering its actions and your vague responses to my questions, I think that line of thinking was not unwarranted."

Chuckling, it nodded, pointing its finger at him. "Still, it did not serve you well to kill it."

His strength was failing him as the adrenaline rush came to an end. "I care not," he said and hung his head, feeling terribly heavy again.

It shook its head and wagged its finger at him. "I will have to punish you for it. You trespass and then kill a member of our army. Not wise choices."

Loki would not defend himself. As though they cared if he had fallen through space and just happened to land on their lovely little desert island. Or that he was the king of Asgard. Or, at least, that he had been. They knew all they needed to know. That he was Asgardian. That he was a sorcerer. He wouldn't give them anything further.

Instead, he merely smirked at its back. "Who said I was wise?"

It grabbed his hand before he could dodge from its grasp and pushed him in front. "Come, and do not even think of using that handy magic of yours against me."

Loki couldn't stand the thought of it being behind him, out of his sight. "How can I lead the way if I know not where you want me to go?"

Stumbling over rocks, he wished that he had his boots still. His feet were going to be thoroughly bloodied by the time he reached his destination. It said nothing but just pushed him in its desired direction every so often. Eventually, he came to blue lit stairs. It was a good thing they were lit, albeit dimly, because he could barely see anything. He couldn't hear anything either. The sensory deprivation was nauseating... or perhaps the air was just growing thin. He paused and doubled over, trying to catch his breath. Gasping, he winced, his side screaming at him with each breath. His lung was probably fine, but the damn ribs just couldn't get a break. He almost laughed at the pun.

*Sig would've liked that one.*

Pushing off his knees, holding back tears at the thought of her, he stood and continued the descent down the blue stairs. They seemed to go on forever. How far down did they go? He reached the final step and walked reluctantly down a frigid rock corridor, the walls on either side of him ascending so high that he couldn't see where they stopped. What he could see was the distant stars. No ceiling in this place. Open air. Just walls, albeit ridiculously tall walls, of stone. He shivered, painfully aware that he was clad only in his leather breeches and nothing more.

The grey man's voice startled Loki. "Stop. We have arrived," it ordered, gesturing to an opening in the rock to his left.

Stepping reluctantly past the threshold, Loki sniffed at the cold air, his shivering turning to downright shaking. His breath white against the blackness of the room, he looked up and was met with blackness. He'd hoped that this place also had no ceiling, but hoping for anything at the moment was pointless. The wall opposite the opening to the hallway had an array of tiny holes in the rock letting in the dimmest of starlight. Just enough so he could see his hand in front of his face. Without warning, bright white light flooded the room, his arm coming up over his eyes protectively. Shuffling of feet broke the silence, and then three pairs of scaly grey hands were on him.

"Take your hands off me!"

He shoved at them wildly, but it was to no avail for he had no energy left. One of them, he knew now that it was another bestia, had its arms around his waist from behind, his arms pinned inside the hold. Another was putting a gag on him. And, very unfortunately, the other was pulling the breeches down his legs. Twisting his torso, fighting against the one behind him, he kicked the one who had successfully removed his final garment.

What was happening?! What did these savages want with him?! Why couldn't he at least keep his pants?! He had already been freezing! Angry tears were in his eyes when they dropped him to the ground without a word, ripping the gag back out and taking his last shred of dignity with them. Bringing his knees to his chest, he wrapped his arms tightly around them, and dropping his head to his knees, he fought back sobs.

The grey thing (man?) spoke, the sound grating on Loki's ears. "Asgardian rags have no place here."

Loki looked up at the voice. Still standing near the opening, the grey man had an unreadable expression. Loki's response was laced heavily with sarcasm.

"Will I be clad in something more native to this charming desert?" He scowled at the word 'desert,' remembering that Thor had been dropped in a very different kind of desert and had made friends and received kindness during his short exile to Midgard.

I hate him.

The grey man (yes, man, sort of) produced that odd might-be-smile and shook his head. "You must earn that right," he said, and with that, he disappeared down the corridor and a glass barrier slid across the opening.

Loki dropped his head again. No blankets. No clothes. No windows. He looked around. No toilet. No washbasin. Not even a hole in the rock or a bucket. Nothing. He was the only thing taking up space in the room. Naked and alone and freezing. Just like he had been when Odin had found him as a baby. He'd fallen right back into darkness. The sobs he had been fighting since he'd landed on this wretched rock broke through the barrier of tightly sealed lips, and he slumped forward, rolling to his side, curling into a ball. A sobbing, naked, pathetic ball of weakness.



## Chapter 9: Remember Remember (This Hurts Like Hel)

~One month later, Asgard~

**W**hat was that phrase the Midgardians used? —*You never know what you've got til it's gone.* Oh, how sad, but wasn't that always true? Loki's death had been nothing short of disastrous to Asgard. The people were genuinely grief stricken for the loss of the king who had battled courageously against their mortal enemies, for the king who had saved Odin and Frigga from sure death, for the king who had, supposedly, killed Laufey.

No one knew the pivotal role that Sigyn had played in the Jotun king's death, and she preferred that. She had no desire for accolades. She had no desire at all. Nothing mattered—*Not anymore.*

All Asgard knew now that they had misjudged Loki entirely. Suddenly every little honorable thing he had done, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant— conjuring butterflies to release at weddings, writing Odin's best political orations, producing the fireworks for the harvest festivals, for instance —was brought to light. It was as though he'd never been the dark prince, the mischief maker, the prankster. Everything now suggested he'd been loved even more than *Thor*. Too little, Asgard. And *far* too late.

The citizens, typically clad in every color of the rainbow, had become a sea of green. Banners embroidered with serpents hung from the windows. Children wore little homemade golden horns on their heads. Loki's favorite drink, equal parts persimmon cider and single malt, which had been dubbed '*The Trickster*' was the most purchased drink, even more so than mead, in every tavern across the city. People bargained for daggers rather than swords. Barbers even reported an increase of black henna dye requests at their shops. And to think...all he had to do was *die*.

Sigyn stared across the Eternal Sea, watery eyes glazed over, at nothing as a funeral pyre worthy of a king was prepared on Loki's sailing vessel at the palace gates. It had been a month since his fall. Apparently, Asgardian funerals required lengthy preparations. That, and they'd had to throw together a coronation ceremony for Thor—*that bastard*.

Not that it had been a celebration in the slightest. He certainly wasn't receiving *praise* for breaking the bifrost and killing Gylfi's entire regiment, Loki along with them. He'd

obliterated the frost giants, but at what cost? No, that ceremony had been about as somber as a funeral, and he'd known it. She'd almost felt sorry for him—*almost*.

Thor's entire demeanor since Loki's death suggested contrition. He seemed lonely. The once arrogant prince she remembered, the prince who'd been banished to Midgard was all but gone. He had looked genuinely pained when his mother had told him that Loki was dead.

Shuddering against the cold winter gusts, Sigyn scowled. But what right did *Thor* have to feel pain or grief? He had the *hammer!* He could have *saved* Loki! She'd hit him so hard, she'd broken her hand when she'd first seen him upon returning from the battle, and she'd continued her assault on him despite the broken bones. He'd not put up a fight, knowing he'd earned the attack. He'd been lucky that she hadn't roasted him right then and there. His mother's presence had been his only saving grace. The guards had hauled her away from him, literally kicking and screaming as she'd hurled a long slur of curses at him.

"*Was it worth it?!*" She'd screamed nearly unintelligible expletives until her vocal cords had given out. "*Was it worth it, you scoundrel?! You killed him! He's dead now because of YOU!*"

It wasn't her most shining moment, but what could they have expected? Stalking toward him in the great hall, she'd heard him *defending* his actions to his mother! Breaking the bridge had been, in his *genius* opinion, the only option, and when it had exploded, he'd flown straight to his mother. Understandable. *Somewhat* understandable, she corrected herself. How hard could it have been to swing by and grab his brother on the way?!

Oh, but where had he gone once he'd discovered that Frigga and Odin were safe? Had he returned to the bridge to aid survivors? To possibly save his friends or his own brother? No, of course not! He'd gone straight to Jane! To that *mortal* he'd been fucking on Midgard! Sigyn wasn't altogether sure why she hadn't killed the tiny little human yet. Jane deserved no less. The runt had yet to leave Asgard not only because of the broken bifrost, but apparently, her pathetic body required *ages* to recover, and she had taken up a seemingly permanent residence in the healing rooms. Oh, that she could find a secret portal to Midgard and throw the weakling right back where she'd come from.

And speaking of Midgard, how had that been a *proper* exile? Thor had returned practically as soon as he'd gone, and he'd found sexual gratification during his short stay! What sort of *justice* was that? After starting a war? A war that *Loki* paid the ultimate price for?! *No*—she refused to feel pity for Thor. She didn't care that he apologized profusely every day, and his eyes glistened incessantly with unshed tears, as well. He wasn't sleeping, he had no appetite, he was bested by weaker opponents in the arena regularly, and he received more

than a few cold hard glares from the nobles daily. *Good*—that murdering miscreant deserved it. Perhaps it was cruel, but she would *never* forgive him. Not for killing Loki. Not for *murdering* her only reason for living. Saving *one measly mortal* did not make him, in her opinion, worthy of the hammer.

*Wait*—frowning her brow, she narrowed her eyes at the sea before her. He no longer carried the hammer with him. Not since that horrible day. That was...*odd*. Had he decided for himself that he was no longer worthy of its weight? Or, more gratifyingly, was it stuck in his chambers because he could no longer lift it? *Hmm*. That was worth exploring. Another time. Thor didn't deserve another second of her thoughts.

Straightening her shoulders, she refocused her thoughts on the day at hand. This was a day to say goodbye to the love of her now miserable and *too long* life. Typically, Loki's body would have been laid upon the pyre and set off to sea. Of course, there was no *body*, so Frigga had insisted that something of import be the place holder. Sigyn had very nearly suggested that *she* lay in his place. She *did* want to die, after all. Truly, she had no idea how to go on.

'*One foot in front of the other*' was what everyone kept telling her. She scoffed. Oh, was it that easy? Well maybe if she cut off her feet, their advice would be rendered useless, and they would just shut up and let her die already. Regrettably, that wasn't an option. Frigga had made it quite clear that Sigyn was the closest thing she had to a daughter, even more so than Sif. The queen had hardly left her side over the past thirty days. Sigyn didn't understand how her woeful presence could be a comfort to Frigga, but somehow it was, and she hated the idea that she was the only thing keeping the queen from falling apart. She adored Loki's mother, and for certain, Frigga would have become her mother since Loki had offered her his hand. What an utter waste. What an utterly *devastating* waste. She'd been looking forward to having a real mother. Freya had been nothing of the sort.

After much discussion, the decision had been made. His horned helmet was to be burned in his place. Sigyn wasn't especially pleased with the choice, for she had no wish to part with *any* of his things. She'd even considered sleeping with the damned thing, cold and hard as it was, but wrapping herself in his unwashed clothes was the better option anyhow. They still carried that peppermint and woodsmoke smell that was so uniquely him. It wasn't as though she'd left his bed yet, and she had no intention to...*ever*. Each night, tangled in his black sheets, she practically drowned in his scent. She found herself reaching for him, craving his arms wrapping around her, his hips settling between her legs. She shook her head. Never again—she would *never* have that again.

All Asgard stood solemnly across the plains, the hills, the shores of the sea, gathered in the streets of the city, atop balconies. The entire realm (save for the *still* sleeping Odin—she rolled her eyes at the thought) was paying their respects as Loki's boat was ushered from the palace to the sea. Hundreds of white Muna lilies, native to Asgard, were cast by the onlookers onto the largest and most tragic pyre she'd ever seen—a pyre meant for a *king*. If she'd watched the procession (she kept her eyes on the sea) it would have broken her already shattered heart further. She would have said it was the saddest thing she'd ever seen, but nothing could be sadder than seeing Loki falling from her. She'd *died* that day.

Horns sounded mournfully across the city and through the valleys down to the shore and across the sea as the boat came to the final dock. Thor's new black cape, which he favored now over the brazen red one since Loki's fall, tossed about in the cold wind. He'd planted himself on the dock, face hidden under his silver winged helmet, right fist across his heart, left hand curled around Gungnir. Frigga mirrored him on the opposite side, clad in a dark green dress and similar black cape. Furrowing her brow, the queen shook her head at the empty pyre and placing Loki's helm atop the dried ash branches, she raised her hands and gold swirled around the boat, the white lilies transforming into the exact shade of Loki's emerald eyes. The queen and Thor made the final push, and the boat sailed into the sea gracefully, fitting for the most elegantly *graceful* man Sigyn had ever known. Asgard lit up in the night at that moment as memory lanterns, thousands upon thousands of them, were freed from the hands of the citizens, floating into the cold atmosphere.

Sigyn watched the lanterns as she sat astride Sinir for she'd sent her mare back to Vanaheim under her sister's keep. Loki's horse should have been released into the wild. It was the Asgardian way. One horse. One rider. For *life*. But she would have none of that. Sinir was *hers* now. She'd claimed the dark brown stallion for herself the moment she'd returned from the bridge.

Despite her extensive injuries, she'd forgone the healing rooms and had marched straight to the stables, seeking out the wounded steed. He'd looked lost, his black eyes shining with tears, somehow knowing that his master was gone. His injuries had been great during the battle, and he'd been separated from Loki, unable to get back to him. The explosion had sent the horse flying, too. He'd survived, *amazingly and thankfully*, landing on the soft sandy shore, but he hadn't been able to get up and run to save Loki when he'd heard Sigyn's cry for help, and it was clear that the horse felt as though he bore some responsibility for his master's death. She'd sobbed into his blood-streaked mane, trying to reassure him that none of this had been his fault. It had been to no avail, though. She'd seen it in the beast's eyes. He, too, was devastated, feeling the sting of failure, of survivor's guilt.

Despite the sorrow that clearly plagued Sinir, he was a living reminder of Loki, which she needed desperately, and she was thankful, to no one in particular, that he'd lived because the other of Loki's beasts had not been granted that same mercy. In the aftermath of the battle, after she'd claimed him as her own, after she'd attacked Thor, after the smoke had cleared, she'd helped clean up the massive destruction in the palace. Taking survivors to the healing rooms, removing corpses, and burning them, delivering the ashes to family members. She'd been the unfortunate soul who had discovered Theoric, covered in his own blood. Remembering that he'd been alone, with no family to speak of, she'd personally seen to his careful and respectful cremation. He should have had a vessel of his own to send off to sea, but the dead were too many. It would have taken a solid year to give proper funerals to all of them.

*So much worse* than finding Theoric, though, she'd found her personal protector. Fenrir's broken body had been sprawled amidst the scattered corpses in Loki's corridor. She'd struggled to pull the beast's heavy head into her lap and had sat there for a day—*A full day...unmoving*. Holding the great wolf that had been as much a savior to her as Loki had been in Vanaheim, she'd sobbed into his soft, albeit matted, black fur. Somehow, she'd known he was dead. Calling for help on the bridge and receiving no answer, she'd known.

Now clothed in her black Vanir armor, her quiver slung across her back, on a boulder twenty yards from the dock, she fixed a black and jade arrow to her longbow. It had been her charge, at *her* request, to light the pyre. How oft had her fire amazed Loki? Was it not fitting for her to amaze him one last time? The horns ceased their tragic bellowing finally, an otherworldly silence enshrouding the realm. Naught but the rush of the sea could be heard. Frigga's eyes alone moved to Sigyn; all other eyes fixed on the boat that was sailing to the edge of the sea beyond the broken bifrost.

Cheeks soaked with tears, grey green eyes struggling to focus past them, Sigyn brought the bow up, pulling the string taut. Smoke seeping from her fingers, the sharp black arrowhead lit ablaze, and she released it high into the air. Her black hair whipped about her face as a sudden gust of frigid wind rushed across the shore. The arrow landed right between the horns of his helm, lighting the branches instantly, and her breath caught in her chest as the boat made its way to the edge of the sea and tumbled over. There was no essence of his body, of his soul, to float into the sky and become stars. He wasn't there. He was still just...

*Gone.*

The horns sounded again, signaling the end of the ceremony, and the citizens made for the city. Frigga and Thor stood in their spots, not looking away from the sea. Sif and the warriors three, all of whom had miraculously survived as well (why had *Loki* been the one

who had to die?!) hesitated at the shore, but turned soon, trudging through the white moonlit sand back to the palace.

Hours later, Thor squeezed his mother's arm, silently beckoning her to return with him, but when she refused, he simply nodded and went on his way. She turned then to Sigyn who seemed frozen to her boulder, bow still in her hand, her knuckles white from the tight grip. Slowly, with careful steps, Frigga climbed to her *would be* daughter. Shivering, Sigyn didn't move. She couldn't. Her body, like Sinir's, was fixed in its place. It was all so final. So tragically *final*. Loki was no more than a memory to Asgard now. They'd said their goodbyes. They could now wipe their hands clean and move on—oh that she had that luxury.

Frigga stood beside her, her gaze following Sigyn's to the edge of the sea where the fiery boat had plummeted to its end. They remained silent, not daring to touch each other lest the contact break their stoic resolve. The two women who had adored Loki. The two women who would have died in his place in an instant. There they stood. Helpless. Unable to turn back time. Both wondering when the pain would stop. Years? Decades? Centuries? *Millennia?*

*No—it would never stop.*

That was, not until Sigyn finally died, most likely by her own hand. Maybe she would meet him in Helheim. Maybe he would remember her. *Doubtful* at best. Hela wouldn't let them near each other. Loki had fallen. Loki was dead. He was given a beautiful ceremony and honored as a king, and it was enough.

*For today.*

She couldn't think of tomorrow. Or the day after that. Or the day after that. Or the day after that.

*Or the day after...*

## Chapter 10: Green is for Life

~Loki's Prison Cell, The Desert~

**T**his *desert*, this lonely sterile rock was one long unending stretch of time. Time without daylight, thus rendering Loki's ability to track the time he'd been there nearly impossible.

When he'd first been stripped of his *Asgardian rags*, Loki had assumed the grey man would return eventually, but after losing his mind by counting seconds and minutes and hours and deciding that it had now been a month since his fall, he'd not had a single visitor. He'd not heard anything. No scuffles or footsteps or strange voices out in the hall. He'd not seen anything either. No shadows passing the glass door, no change in the dim starlight seeping through the holes in the wall. Nor had he received any food or water.

If he'd been mortal, he would have long since been truly dead. What he wouldn't give for the sweet release of death right now. Unfortunately, his body would require much longer to starve. He understood now why the room had no toilet or bucket or hole in the ground. He had nothing to empty from himself. And after all this time, he *still* had no garments. No blankets. *Nothing*. For thirty fucking days he'd been without food, clothes, water, light, visitors, or a bath.

He couldn't practice magic because it required energy, of which he'd been completely drained. If he'd been able, he would have conjured a double of himself. At least then he might have had the illusion of company. If he'd simply been on one of the nine realms, of which this desert clearly was not a part of, he could have conjured any living person he'd desired. Sighing heavily, he pictured creating Sigyn's replica. Shaking his head, he scolded himself silently.

*Just stop, Loki.*

But this place, wherever it was, was somehow different. It transcended his usual forms of magic. It clearly wasn't just the fact that he was tired and starving. Something else was confusing his insides. Sleep and the accompanying dreams were his only reprieve from slowly becoming more corpse than man. It was uncomfortable with only a rock surface to lay his head on, but he'd grown used to the lack of amenities in this sterile prison cell. His brain was still able to dream, thankfully. Whether they were pleasant or absolute *nightmares*, he welcomed them. For a few hours during a decent REM cycle, he would see something other than darkness. The dreams, the memories, they were the only things that

made him aware of himself as an actual person rather than a beast without any thoughts other than hunger or pain, both of which *never* ceased.

He sat upright, his back to the wall filled with tiny holes, facing the door. His head hung, his hair tangled and at his shoulder blades. Ankles crossed, his hands lay protectively in his lap, shielding his nakedness. Not that it mattered. No one had been here in a month. Eyes heavy, stomach still agonizingly empty, he succumbed to blessed sleep, hoping the images that flashed across the backs of his lids would be of Sigyn. Over the course of the month, his dreams had ranged from memories of Odin, Frigga, and Thor, to imagined battles and spells, and really any of the smallest most insignificant moments of his life. But if he'd dreamt them, he supposed that they must not have been so insignificant after all.

---

Odin was seated on a plush blue and yellow armchair in front of a roaring fire pit within his personal chambers. Thor on his knee and Loki at his feet, they looked up at the grey brown of their father's beard. The king addressed both boys, though his eyes were trained on his eldest.

"Your grandfather, my father, Bor, was a mighty warrior and king. Did I ever tell you that he abolished the dark elves?"

Aqua eyes wide with boyish delight, Thor thrust his fist into the air. "I shall be even mightier than he!"

Odin laughed heartily at the gesture, and turning his cheery gaze to Loki, he questioned the quietly smiling raven-haired boy.

"And what of you, my son? Shall you be as mighty as your brother?"

Loki pursed his lips before grinning widely. "Mightier." Loki's eyes danced at the happy chuckle from his father.

Piping up, Thor spoke pointedly to his little brother. "*Nuh uh!* Look how *small* you are, Loki! You'll *never* be as mighty as *me*."

Face falling, Loki stood to his feet and made for the door which transformed suddenly into one of the stable gates. Looking down at his feet, he noted they were much larger now and much further from his head. He'd grown from a young boy to a man over the course of two seconds. To his right, his father stood before one of the stalls, arms crossed, peering in.



Swallowing, Loki called out to him, "He is for you, Father. I discovered him in Vanaheim, half dead without his mother last year."

Odin turned at the sound of his voice, a puzzled look on his face before taking the reins of his new eight-legged steed and pulling him from the stall.

"You've been raising him ever since?" he asked, stroking the horse's muzzle.

Loki smiled. "Away from the city, yes."

"He is...*odd*," Odin said, the extra four legs on the animal clearly bemusing the king.

Chuckling softly, Loki shrugged, "Yes, I suppose he is, but he shall certainly be the fastest horse in all of Asgard. Probably in the nine! A king should have no less, don't you think?"

Nodding in agreement, the king placed his boot in the stirrup, and mounting the grunting horse, he offered Loki a small smile before taking off at full speed. After a few minutes of riding, grinning ear to ear, Odin returned to his son.

"Indeed, he *is* fast! Odd gift though he may be, he is truly mighty."

Odin dismounted and clapped him on the shoulder before turning at the sound of Thor's voice. The king hurried to his eldest and embraced him in a tight hug. Genuine smile faltering, Loki grabbed the reins of his *mighty* gift to Odin and pulled the horse back to the stables. The wrought iron gate of the stall melted under his grip, the stables fading entirely, and sudden heat overwhelmed him as the dirt ground of the stables became grass and the sound of clanking metal rang in his ears. Sweat beading on his face, eyes adjusting to the bright light of a hot summer day, he realized that he stood in the training arena. His own voice sounded in his ears. He hadn't meant to speak, but when he did, the sound was breathless.

"*Exhausting* day," Loki gasped, walking to the arena's main fountain. Breathing heavily, he rubbed an ache in his shoulder as blood seeped from a wound that Sif had dealt him during their sparring, which had lasted two hours, at *least*.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Thor, smiling hugely, appeared and punched him in the arm. "Very exhausting indeed! But you fought like a *man*, finally! It was about time that you bested Sif!"

Kneeling over the edge of the fountain, Loki splashed water on his face, ignoring the slight dig. Across the arena, the Crimson Hawks cheered. Looking up at the sound, Loki watched

as Odin descended the steps, eyes fixed on his sons, and crossed the field quickly to meet them.

“Father.” Bowing, Thor and Loki had spoken in accidental unison and turned to each other chuckling.

“Loki, I’m glad to see you here. The library is for women, not princes of Asgard,” Odin said flatly.

Loki fought a scowl. He didn’t want to show disdain for the comment lest he receive a sound verbal lashing, of which he’d had at least ten in the past two days alone—Hadn’t he? He shook his head. Time was a bit... *fuzzy*...now. Looking around, confused, he pinched the bridge of his nose. He wasn’t sure how he’d ended up in the training arena in the first place. He’d been in the stables not two seconds ago.

Frustrated and thoroughly addled with his surroundings, he couldn’t help but glare at his father. Odin was such a misogynistic prick, and he’d insulted Loki’s interests...*again*. He just didn’t understand his father. Whatever was wrong with studying? With reading? With improving one’s mind? He was nearing the end of his schooling and was at the top of his class at the academy, but all his father wanted was a battle hungry brute like his brother.

Chin raised, Odin pursed his lips before continuing, “Álfar informed me that you are keen to use daggers, Loki. More importantly, that you are talented with them.”

Odin then produced a set of twelve of the sharpest throwing knives he’d ever seen, their silver glinting so brightly in the daylight that he had to shield his eyes. Smile spreading across his face, Loki took the knives and pocketed them within his armor. His father had given him a gift. An actual *gift*. He couldn’t believe it.

“Thank you, Father, they’re—”

Odin waved his hand, cutting him off, and turned to Thor. “It was nothing. Thor, take him to the gymnasium. Those boyish muscles of his need work.”

Loki never made it to the gymnasium, though. The scenery was changing... *again*. The brightness of day dimmed until his pupils dilated in the abrupt darkness of the weapons vault. *Oh no*. Not *here*. He didn’t want to see this place—*Never again*. He wanted to run, but his feet were heavy as lead, paralyzing him in front of an ancient blue box. He knew his next words, and he hated them.

*“Just do it.”*

*No!*—his mind clawed at the wretched command. He didn't want to do anything. He'd been here before. This was not something he wanted to relive, but he couldn't stop himself. His hands moved of their own accord. Cold rushed through his veins, power along with it as he wrapped his fingers around it. His heart ached as he screamed silently.

*Please stop!!*—he tried to pull his hands away but couldn't.

Somewhere behind him a voice echoed in the stone chamber. *"You are my son, Loki. I raised you. You are my own."*

*Lies!* "Am I born of Frigga?"

Silence.

*"No."* It was his mother's voice that had answered him. That wasn't right. It should have been Odin. Then her hands came around his, which still clung to the casket. Pale skin over blue, he wept at the sight. Frigga's voice sang to him, "Shhh. There there, love."

It was the same melody she'd always used when he had nightmares. He was in his childhood bed.

"You were dead, Mother. It was just Father and Thor and me." His voice was far too high-pitched and trembling for his liking.

*Oh*— he was just a little boy again. Why couldn't he stay in *one* spot? Or at *one* age? All this flip flopping and moving around was entirely disorienting. He couldn't keep up.

Eyes narrowing in jest, Frigga poked his nose. *"Tut!* Impossible. There exists, in the nine, no reality where your father survives me."

Arms tightening around him, Frigga winked at Loki's slight smile and chuckle as her fingers combed his hair away from his tear-stained face. She was coddling him. She had *always* coddled him. The part of his adult consciousness that knew he was walking through some sort of lucid dream scowled at the squeaky weepy little boy. Why did he have to *cry* so much? It was *humiliating*.

"Now what shall we do to get you back to a nice dreamless sleep, hmm?"

Loki sat up straighter, his grin widening as he swiped the back of his hand across his wet cheeks. "Magic? Would you conjure for me?"

Nodding, she laughed. "Of course! What shall I make.... ah, yes!" Frigga held out her hand, palm up and a small yellow kitten with blue eyes appeared just above her fingers. Loki scowled at the furry creature. "What's wrong, dearest? I thought you liked cats."

Rubbing his palms together, Loki shook his head, his tongue running along his lips. "I love cats, but I do not like this one at all."

Eyes squinting, he rubbed his hand over the creature's back, and smiled. Under his touch, the fur became black, the eyes green. Nodding, pleased with his work, he picked the purring cat up and sat it in his lap. The furry little thing changed then, morphing into several heavy schoolbooks. Upright suddenly and a good three feet taller, shoulders slumping, adolescence having just taken over his boyish skin and bones frame, Loki closed his hand around the strap of his black leather school satchel. Walking into his room, he tossed the bag onto his bed along with the books.

"Something vexes you."

Loki started and turned at the sound of his mother. He responded, his voice warbling somewhat. *Ah yes.* His voice was changing. *Deepening.* Reluctantly leaving childhood behind, fearing what adulthood held for him.

"Just the idiocy that surrounds me at the academy."

Head tilting sideways, she frowned, "Your brother and his friends, I presume?"

Snorting, he nodded, "You presume correctly, Mother."

Walking to him, Frigga smirked, bringing a hand to his shoulder, "I would that they had even a *quarter* of your intelligence, Loki."

Shaking his head, he pulled a face, "Well, today had *nothing* to do with intelligence. We were lifting logs, Mother. *Actual* ash tree logs. Five feet in circumference."

Frigga sighed loudly and cupped his cheek, "You have your strengths. They have theirs. One day their biceps will fail them. But that *mind* of yours? It will be sharper than knives *all* your days."

She seemed to slide out of the room, and in her absence, he looked in his floor length mirror. His features grew sharper, cheekbones hollowing further, jawline tightening, black hair lengthening to fall just below his chin, muscles growing and becoming leaner, body stretching to the full height of manhood. Boy to man.... *again.* A breeze ruffled his hair as

he found himself suddenly dashing through the corridor that led to his mother's chambers. Leather armor clinging to his oddly soaking wet body, he beat Thor to her room. Running had always suited him, and he loved that it irked Thor to know his little brother was faster. Laughing, the brothers bent over, hands on their knees while they caught their breath. Their mother had summoned them while they'd been swimming in the Silver Lake, miles away, with their warrior friends.

"Did you forget to take towels with you to the lake, boys?" Frigga frowned at the puddles they were creating on her granite floor.

Thor pointed at Loki. "He thought it would be funny, apparently, if they vanished into thin air. Along with our clothes."

Holding up one finger, Loki smirked at him. "Not *our* clothes. Just *Sif's*."

"Oh Loki..." Frigga whispered under her breath.

"Oh Loki? Oh, Loki *what?*" Showing his palms, he quirked an eyebrow, feigning innocence.

Rolling her eyes, two objects materializing in her arms, Frigga stepped behind Thor, and she fastened one of the objects to his shoulders. A red cape. Loki scowled. It was a cape fit for a *king*.

Her voice was like a bell, chiming with pride. "Thor, I have fashioned this for you. You are a man and a warrior now. Red is the color of *passion*, my son, and you are filled to the brim with it, but do not let it turn to *rage*."

She eyed him pointedly before handing him the second item. A silver winged helmet. He tried it on to see that it fit properly, smiling when it did. Loki had to turn his head to hide the roll of his eyes. As though Thor didn't already have a hammer that could make him fly, now he had *wings*, too. *Tremendous*.

Thor's gruff voice grated on his skin. "Thank you, Mother. I feel quite... *kingly*."

She nodded as Thor kissed her hand and strutted happily from the room leaving his brother and mother alone. Turning to her second son, her watery azure gaze meeting his, she retrieved two more objects from somewhere behind her back, and Loki peered curiously at them. She swept up a green cape and draped it about his shoulders.

"The green matches your eyes."

Loki rubbed the fabric between his fingers and sighed, "What? No symbolic meaning for me? It just *matches my eyes*? Honestly, if it wasn't from you, Mother, I'd be a bit insulted."

Frowning, she pursed her lips. "Green is the color of *life*, my dear god of mischief. My little prankster." She poked his nose earning a small laugh from Loki before she continued. "And do not pretend that it isn't your favorite color."

"I never said it wasn't—" he started only to be shushed by her finger on his lips.

All amusement gone from her tone, she spoke in earnest, "As I said, green is for life, and I want your life to be so beautiful, Loki. I want you to know *love*. I want you to be happy. Do not let your little tricks become more than that—more than something playful to bring a bit of joy. Do not let them become something darker for *darkness* does not befit *happiness*."

He didn't know what to say to that, so he remained silent, only nodding at the words. Smirking, she placed the other item, a golden horned helm, atop his head.

"Now *that*, my dear Loki, *that* befits a king."

Loki smiled, white teeth glinting in the afternoon light. "It is a bit more intimidating than *feathers*."

Her smile turned to a frown as he removed the horns; all joy abruptly disappeared from the room. Her chambers became dark, and Loki sat at the foot of a bed, Frigga next to him. His father's chambers? Why did he have to be here? He *hated* this place. He knew the words that were about to leave his mouth. He'd said them to his mother, and he'd broken her with them.

"Mistake? *Mistake?! That's a fucking huge mistake!* How could you? How *could* you?!"

Clutching the hand of her husband, guilt writ on her face, she didn't respond. His eyes then slammed shut as the walls exploded and burst into the brightest daylight imaginable. He choked and coughed violently having accidentally swallowed a mouthful of lake water. Looking up, he winced at the booming voice of his brother ten feet above him, far too loud after all that quiet in the royal chambers.

"You cannot fathom it, brother!"

Naked save for his mid-thigh length under armor pants, Thor swung from a tree branch and crashed into Silver Lake, huge waves rippling out from the massive weight of his body. Loki, in a similar state of undress, dodged the splash, swimming quickly to the

shore. He laid flat on his back, one knee bent, the water droplets on his exposed torso evaporating in the intense heat, and throwing an arm over his eyes, he groaned, annoyed. Pushing inky wet strands of hair behind his ear, he laid the snark on thick.

"I know you aren't familiar with many adjectives, Thor, but do *try* to explain the sensation. I *ache* with anticipation."

Rubbing the water out of his eyes, Thor grumbled, "Shut up, Loki." He paused, floating onto his back. "She was so soft underneath my hands."

Loki snorted, "Yes, she probably *adored* those big, calloused hands of yours rubbing her delicate breasts raw."

Shooting a glare at Loki from the water, Thor spat, "Oh you think she would have preferred your soft little *feminine* fingers?"

Waving a hand, Loki laughed humorlessly. "Just continue your unimaginative drabble for fuck's sake."

As though lost in his own dreamworld, Thor sighed, "Moving inside of her, by the Norns. She was unbelievably tight. And hot. The heat. And so incredibly slick. I practically finished before I'd started."

"Oh, dear gods, please tell me that you did!" Loki cackled unabashed, the force of the laugh causing his shoulders to shake uncontrollably.

At Loki's amused outburst, Thor swam to the shore and punched him in the stomach. Squirming, Loki curled in on himself protectively, but he continued laughing as Thor growled at him.

"*You* would not have lasted any longer!"

"I *did* last longer, you giant virginal oaf," Loki couldn't stop laughing.

Thor scoffed, "What do you...do you mean to say that you have already...?"

Eyeing him, Loki tilted his head to the side. "What do *you* think?"

Plopping onto the ground by his little brother, Thor shook his head, scowling. "Well, *that* is certainly disappointing. I'm *older*."

One eyebrow raising, Loki smirked. "And *I'm* told that I have a rather talented tongue."

Thor couldn't help but laugh at the insinuation. "I do wish you would stop using it and shut up sometime."

Squinting up at his big brother, Loki smiled smugly. "Not likely."

He sat up, the tree above them having morphed into a pillar, one of many pillars in the academy's lecture hall. Thor was still there, though he was now fully clothed in his red tunic and navy pants, and his once full beard looked more like day old whiskers. He snarled angrily, throwing a heavy tome against the wall.

"It doesn't make any sense!"

Sighing, Loki walked to the battered book on the floor and bent to retrieve it. Dusting off the cover, he stood.

"It makes perfect sense if you'll actually *read* the instructions, Thor."

The blond prince crossed his arms, huffing loudly. "You speak as though I can't read, Loki. *I can.*"

Throwing his hands up, Loki snapped, "Well then, *do!* I tire of tutoring you when you refuse to put any effort into your studies."

Slamming his fist on the desk, Thor shouted back. "You *know* how frustrating arithmetic is to me!"

"I'm done," rolling his eyes, Loki tossed the book down on Thor's desk, "Figure it out yourself. If you do not pass the exam, it will be your own fault."

Loki made to leave the hall. He'd stayed two hours after dismissal already to help his brother prepare for their final exam the next day. Two *wasted* hours.

Swiveling in his seat, Thor called after him, "Father will *not* be happy with you if you refuse to help me!"

Loki stopped abruptly, turning on his heel to face his brother. "I fail to see how *your* studies are *my* responsibility! How can Father put this on *me?*"

Glaring at Loki, Thor scoffed, "*I help you* during training, do I not?"

Frown creasing his brow, Loki paced the front of the room, a hand running through his hair. "That is hardly the same! I actually *try* during our arena matches! And I have



improved vastly! Just last week I bested Sif! You do nothing but whine about this being too hard. Why does he hate me so? What did I ever *do* to him? This is absurd! It matters not what I do or don't do. Somehow, in his eyes, it's wrong. And yet *you* —" Loki, coming back to his brother, shoved his finger into his chest "—can do *no* wrong!"

Stomping to the exit, hands fisted, he shouted over his shoulder. "Go ahead and fail for all I care! Father will hate me either way."

His feet took him through various halls and corridors, and he found himself in the throne room. He and Thor stood on either side of their father as a stunning black-haired young woman approached them behind that wench, Freya.

Oh, *this* woman. He knew this woman. He *adored* this woman.

Why wouldn't his feet move?! He wanted nothing more than to run to her and comb his fingers through that glorious obsidian hair of hers. Freya said a name—*Sigyn*. It was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard. That is, it *was* the most beautiful sound until Sigyn spoke. By Hel, her *voice*. He *loved* her voice.

*"Your majesty."*

He opened his mind to her thoughts, which very clearly said his eyes were familiar and beautiful. Smoke pooled at the hem of her dress, and just as soon as he saw it, it disappeared. Someone, maybe it was his mother, said that this Sigyn was a sorceress, and his breath hitched as she sauntered back to the regal doors, turning her head to give him a smile over her shoulder. Finally, his feet decided to function properly, and he jumped from the dais in a single bound and ran after her. He chased her all the way to the dining hall. He was at her side immediately, snaking his hand around her waist and telling her he'd read her mind. She blanched under his heated gaze, her voice echoing through the empty hall.

*"Forgive me for my lurid thoughts."*

The table disappearing, the granite floor becoming snow covered grass beneath their feet, he gaped at her as black mist flowed from her fingers and fell over the burning body of Sif. The snow melted under the flames, becoming a stone floor where he sat alone. A door opened, the sound ringing in his underused ears loudly, and someone placed black hair, a silver ribbon binding the shining strands together, in his hands. Grey green eyes pierced his, small hands wrapping around his arms, pulling him to his feet, and then they were flying through the rainbow beams of the bifrost. One hand gripping her waist, the other in her hair, his mouth bruised under her kiss as the beams faded to dim green flames burning

in the huge fireplace of his chambers. Hand still in her hair, pushing her further and further into the black sheets of his bed, his body moved over hers, the heat of her skin making his blood boil. Her legs encircled his hips, blood trickling from his back as black nails scraped down his spine. They rolled, her face above his, thighs on either side of his waist, and she smiled as he gripped her hips.

Then her beautiful mouth turned down, and she was speaking, but he couldn't hear her. He tried to push up to hear the words, but he couldn't. His arms weren't working. His core muscles weren't working. *Nothing* was working. He was exhausted and weak, and her body was pulling back from him. Abruptly, her silent words became so loud that his ears bled.

*"PULL UP!!"*

Below him, the bed disappeared, leaving nothing but deep black space underneath as he fell from her.

---

His cry echoed in his stone prison cell. *"NO!!"*

Sigyn's ear piercing scream had jarred him awake, and looking around, feeling the solid floor beneath him, he relaxed slightly, knowing that he wasn't falling again. Of course, that also meant that he was still imprisoned on a so-called desert with no hope of release or escape. He hated the dreams, tinged with sadness and pain as they were, but he needed them, nonetheless. They reminded him that he had been *someone*. That he'd had a *life*. How did the humans say it?—*once upon a time*. Frigga's words echoed in his mind.

*"Green is for life."*

Despite her wishes, his life had rarely been anything near happy. Odin and Thor had made sure of that. Well, *mostly* Odin. The old man in and of himself *was* a nightmare. With each passing second in this Helhole, Loki grew more and more certain that Odin had never cared for him. Not truly. There had been rare moments when something resembling affection would pass between himself and his father. Giving him the daggers. Thanking him for Sleipnir. And his father, or *ex-father* as it was, had congratulated him upon receiving the highest academic honors of his year group, which was Thor's group since Loki had skipped several years ahead—No one ever thought to mention *that*.

Odin had even toasted him for his success at the graduation feast, but not before praising Thor for his less than stellar achievements. It was as though Loki had been an

afterthought. Rolling his eyes, Loki shoved his nose in the air, mocking the old man's voice, though the sound was a bit rough considering he rarely used his vocal cords anymore.

"Oh, Loki, I heard you like daggers, so I bought some for you even though they are a rather *feminine* form of defense. I'm pleased that you finished at the top of your year group, Loki, though you might consider taking your nose out of those books and into the training arena. Look how much bigger *Thor* is than you! Thank you for the fastest horse in the nine, Loki. Even if he is positively *hideous* with those legs of his. I think I'll go challenge your brother to a race. No need for *you* to come, Loki. Go practice magic or *whatever* it is that you do. Oh, you kissed a *girl*? Well, I must say that I'm *relieved*. I assumed you'd prefer kissing boys."

Shaking his head, he sighed. On the opposite end of the spectrum of love and hate, stood his mother. Frigga had adored him. He knew that now. Without her, he would have jumped from the bifrost long before he'd reached adolescence. Had she *known* that? What had his last words been to her? He tried to think back, but his memory was unhelpful now. Had they been *good* words? He knew he'd cursed at her when he'd discovered his true parentage, and she had apologized profusely. When had he last seen her? At Odin's bedside. When Sig had roasted Laufey. Frigga had clung to him, and he'd held her, too. *Good*. Even if he couldn't remember the last words to pass between them, his actions had spoken well enough.

And then there was *Thor*. He'd loved the fool, despite his hatred, but since that fucking cretin had all but *killed* him and destroyed *everything*, the blond dolt was *dead* to him. Not that Loki would ever see him again. Not that he would ever see *anyone* again. Maybe Thor had secretly harbored jealousy for him, too. Frigga *had* shown a preference for Loki, after all. Come to think of it (he had all the time in the nine to *think* now, didn't he?) Thor had other reasons for hating him. Loki ticked off the reasons, *petty* as they were.

Thor was a slower runner. Loki had been the champion, *much* to his father's dismay, at *every* track meet. Thor was also a joke of a pupil at the academy. Well, not a *complete* joke. He'd fared quite well in the end, but he hadn't come close to Loki who had excelled to the point of putting their professors to shame. But really, Dean Rafnar continually confused quantum *chromodynamics* with quantum *electrodynamics*! There was no way in Hel that Loki wasn't going to correct the supposed '*theoretical physics*' professor for such an *elementary* slip.

Even more vapid was the possibility that Thor might have been envious of his *hair*, too. It was understandable. The black had always stood out, turning heads everywhere he went. Not to mention he'd had just as many offers from men as he had from women to visit

their beds, and if he were to be honest with himself, he'd been more flattered by the former. Not that he'd entertained the offers, but it was impressive that he was capable of causing a sexual identity crisis in so many supposedly heterosexual men. What was wrong with them just admitting that they were interested in both genders? Or the same genders? Or maybe they weren't. Maybe it had just been *him* they were interested in.

He smirked at the thought, but it turned to a frown quickly. It was a good thing there were no mirrors here. His appearance was probably *monstrous* at this point. Rolling his eyes, he rubbed a hand down his face. As though his looks mattered in the *slightest* now. He'd become far too vain over the years. What else might have caused a twinge of jealousy in his brother?

*Oh right*—Loki smiled. Loki had been the *first* to bed a girl. Now *that*, sharing *that* news with Thor, *that* had been worth dreaming about. He'd wounded his arrogant brother's pride, and it had made for a grand afternoon. Not that his first experience with sex had been especially memorable. The event itself had been his first taste of physical pleasure, outside of his own hands obviously, but the girl had been nothing more than a good solid fuck. He'd lost count of the sexual partners he'd had long ago. He *was* nine hundred years old, after all.

He'd never developed an emotional attachment to any of them, but along came Sigyn, and once he'd had her, gods, *nothing* could compare. *Fucking* was a far cry from what he'd done with her. *Love*. It was *most* incredible and the *worst* imaginable emotion in the entire universe. He felt *hollow*. She'd filled him. She'd made him whole. And now she was gone. Loving Sigyn had left him completely and utterly hollow, and sadly, he knew he'd done the same to her. Now they were just two heartbroken creatures, separated for eternity.

Did the strange alien creatures living in this desert know that leaving him alone with only his memories and dreams would torture him this way? Did they know that no blades or whips or other forms of physical torture were necessary to torment him?

*Of course*, they did. Why waste their time physically torturing him when he could do it *himself*? But why the Hel did they *want* him to? What were their intentions with him? How much longer before he would *finally* starve? Months? Years? He couldn't remember the time it took for Asgardians or Jotuns or *half*-Jotuns (whatever he was) to starve to death. How long had he been here?

*Oh yes. That's right. One month.*

Much to his surprise (shock and absolute *terror*, more like) the glass door suddenly slid open. Bright light flooded the room, and Loki thought his eyes would explode in their sockets under the garish haze. He threw his arm over his eyes and pulled his legs up as that same damned grey man entered his cell.

“I see that our little Asgardian magician is still alive. Good. I have a proposition for you. And I imagine you will like it.”

## Chapter 11: Don't Make Deals with Monsters

### *~Loki's Cell, The Desert~*

**A**fter thirty days in near pitch black with nothing to look at but tiny holes in the wall, sudden glaring white light thrust upon his perpetually dilated pupils felt like a kick to the face. Loki's head pounded, his vision desperately trying to adjust to the abrupt change, and despite his inability to see anything save for the white spots darting across the backs of his eyelids, he knew who had spoken to him, recognizing the voice of the grey man instantly, the sound as revolting as he remembered. Cringing, he started to ask what sort of proposition he was being offered, but he was cut off by a gag around his mouth.

What was with the gags? Did they really believe him idiotic enough to bite them? Or scream for help? Help from *whom?! As though he could even make such a sound. His vocal cords had been spent on mocking Odin's voice.*

Two bestia grabbed his arms and yanked him to his feet. Honestly though, *yanked* was too gentle and sweet a word for the action. Dead weight under their grasp, his legs wobbled beneath him as they dragged him from his cell. He'd not used them much, obviously. He'd gone thirty days with no food or water for Hel's sake. He was too weak to stand, much less *walk*. Fortunately, his eyes were beginning to adjust to the light, which meant they still worked properly.

*Unfortunately*, what he *could* see were his bone thin legs attempting to keep off the rock surface lest the skin of his feet be rubbed off from the friction. Scaly hands digging into the skin of his armpits, Loki choked on the blood from the gag slicing into the corners of his mouth, and after fifty yards or so, they turned sharply, dropping him into another bright white room no bigger than his dressing room in his chambers.

*His chambers. In Asgard—Home.*

What he wouldn't give to jump off this desert and fall through the abyss again. Maybe he would land right back on what was left of the bridge where he'd started. Maybe the universe was one huge circle rather than a tree with branches. *No*. Hope was utterly *useless* here, and he still wanted to hear this proposition that he would supposedly *like*. There would be no jumping off this desert rock until he heard it. That was, if the grey

man decided to show his face again and actually tell him what it was. At the moment, he was nowhere to be seen.

The floor of the room he'd been dropped into sloped down on all sides into a foot wide drain in the middle. Squinting at the walls, he grimaced. They weren't *walls*. They were mirrors—*Oh shit*. As though he hadn't seen enough when he'd caught a glimpse of his shriveled legs. Now, staring at the corpse looking back at him that had once been the king of Asgard, his insides boiled with hate for the alien beings who had done this to him, for his *brother* who had done this to him, unintentional as it was.

Every bone jugged out from beneath his ashen skin, what little muscle he had left barely visible. Two silvery jagged scars stretched angrily across his thigh, long since dried blood caked on the flesh below. The once gaping wound under his ribs had turned the same silver color of the scars on his thighs. His hair, now far below his shoulders, hung in messy matted waves. Sharp cheekbones had become sharper still, the cheeks below all but hollow, and emerald eyes had dulled to a murky olive. If it hadn't been for the hair on his head, it would have looked more akin to a skull. Fresh blood seeped from the gashes around his mouth as they removed the gag, and shrugging, he looked to the creatures—*Now what?* They started speaking then, and if Loki hadn't been trained in the magic of Alltongue, their words would have been lost on him.

"Why must *we* be the ones to clean him?"

"Can we not just throw him the soap?"

"Look at him! He can barely hold his head up! You think he has the strength to *scrub* himself?"

"Well, *I'm* not going to do it."

"What if we fed him? Think then he would be able to do it himself? He looks to be starving."

Loki couldn't believe his ears—*He looked to be starving?!* Surely not! After thirty days with no food or water, he looked to be *starving*.

*Imbeciles.*

"We were told to clean him up, not *feed* him."

Rolling his eyes, tired of their idiotic blather, Loki snapped, “I *am* starving you mindless savages.”

Eyes blown wide, shocked by his retort, they gaped at him. “You know our words?”

Shaking his head, the slight movement taking more effort than it should have, Loki spit out the blood gathering in his mouth.

“I speak Alltongue, you blathering fools. *Of course*, I know your words.”

The creatures eyed each other before addressing him directly in a different language. “Ugly fucking Asgardian.”

Ah, so they thought he was *bluffing*. Smirking, he looked at them from underneath his brow and adjusted his words, his tongue twisting in the manner theirs had.

“The ugliest Asgardian will forever be infinitely more appealing to the eye than *your* kind.”

They let out howling laughter at his words, and Loki cringed at the sound, his fingers digging into his curled-up knees. Nails on the academy chalkboards were celestial music in comparison. Unexpected scalding water poured from above his head then, and digging his heels into the white floor, he pushed himself back violently from the boiling shower, the force of the shriek that escaped him burning his throat as adrenaline flooded his veins. Their cackling bounced off the walls as another shower drenched him in his new spot, his ear-piercing cries only encouraging them. But it was damn near impossible *not* to cry out! Every move he made, a new hole in the ceiling would open above his head and drop buckets of flesh searing water on him.

Did they have any idea what they were doing to him? Did they know what sort of torture this was for a godsdamn *frost giant*?! The burning water froze at that moment, the droplets on his now blue skin and hair becoming icicles. Blessed, glorious, *frigid* little icicles. Their squawking ceased abruptly, their feet slipping right out from underneath them, and they landed hard on the icy floor. If he hadn't been in so much pain, Loki would have laughed at the sight of the two bumbling fumbling creatures.

“What *is* he?!”

“Why is he *blue*?!”

“I thought he was Asgardian. Do they *do* that?”



“I don’t think so.”

Never had Loki been so grateful for his true parentage. Though once again, he had no idea *how* he’d changed. That was something he sorely needed to know. It had proven quite handy twice now. First saving Sigyn in Vanaheim and now *this*.

Continuing their bemused conversation, the bestia gawked at him as his skin returned to its normal pale hue, the ice melting, the remnants flowing to the drain in the middle of the room.

“Should we tell the Other?”

“Let’s just clean him and be done with it. I do *not* want to see him turn blue again.”

Finding his voice once more after all that wretched screaming, Loki chuckled mirthlessly. “Surely you aren’t scared of the weak *ugly fucking Asgardian?*”

Using the wall for support, he managed to push to his feet, some of his strength returning to him. Maybe turning Jotun made him stronger. It certainly seemed that way. Hopefully, he would live long enough to test it. Following a far too close for comfort wash, they cut his hair once more to the shoulder length it had been when he’d arrived and threw him a pair of black knee length fitted leather shorts. Stepping into the garment and pulling it up his legs, he breathed a sigh of relief, and looking at the bestia questioningly, his eyebrow raised.

*Is a shirt coming, too?*

Grabbing him by his elbows, they pulled him from the room.

*Apparently not.*

Well, at least he wasn’t *entirely* naked anymore. Not that he should have been embarrassed. Even after a month’s starvation, he was still, ahem, impressive.

“Where are you taking me?” Loki growled, trying to wrench his arms free from their grip to no avail. Dammit. He needed to eat. And drink. He needed the muscle he’d lost. He needed his *magic*. “I can walk on my *own*, you cretins!”

He received no response as he was pulled down a long open air rock path bathed in the same dim blue light that had shone on the stairs he remembered. His shoulder was nearly yanked out of its socket when they came to an abrupt halt at the base of a new set of stairs.

Clenching his teeth as they pushed him to his knees, he sneered, “I do not *kneel* for any—”

A swift kick to his mouth shut him up immediately, blood splattering on the stone beneath him. Sweeping his thumb across the gash in his split lip, he stared at the red smeared across it. Blood on his mouth. *The bond...Sigyn.*

Hanging his head, he squeezed his eyes shut, but no tears came. A month ago, a week ago even, he might have wept. But now? All he had was anger in his bones. Seething, blood mixed with saliva dripping from his open mouth in one long string, he peered from under his brow at the grey man who had reappeared and was now descending the stairs above him.

“*Careful, Asgardian.*”

At his right, the bestia opened its mouth at the word *Asgardian*, but when Loki shot it a murderous look, its lips formed a tight line. Impressed that he could once again inspire fear with a mere *glance*, he smirked, his eyes returning to the grey man who was, rather eerily, *smiling* at him.

“Do you like your new clothes?”

Uninterested in *small talk*, Loki inclined his head and glared, speaking through clenched teeth. “It is an *acceptable* garment.”

Laughing, the grey man clasped his hands behind his back. “Well, we had no desire to see *all* your parts.”

Loki snorted—*Get on with it, hideous creature!* “What is this proposition of which you spoke earlier?”

Nodding, the grey man bent down to Loki’s level, his voice dropping an octave. “You are an Asgardian sorcerer. A strong one. Just look how quickly your strength has returned to you! *He* has need of your abilities. If you travel to Earth, learning and testing the human defenses, and come back with that knowledge, he will give you what you desire most.”

Loki frowned—*What he desired most?* How would this “*he*” know that information? What, had he been speaking in his sleep? And dear gods, if he had, what paramount and highly classified information might he have given away? More importantly, who was “*he*?” When Loki had asked who “*he*” was at their last meeting right after his fall, the grey man had refused to tell him. Maybe he would tell him now.

“Who is this *he* that needs me?” Loki tried.

Shaking his head, the grey man pursed his lips and wagged his finger. “Agree to do this. Be successful in your mission. Then, and *only* then, shall you have his name.”

Of course, the creature wouldn’t give him the name. Loki was rapidly tiring of the cryptic *‘you must earn the right to that information’* answers. He had learned one thing, at least. The grey man was not the leader of this desert. He was only a henchman with exclusive rights to the ear of their leader.

Quirking his jaw, Loki sucked in his cheeks. “Very well,” he said, “Then tell me what it is that *I* supposedly desire most.”

Smiling in that wretched way again, the grey man looked around, his eyes darting back and forth in their sockets.

“To return to Asgard, yes?”

Sighing, Loki rolled his eyes. Well, *obviously*. One needn’t have genius level intellect to figure that out.

The grey man showed his teeth then. “And to kill your *brother*, yes?”

Loki bit the insides of his cheeks to keep his jaw from dropping. They knew *exactly* who he was. Either he *had* been sleep-talking, or they’d investigated his past during his time in isolation. The latter was unlikely, though. If that had been the case, *surely*, they would have discovered his Jotun heritage.

He considered the grey man’s words. *Was* that truly what he wanted? To *kill* Thor? For certain, he wanted Thor to pack up his royal chambers and move into the dungeons. Why, he would *himself* throw the blond miscreant a fucking housewarming party! But no, he had no desire to murder his brother flat out. He’d seen enough death in the past few months to last a lifetime. Perhaps it would be best to play along though. Let them think that slaughtering his brother was *precisely* what he wanted.

“Yes,” Loki answered, nodding once, focusing on keeping his breath even. “Now, do please explain why the *mortals* are of your concern.”

Returning to his full height, the grey man began pacing across the bottom step. “They have the *tesseract*. It is an energy source as strong as your bifrost—”

"I *know* what the tesseract is," Loki cut him off, glaring at his back. "My father—" he sighed at the word "—the *Allfather* put it on Midgard himself ages ago."

Turning on his heel to face Loki, the grey man spat, "I would adjust your tone if I were you!"

Huffing, nostrils flared, Loki shut his mouth.

Resuming his pacing, the grey man continued, "As I was saying, the tesseract, the *cube* to some, is as strong as your bifrost, and *he* wants it. If you accept this mission, and I suggest that you *do*, you shall return to Asgard soon. *Retrieve* the cube as well, and you shall return sooner still. If you return without it, you will wait until our army has penetrated the human defences. Once we are in possession of the cube, you shall return to Asgard with our army to defeat King Thor. What say you?"

Eyes narrowing, Loki pursed his lips, his thoughts racing. He'd never held any affinity for the mortals (why should he?), but he had no desire to be privy to mass *genocide* on their planet. Even less so if *his* hand was involved. If he refused to kill his brother (*one* man) how could he possibly accept killing *billions* of humans? If he were to accept this proposition and go to Midgard without retrieving the cube himself, this '*he*' character would send an army of bestia or whatever other species was in this desert to the human realm. Loki couldn't allow that, could he? All for the chance to get back to Asgard? *No*. That was a terrible option. He was selfish, but he wasn't *that* selfish.

He would *have* to bring the cube back, right? That was the only way to spare the humans. Though if he *did* bring it back, it would then be in the hands of a person who clearly enjoyed torturing and tormenting anyone of his choosing. If '*he*' was powerful enough to have his own army, or powerful enough to wield the cube which was one of the most powerful and original singularities in the universe, then he would have the ability to colonize or destroy every known and unknown realm. The cube could transport this '*he*' person anywhere. Whenever he wanted. With however many of his army he wanted. It would be far more than just the humans who would suffer. *No*. That was an even *worse* option.

Truly though, how could he trust this person in the first place? How could he put his faith in someone who had starved him for thirty days naked in isolation in complete dark? This great torturer? This horrid tormentor of souls? No doubt '*he*' had done this to others. So then what? Just say no and either return to isolation or be killed or tortured further? Well *that* certainly wasn't an option either. *Was* it?

*Fuck*—If only he knew how to wield the tesseract *himself*! If Loki could wield it, then he could transport himself straight to Asgard and throw it in the vault. '*He*' couldn't follow

him into Asgard. Not if the cube was locked away. Odin's vault was far too powerful. It mattered not, though. Loki *didn't* know how to wield the cube; therefore, he couldn't accept the proposition. As much as he longed for Asgard, to escape this wretched rock, to hold *Sig* again, to save his home from a disastrous king, he couldn't go back *this* way. No more blood on his hands. He was done—*Done*.

Shaking his head, Loki sighed and glared at the grey man. "I'm afraid that I no longer make deals with *monsters*."

Chest heaving, the grey man sneered as he bent back down to look Loki in the eye. "Did I not say that you *should* accept this mission?!"

Hands fisting, Loki attempted to stand to his feet, but the heavy hand of one of the creatures at his side landed on his shoulder, shoving him back down.

His blood boiling, he snapped at the grey man, "*You cannot force-*"

"Either you accept," the grey man shouted over him and grabbed Loki's chin, "or *she* dies!"

Angry tears clouded Loki's vision, his mouth gaping, "*Wha-*"

"You screamed her name every night. Tell me, *Loki*, who is *Sigyn*?"

*No no no no no no no no NO*. What had he once said to her?

*I'd sooner let Asgard burn than I would let anyone or anything hurt you.*

And by *Hel* had he meant it.

Eyes darting back and forth, he quickly went through his options again. Maybe he could use one of the human scientists, one of those astrophysicists like Dr. Foster, to help him wield the cube. She'd been working with someone before Thor had returned. What had his name been? *Erik* something. Then he could return to Asgard, right? Why *wouldn't* the humans help him? He would be *protecting* them! *Surely*, they would understand. His shoulders slumping, he sighed heavily. No, they wouldn't. They would assume he was mad. They wouldn't simply just *hand over* the cube. They were *mor-tals*, not *mor-ons*.

Maybe he could unleash Surtur on this torturer of his. The demon king would without a doubt defeat him! Scoffing, he rolled his eyes. Had he completely lost his mind?! He'd *just* said he didn't make deals with monsters, and yet he was considering releasing the *biggest*

one of them all?! A fucking thousand-foot-tall fire demon?! Odin himself was *terrified* of the creature! But this was *Sigyn*. Jaw quirking, he ran a hand through his hair.

*Wait*—Maybe his torturer was Surtur. Shaking his head, he scowled. He could have kicked himself for being so *brainless*. Surtur was in Muspelheim. He couldn't have just *wandered* into the middle of space unnoticed. Heimdall *might* have mentioned an occurrence such as that to his father. *Ex-father*.

Loki had only one option, regardless of the outcome. He *had* to go to Midgard. He couldn't just sit by and watch his torturer kill Sig. Of course, there *was* the possibility that the humans would defeat this desert army. They had those, what did they call them ... superheroes? Ridiculous name for a pack of mutant misfits. They had *more* than capable armies, too. There were *seven billion* of them, after all. They weren't exactly *defenseless*. Not to mention his torturer couldn't kill Sig without the tesseract in his hands. *'He'* would have to come to Midgard himself or send his minion army to fetch it.

Annoyed with Loki's silence, the grey man, glaring, sighed heavily. "*Well? Do you accept?*"

Taking a deep breath, Loki raised his head and nodded. "*Yes.*"

Yes indeed. He would go to Earth and somehow learn to wield the cube. If not, he would fight alongside the humans when his torturer came for him.

## Chapter 12: Rain Rain, Go Away

~One month after the funeral (also since his proposition in the desert)~

**A**s much as Thor wished it would, business in Asgard couldn't stop. What did the mortals say? They had come up with some rather inspired idioms. Ah, yes—*The world keeps on turning.*

Asgard didn't *turn* per se, but the dawn-dial clock still moved daily, so the saying fit. The first month after he'd broken the bridge, the month before they'd held Loki's funeral, he'd seen to his kingly duties at court *like a good boy*, and it had been utterly *disastrous*. None of the directors, delegates, military officials, palace workers, soldiers, nobles, lords, ladies, or anyone else wanted to see the disgraced and pathetic excuse for a *king* that he was. Nothing productive occurred while he sat on the throne, and since he was in their eyes *incompetent*, after the funeral he'd asked (*commanded*, more like) Frigga to see to the court daily. She may have been showing signs of exhaustion (*weren't they all?*), but she was the only other royal who could do the job that he just couldn't do for the time being.

How was he supposed to sign all the new defense bills, read through all the proposals for new militarized law enforcement, or strategize with foreign diplomats concerning peace amongst the realms without the aid of the bifrost when he could hardly choose the meal plans for the palace chef for Hel's sake? It was just too much, and he'd needed to put himself to a different sort of work. Something that wouldn't require *thinking* at all since all the *thinking* he'd been doing was somehow *always* wrong. He'd needed something that would physically exhaust him. Something that would force his body to finally sleep at night rather than toss and turn with thoughts of his failures.

Little deliberation later, he'd decided to oversee the reconstruction of the bridge. Rebuilding it was going to take *ages*, which was a very good thing indeed. Starting the day after the funeral, a month ago now, Thor had worked tirelessly alongside the laborers repairing the bifrost. Inch by inch. Foot by foot. Refusing to leave the work to spend any time in court, every miniscule piece of newly created prismatic quartz had his fingerprints on it. He needed the hard physical labor. It was the only way he could get out of bed each morning. Pain in his muscles and bones drowned out the deeper pain screaming in his heart.

Not only the officials at court, but his citizens, too, held no respect for him, refusing to forgive him for breaking the bridge, and he could hardly blame them. For one thing, the bifrost hadn't been the only casualty, not even *close*. Destroying their mortal enemies at the cost of killing Gylfi's entire Hawk regiment was hardly worth celebrating. Much worse

than the Hawks' deaths, he'd killed their beloved king. That is.... *now* Loki was their beloved. Post-mortum love and accolades crashed over his ghost in waves.

Scowling, his shoulders slumping as he bent over the jagged edge of the bridge, Thor smeared a coat of diamond liquid metal across the quartz siding, and glaring up at the storm clouds, the rain hitting his open eyes, a streak of lightning flashed across the black sky, the deafening crack of thunder booming over the city. Rain had fallen the afternoon he'd been informed of Loki's death, and it hadn't ceased its drenching of the realm since that day.

Flowing out of him of their own volition, his anger and pain fueling the raging torrent of wind and rain, Thor simply couldn't control the storms. If there was a silver lining in one of those black storm clouds, it was that Asgard was on high ground and sloped down on all sides into the sea. Otherwise, the realm would have been long since flooded. As though killing the Hawks and Loki hadn't been enough, drowning the lower lying citizens would have no doubt started a revolution.

Pulling the hood of his black cloak over his soaked hair, gingerly pushing the next inch of quartz into the liquid metal, his thoughts roamed to his mother. Perhaps his reasons for having Frigga take over the more trying aspects of the throne had been selfish, more so than just his preferring to work with his hands for the time being. Well, there was no "*perhaps*" about it. He *knew* his reasons for pushing Frigga into the position were selfish, but they were also *justified*. He refused to stand by and watch idly as she drowned in sorrow in Loki's chambers all damn day long. In his estimate, his mother had spent three quarters of her time sobbing in his brother's old rooms. He could care less that the grief was still fresh. Infinitely more disturbing was the fact that if she wasn't crying while holding onto one of his brother's old books or jackets or any other number of his things, she was spending her time with *Sigyn*.

He scoffed, the Vanir's small heart-shaped face flashing before his eyes as he smeared another coat of liquid metal over the edge. He didn't *hate* his late brother's lover, but he certainly didn't *like* her. She was the most volatile creature in all Asgard. He never knew how to behave around the short dangerous fire sorceress. Was she going to punch him? Curse him? Set him on fire? Bow to him? Pity him? Sometimes she looked as though she might even *hug* him! Her emotions toward not only Thor but *everyone* were utter chaos. He understood that she'd been in love with Loki, and grief had an odd bewildering effect certainly, for one never knew when a memory might pop up and destroy the day, but it had been two months since his fall, and he couldn't decide if she was going to murder him in his sleep or embrace him in empathy. He was certain the former was more likely.



Swiping at the wetness on his cheeks, not from the torrential downpour but from his tears, he blew out a sad sigh. Just knowing that his mother wanted to spend all of what little free time she had with the Vanir, that there was no space in her life for her *surviving* son, was enough to break him.

In his defense though, destroying the bridge had seemed like the only option at the time. He'd been *surrounded*. They *all* had been! He remembered thinking it was the only way to cut off the Jotuns. He couldn't see, from his vantage point at least, that the Hawks had a new edge! He knew that it had been a rash decision the moment it had broken, and he'd been sent flying just as everyone else had been. Mjölnir had been his saving grace, and in a moment of panic, he didn't think to check for survivors. All he could think of were his defenseless father and mother. Who could blame him for that? Yes, it had been sheer *idiocy* to go to Jane immediately after, but with everything that had just happened, he simply hadn't been *thinking* straight!

It was for that very reason, the fact that Jane had been a ridiculous distraction that had cost him his only brother who had proven to be a most *amazing* king, that Thor couldn't stand to visit her in the healing chambers. He hated seeing her face, hearing her voice. Everything about her was just a terrible reminder of what he'd done. He'd lost the hawks, his brother, the bridge, and all respect.

He *had* to visit her periodically, though. It would have been cruel not to, and Thor had never been cruel. He wasn't about to start being cruel now. Someone had to tell her how the work on the bifrost was going, and he needed to show at least a *little* care for her. The poor thing was stuck here until they completed the bridge, and he had no idea how much longer it would take. Gods, here now on this sad excuse for a bridge, under freezing endless rain, all he felt was...

*Loss—He'd lost everything.*

His biggest loss, even bigger than losing Loki, was his mother. Frigga now looked at him as though he disgusted her. He just didn't understand it. He was her *only* son now! He was all she had left! Did she not see that? Was she just angry that she was being forced to court each day? Weren't they *all* making sacrifices at this point? She wasn't the only one grieving! He'd lost his only brother! He scoffed at the word *brother*.

Frigga had told him the news that Loki wasn't his blood brother. It had been a bit of a shock, and it made him wonder if that knowledge had urged his brother to destroy Jotunheim completely. They'd been taught to *hate* the Jotuns from the time they could remember, so it was understandable that he would want to remove all aspects of his true

heritage. Maybe if Loki could rid the entire universe of the monsters, he wouldn't have felt like one himself. Had that been his thinking?

Thor shook his head, grabbing another square inch block of quartz, setting it to the liquid metal, his hot breath making steam in the cold wind as he considered his late brother's final days. Loki had *just* found out he was a frost giant, then had been handed the crown after Thor had been banished, then had *war* thrust upon him, and yet he'd managed to keep his head on straight. He'd probably been even *more* exhausted than Thor was now, and yet he'd done it. Every kingly duty, new as it was to him, Loki had successfully completed *every single fucking day*. It was no wonder that Loki was the hero now. He'd been smarter, grown stronger, been the most powerful sorcerer in the nine, been given the throne and had made it proud—made *everyone* proud—and on top of it all, Loki had found the love of his life. Thor wasn't so sure suddenly if he adored his brother or positively despised him in that moment.

More thunder boomed, the sound of children screaming and then laughing echoing across the realm at the crash causing a momentary grin to spread across Thor's face as he pulled the black hood of his cloak further over his blond head. A slender hand landed on his shoulder then; turning to see the rain wet face of Sif, he nodded, his voice raspy from the effort of working from dawn until well past dusk.

"I won't be much longer," he said, his voice hoarse from the cold.

Sighing, she turned, and he watched her as she mounted her horse and rode back to the palace. Looking around, seeing that most of the workers had left, he shrugged and returned his attention to the siding of the bridge. He preferred the solitude. Fewer eyes to bore into the back of his head. He could now work in peace with nothing but his thoughts, unpleasant as they were, to keep him company under the twisting angry clouds. Other than the bridge, he had one thing to bring him some semblance of peace. Or at least, the *illusion* of it. Really more like a *relief*. And she was disappearing down the bridge.

*Sif*—they'd picked right back up where they'd left off before he'd been banished. It wasn't remotely fair to Jane. After all, Sif had tried to kill the girl, but then again, he'd delved into a relationship with Jane far too quickly, which hadn't exactly been fair to Sif, thus she had every right to be eternally pissed at the girl, though he didn't approve of kicking her *senseless*. Thor scowled at his own callous behavior.

What was so difficult about just keeping it in his godsdamn *trousers*? By Hel, even *Loki* had had more control over his sexual desire, and Thor was certain that his brother had had more offers than he'd had (something that never ceased to piss Thor off). Honestly though,

he hadn't truly picked up where he and Sif had left off. He was hardly *falling in love* with her like he had been before his exile. Scarcely feeling any emotion other than anger or despair or merciful numbness, there was no room for anything resembling *love*. No, what he was doing with Sif was nothing more than satiating a carnal desire, a physical release, a momentary escape from his dreadful reality.

Not wanting to make their relationship known to anyone, he visited her chambers nightly and returned to his own shortly thereafter. His efforts to keep the relationship clandestine had more purpose than just to keep it quiet for the sake of propriety, though. He didn't want Sif thinking there was something more brewing within him, that his once loving feelings for her had returned to him. For certain, he *did* care for her. He wanted her safe, wished her well, and if they were battling together, he would defend her, but he was hardly in love with her. They had sex—a lot. Nothing more. Knowing that Sif wanted more, he had to tread carefully.

One other place that he visited daily, other than Sif and his work on the bridge, was his father's chambers. Odin had *adored* him, and he was the only man in the realm who would still have shown him love. The only man who could give him sound advice. Encouragement. Strength to just *do* this! Why hadn't the old man awakened yet?! Thor wished that he would. Being a disgraced prince was one thing, but being a disgraced *king* was just .... what was it? Terrible? Thor rolled his eyes.

'*Terrible*' was a weak description. Loki had once said that Thor didn't know many adjectives. Damn his brother for being right. For *always* being right. For being so godsdamn smart and cunning. For growing in physical strength and prowess. For having the enduring love of their mother. For falling in love. And *staying* in love. And having that love returned in earnest. Even until *death*. Even *beyond* death. Setting the final liquid metal against the jagged edge, Thor stood, and breathing heavily, he walked back down the long bridge to find Sif.

---

~*The Healing Halls, East Corridor, North Wing of The Palace, Asgard*~

It hadn't stopped storming in the two months since Loki's fall, so there was no riding Sinir, practicing magic in the gardens, or fighting in the arena for Sigyn. Sure, the Asgardian soldiers who were becoming the new Hawks trained in the pouring rain, but her main weapon was *fire*. How useful would *she* be in a torrential downpour? Sadly, she was stuck inside the palace, and she could do only so much wandering through the library or visiting

the dining hall before she would absolutely lose her mind. Not that there was much left to *lose*, to be honest.

Speaking of the dining hall, she only visited it when her hunger became too pronounced to ignore it, the gnawing ache in her belly forcing her to eat even though she had no desire to do so. Picking at the food available, she would eat the tasteless slop just enough to calm the pangs in her stomach. Her mind and body feeling nothing short of sluggish, she knew she needed to eat more, and she *did* desire to be strong physically, for the strength of her muscles was all she had. The heart was where *true* strength lived, and the bond with Loki, not just the blood bond but the seemingly impossible love between them, had given her more strength than she'd ever had on her own. Now that he was gone, she felt *weak*.

*Powerless.*

Staring ahead blankly, just aware enough of her surroundings in the hall so as not to walk right into someone or into a pillar as she once had, she followed the same path to the healing room that she'd been visiting daily. Her first visit had been mere happenstance, strolling in out of sheer boredom. They'd once been crowded. After the battle with Jotunheim, the healers had been positively overwhelmed with the wounded, but the rooms were now empty, save for two people. One of those people was Jane Foster, not because she hadn't healed, but because she simply had no means of getting home. *Poor girl*—the hatred Sigyn had once felt for the human scientist had faded *entirely*. Jane hadn't asked for any of this. She hadn't *caused* any of this either. Every ounce of Sigyn's anger and hatred, and sometimes pity or sadness (gods, she didn't know *what* she felt) was now aimed at *King* Thor. However, Sigyn hadn't come to see Jane.

She'd come to visit a *new* friend, and walking slowly to his door, knocking softly, waiting for the invitation to enter, she stepped into the room where Heimdall was seated in a chair on the covered balcony. It was a good thing it was covered since it was *still* raining. Thor needed to cease his brooding. Did he know how *miserable* the entire realm was with no daylight at all?! She approached the once gatekeeper of Asgard with loud steps so as not to startle him and pulled a chair up next to him.

"Still no change then?" she asked gently, setting her hand on his shoulder.

Smiling weakly, Heimdall ran a finger across the bandage that was wrapped around his eyes and tied at the back of his head.

"Eir informed me that the sixth surgery might work, but her hopeful words are just that. *Hope*. Precious little of it, I'm afraid. I am not confident as I once was that my eyesight will be restored."

Sigyn frowned, tears burning her eyes. When the Jotun had struck him in the face during the attack in the observatory, ice piercing his golden all-seeing eyes, the giants had left him for dead. Sif and the warriors three, however, had battled their way down the bridge and had discovered him while fighting. Once they'd seen he was still breathing, they'd taken him straight to Eir. If it hadn't been for finding the gatekeeper, Thor's friends would have been tossed in the explosion, too. Disconcerting as it was to know that Asgard was without a gatekeeper capable of seeing the nine realms and their inhabitants, Sigyn was less intimidated by his presence and it made it *infinitely* easier to speak with him. Of course, she wanted his sight restored. Everyone did. The news of his blindness spreading throughout the realm, the citizens were more than a little concerned that they had no one to keep watch for any threats to the realm.

"I remain ever hopeful, Heimdall," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Reaching up, he found her hand on his shoulder and gave it a good squeeze. "I know, dear Lady Sigyn. Though if I had my sight still, I know not why you would want to know where Loki is. For wherever he is, you could not *follow* him, dear one."

Heart sinking, knowing he was right, she choked on a held back sob. "I know. It does not change the fact that I wish to know. After all he did for Asgard, maybe the Valkyries wouldn't turn him away. Do you not think that is a *possibility*, at least?"

Heimdall smiled. "Yes, Lady Sigyn. I *do* think that is possible. King Loki proved his worth many times over before his death."

"Do you suppose *I* proved my worth during battle?" she whispered, laughing weakly.

Heimdall turned his face toward her, and if she hadn't known better, she would have thought he *could* see her, even through the bandage.

"Lady Sigyn, you have *many* days ahead of you in which you can and *will* prove your worth. You are not bound to your past. If your time comes, and I hope it does not, I suspect you shall find your way to Valhalla."

Moved beyond words, she hugged him and kissed his dark cheek. "I shall see you tomorrow then," she said. "Sleep well, my friend." She helped him to his bed, and once he had settled, she walked quickly from the room and shut the door quietly.

Turning for the royal corridor, she paused at the sound of a small voice swearing behind another door, and walking toward the voice, she knocked, waiting for it to swing open. Jane

Foster, huffing and swiping her long brown hair away from her face, stood on the other side staring back at her in shock.

*"Oh my god!"*

Sigyn put up her hands, palms facing Jane, and backed up a step. "I'm not here to hurt you, Dr. Foster. You have my word."

Eyeing the Vanir suspiciously, Jane pursed her lips before nodding quickly. "Yeah, I bet if you'd wanted to off me you would have already. Come in. I mean, that is, if you want to. God, I don't even know what *day* it is." Rolling her big brown eyes, Jane bit her lip and stepped aside for Sigyn to enter the room that looked as though a tempest had formed right in the middle of it, blankets, clothes, papers, and books littering every surface.

"Sorry for the mess," she said, gesturing to the disaster. "I wasn't exactly expecting company. No one comes here. Well, I mean, *Thor* does, but when he does it's really weird. I don't know what I did, but clearly, I did something to make him hate me. And, *yay*, now I'm stuck here. I mean not that Asgard isn't *great*-" Jane paused, frowning at the storm blowing outside the balcony "-but I have a life back home, y'know? I bet you'd hate being stuck on Earth since you're from Asgard. I mean, you get it, right?"

Sighing heavily, Sigyn shrugged, shaking her head. "Actually, I hail from Vanaheim, though I claim Asgard as my home *now*. I do, however, understand your predicament." Circling on one foot, she waved a hand at the loose papers. "What is all this?"

Scowling, Jane darted around the room gathering the papers and clutching them to her chest before dumping them on the bed.

"Oh yeah so all this-" she paused, fumbling to find something beneath the pile, and retrieving a book, she flipped through the handwritten pages "-is the work I do back home. I'm rewriting everything I can remember. I didn't exactly have time to *pack* before I came here, or was brought here, I mean. Not that it would have mattered if I had since S.H.I.E.L.D. confiscated all my research. Assholes."

"A *shield* stole your work?" Confused, Sigyn reached for the book and snatched it from Jane's hands, landing on a page with a drawing of the bifrost.

Laughing, Jane shook her head. "No no no no. It's an acronym. Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. Stupid, right? It's one of my country's *top secret* government agencies."

Nodding in understanding, Sigyn handed the book back to her. "Sounds..... *overbearing*."

"You said it," Jane mumbled and plopped on the bed.

Empathy pulling at her features, Sigyn stared at the tiny human. "I have some experience with *overbearing* leaders myself. I *am* truly sorry that they took your work. Why did they? What exactly do you *do*?"

Without skipping a beat, Jane pushed aside the papers and patted the spot next to her on the bed. Brow furrowed, Sigyn sat down and looked at the scribbles and drawings that Jane pointed to in her book.

"I'm a scientist or more specifically an astrophysicist."

"I see," Sigyn said, squinting at the page. "You research the wonders of the universe then, and you stumbled upon the bifrost when Thor was banished."

Brows raising, Jane nodded slowly. "Yeah well, that's *one* way of putting it. I mean, that's *really* simplifying it. I wouldn't say that I *stumbled* upon the bifrost so much as recorded unknown electromagnetic disturbances in the atmosphere, compared them with the thermodynamic properties of our known—"

"Please stop," Sigyn cut her off with a wave of her hand. "Everything I said was perfectly accurate. There is no need to *overcomplicate* things. What interest does this S.H.I.E.L.D. agency have in the bifrost?"

Scowling, Jane threw up her hands. "What I discovered in New Mexico, which I *now* know was the bifrost, alongside my colleague Dr. Selvig is *proof* of other worlds. 'Other worlds' means other intelligent lifeforms in our universe. We little Earthlings refer to those beings as *aliens*. Our government has a century's worth of incidents that suggest the existence of other lifeforms, but they are constantly covering it up. Anyhow. That's not the point. The bifrost emitted enough energy to fuel a *nuclear* bomb, and it just sort of *fell* out of the sky! I mean, *nothing* like that has been recorded in our written history. And since I'd been the one researching it and making equipment to test it or possibly recreate a significantly *smaller* version of it, they just *had* to swoop in and take all of it. It's all a power play. Knowledge *is* power, after all. Who knows, maybe they're gonna use my research to make an Einstein-Rosen bridge of their own. Or at least try to. *Pfft. Good luck.*"

Rolling her eyes at Jane's insistence on using terms she wasn't familiar with, Sigyn held up a finger. "What is an *Einstein-Rosen bridge*?"

Jane laughed. "Oh sorry. Erm, it's a wormhole. It's like time travel across the universe. It's basically what the bifrost is."

Humming, Sigyn stood and walked to the rain-soaked balcony. "Will this agency not return your research to you when they have finished?"

Jane snorted, slamming the book shut. "I'm not holding my breath. I don't think they'll ever be *finished* with it. They probably hired on my colleague or may have detained him back when I was brought here. God, my friends and family are probably going out of their minds wondering what happened to me. Erik *probably* saw me leave but-

"Who is Erik?" Sigyn cut her off.

Glaring, annoyed with Sigyn's abrupt conversational skills and constant interruptions, Jane's shoulders slumped as she looked across to the construction on the bridge.

"Dr. Erik Selvig. I mentioned him earlier. I'm sorry, but I'm more than a little frustrated here. I have a life to get back to. If I could somehow let people back home know that I'm okay, then I would gladly stick around and do the most *incredible* research of my life here in Asgard. That is if it would *ever* stop raining."

Sigyn turned to face her, eyes darting back and forth, lips pursed. "Are you concerned for Erik?"

Jane nodded emphatically. "Well *yeah!* *Of course*, I am! S.H.I.E.L.D. detained Thor and accused him of being a *terrorist* just because he'd attempted to get back his hammer!"

Sigyn couldn't help the heavy sigh that escaped her as she moved from the balcony rubbing her temples. Jane Foster's voice was far too shrill for her liking.

"Calm down for a moment, please, and let me think."

Brows raising, Jane followed hot on Sigyn's heels. "Think about what? Is there something *you* can do? I mean, you were Loki's girlfriend, right? He was a sorcerer, and you are, too, right?"

At the mention of Loki, Sigyn turned sharply, eyes narrowed. "*Girlfriend?* Oh right. That's one way of saying it. Yes, and yes. I *might* be able to get you home before the bifrost is complete, but it'll take time, if it's even *possible*. If anyone would have known how to get you back, Loki would have. I'm quite sure I can find *something* in his books."



“Oh my god, *thank you!*” Jane threw her arms around Sigyn then.

Eyes wide, startled by the sudden contact, Sigyn gently pulled away from her. “You should know that he has *thousands* of books. Like I said. It’ll take some time. I’ll leave you be now.”

Nodding, Jane smiled. “Sure. See you soon. Or not soon. Or... whatever. Bye.”

---

~*Loki's Old Chambers, Royal Corridor, South Wing of The Palace*~

Other than his sheets and furs, which Sigyn tossed and turned in every night, she hadn’t moved any of Loki’s things since his ...

Death.

She hated that word. It was so final. She always used the less painful '*fall*' instead. Maybe it was time to just admit it though. Accept it. Allow that wretched word to fully absorb into the deepest fragments of her soul.

Sighing heavily, she stood in the middle of his chambers, looking around the space. He would have never willingly left his rooms in such a messy state. He hadn’t exactly had the time to *tidy up* that horrible day of the Jotun attack. The day he’d left her. The day he’d died. The day *she’d* died. She hadn't had the heart to change anything, disheveled as it was.

She took a deep breath, working up the courage to make that first change. Gingerly pulling a stack of his books from one of the many bookshelves scattered throughout his chambers, she let the tears welling up in her eyes fall. She’d been holding them back for two months now. That last day with him had been nothing *but* tears, and she’d not wanted to feel them wetting her cheeks ever again. She’d gone about her *pointless* existence with the same stoic resolve of the guards posted at the gates of the city or Heimdall even.

But now, literally moving his things, pulling out his desk chair, pushing aside the papers littering the surface of his workspace, it felt like *betrayal*. This was exactly where he’d stood that fateful morning. She remembered it so clearly, as though he were standing right there next her. He’d toyed with the horns of his helmet, which had now been melted by a flaming arrow and fallen over the edge of the sea. He’d grabbed his sleeping pants from the chair after rising to take on another day of kingly duties. His desperate words echoed in her mind:

*"Must I DO today?"*

He'd been exhausted, both physically and mentally, and yet he'd mustered the courage to get up and do his job, unlike the current king who'd pushed every single duty on poor Frigga. Frowning, fresh tears stinging her eyes, Sigyn pushed up from the desk. She genuinely wanted to help Jane get back to Earth. The girl didn't deserve the *not-so*-royal treatment she was receiving from Thor, and if Sigyn could put even one second of her time to good use and help someone, then dammit she'd wanted to, but all these journals, Loki's journals in his beautiful handwriting and meticulous drawing, were too much. Shaking her head, her lower lip trembled.

*I can't do this.*

Running her fingers across the pages, it was as though he was right there. The words moved up from the page, splaying across her vision, the echo of his voice speaking those words ringing in her ears. It was ruining her resolve. It was ruining *her*, as though there was any part of her left to be ruined in the first place. She would have to go through thousands of his journals and feel him and yet *not* feel him over and over.

Swallowing back a sob, she walked to his dressing room, the smell of leather overwhelming her instantly. She hadn't been in this room since that dreadful day when she'd grabbed a towel from one of the many shelves and had handed it to him for a morning wash. Even though the smell brought back all the memories she wanted to forget and yet *not* forget had her falling to her knees clutching one of his jackets to her chest, rocking back and forth, wailing from the sudden fresh grief coursing through her, it was....

*Relieving.*

Oh gods, she should have come here sooner. Why hadn't she just let herself scream *every single day*? She'd earned it hadn't she? The love of her life had been ripped from her, and she'd been there to witness every second of his devastating demise. If anyone deserved to scream, to sob, to lash out, to run away from everything, it was *her*. Like coming back from the dead, screaming was music to her ears, the eardrums having finally healed after that horrid explosion had shattered them.

*"Why couldn't you pull up, Loki?! Why?! You were too heavy for me! I couldn't save you! Gods, Loki, I'm so so so sorry...."*

Choking on the words, her cries becoming nothing but rasping whispers, she threaded her arms through his jacket sleeves, pulling the too big garment tightly around her, and grabbing a nearby shelf for support, she pulled to her feet, left the dressing room and

walked to the balcony. Relishing in the invigorating cold torrential downpour that drenched her in seconds, lightning flashing, thunder booming, she turned back to the room, and nodding once to herself, she walked to the desk once more. She was leaving puddles everywhere, but she didn't care for there *had* to be a portal to Midgard somewhere in this realm, and if *anyone* had known of it, it would have been Loki.

Opening the first journal, she began reading quietly. A small tendril of black smoke seeping from her fingertip, the candelabra on the desk lit in one swift whisper.

## Chapter 13: Are You Ready?

~Asgard, One month later (3 months since Loki fell)~

She'd told Jane it would take some time. "Some" time indeed. Four weeks to be exact. Day and night Sigyn had read, her nose buried in Loki's well-worn books, the spines permanently creased and nearly torn apart after centuries of overuse. Meticulously perusing through his original spells, conclusions, sketches, narratives, and rather *intimate* daily journal entries (honestly, had it been necessary to describe each sexual encounter in such *detail?*) with little more than two hours of sleep every other night, Sigyn found the answer she'd been looking for tucked away in a lone corner of his seven hundredth journal, on page four hundred eighty-two of nine hundred pages.

"*The Unknown Gateway to Midgard,*" he'd written, his typically beautiful swirling script replaced by nearly illegible scribbles.

Hastily recorded without concern for proper penmanship, one could *feel* the excitement in the ink.

*"I've lost track of the time that has passed since I first began my quest for a door to the mortal realm. Has it been two centuries? How old am I? Three hundred and sixty-two years old. Though after today, I feel as young and eager as a boy on the first day of the academic year...."*

Grinning at the mental image of Loki sitting at his desk, his tongue sticking out and licking his lips subconsciously the way he did when he was thinking hard, Sigyn quickly scrolled through the lengthy account of his discovery. The portals followed a pattern. Jotunheim was nothing more than a rock, thus the portal itself was hidden inside a large boulder. Vanaheim, the greenest of the realms, covered in forests, connected to Asgard through a lone evergreen tree. The portal to Muspelheim, the land of fire itself, hid deep inside a volcanic trench under the Eternal Sea. Likewise, since the majority of Midgard's surface was ocean, Loki had searched the floors of each body of water in Asgard, even taking on the absurd task of searching the floor of the Eternal Sea, which was when he'd discovered the horrid Muspelheim portal.

*“Why did I scour the bottom of the sea first? What a ludicrous waste of time! I nearly killed myself in that fire portal! One wouldn’t expect to find the door to the home of the fire demons under water, for fuck’s sake....”*

Not in the sea, but deep inside Silver Lake, he’d found it.

*“Of course, it would be in the last place I looked. How fitting that it had been right under my nose all this time, quite literally since Thor and I swim in the lake every day of every summer. We’ve been swimming there since we were boys....”*

Slamming the book shut, exhilarated to have found the answer at long last, Sigyn yanked her boots on and dashed out of the room.

---

Riding on Sinir to the lake, Sigyn pulled the furry hood of Loki’s jacket up to shield her hair from the hard rain, and dismounting once they’d come to the shore, she paused staring at the waves lapping up on the sand. Heart pounding, hands and feet numbing, head swimming, fear washed over her with such force that she stumbled to the ground trying to catch her breath.

Had she not been in deep water since her fall in Vanaheim? No, she hadn’t. Now she knew why. The water *terrified* her. The thought of drowning, of the pressure closing in on her, breaking her apart piece by piece, was the worst death she could imagine. Even though there would be no falls to tumble over her body this time, the sheer idea of submerging herself had her in a panic, and unfortunately, the portal was at the deepest part of the lake. She had no choice, though. She’d promised Jane.

More importantly, she’d promised *herself*. She’d promised to actually *do* something with her life rather than just wander aimlessly for eternity. Not that she’d had even the slightest taste of eternity. It had only been three months since he’d fallen. Still. Three months without him had felt like a small eternity in and of itself.

Shaking her head, determined to overcome the fear (you are Sigyn of *Asgard*, and you can and *must* do this) she removed the jacket, leaving only her armor and boots and walked into the shallow water until she could no longer touch the bottom. Diving below the surface, her eyes adjusting to the dark water, she turned slowly in all directions looking for the portal that Loki had described; spotting the blurred shifting of light at the bottom, she swam deeper toward it.

Able to hold her breath for a little over an hour, she didn't *need* to breathe. She could have made it to the bottom and back up easily. Unfortunately, for some unknown reason (maybe she'd been distracted by the relief of getting closer and knowing the gut-wrenching experience was almost over) she took a deep *idiotic* breath. Water down her windpipe, her body reacting violently to the invasion, she coughed involuntarily, sucking down more water still.

*For Hel's sake!* —If she'd wanted to kill herself, she certainly wouldn't have done it *this* way. She'd died underwater once, and *oh gods* she was about to do it again. Why did her lungs keep trying to breathe? They didn't *need* air! Granted, they didn't *like* the water (she wasn't a *fish* after all) but why couldn't they figure out that they were only causing her to suck down more water with each cough? Panic was setting in. The very thing that she'd been afraid would happen was coming to fruition, but now the blackness on the outside of her vision had started closing in, she found herself *falling* rather than sinking as black smoke burst from her fingers, the water around her evaporating in the intense heat within seconds.

*"What the-!"*

Gasping, her cry cutting off when she landed just inches from the portal, she gaped at the sight around her. Fiery magic still flowing from her hands of its own volition, it swirled around her body protectively and exploded up and out in all directions, the scorching smoke keeping the water at bay. Silver Lake was *disappearing* right before her eyes. Not only the lake water, but the downpour of Thor's making was drying up as well. Momentarily stunned, she watched the absurd phenomenon open-mouthed.

She hadn't meant to use her magic. She hadn't even *considered* using it. What the Hel had happened? It was as though the smoke had a mind of its own, and seeing its imminent demise, it had sprung to life with the same power she'd experienced fighting back-to-back with Loki on the bridge. Only this time there was no Loki. It was just her. For the first time in three miserable grief laden months, she felt *dangerous* once more. Strong. Powerful. If he were still alive and they'd combined their magic, they could have destroyed an entire *realm* together.

Blinking, she cleared her head and flexed her fingers, testing the magic. It twisted and bent with each curl of her fingers. She reined it in just enough to keep herself dry since an entire lake vanishing in an instant *might* have been alarming to distant prying eyes. Staring in wonder at the fish swimming just outside her little bubble of safety, she gingerly walked back up the floor of the lake and onto the shore. Pulling the smoke back into her body completely, the steam transformed once more to water at the loss of the heat. It rushed

back into the lake, waves slamming against the shore, and the once evaporated rain began drenching her again. Turning to Sinir, she smirked before looking up at the swirling storm clouds.

“Apparently, even the God of Thunder himself can’t put out my fire, Sin.”

Infinitely proud, she practically skipped across the shore to the horse, her boots kicking up water and sand, and climbing onto the saddle, smiling wide, she urged him forward toward the palace with the click of her tongue. She would take Jane Foster home tonight, and she didn’t need a damn bifrost to do it.

---

~The Desert~

Wiggling his fingers, green sparks shooting out from the tips, Loki stood at the base of the same set of stairs where the grey man had first told him the proposition. This was the day that he would leave the desert. This was the day he would escape to freedom. Midgard wouldn’t have been his first choice for that escape, but it was a start and would feel like *Valhalla* compared to *this* place.

His magic was back in full force—*Beyond* full force, in truth. He was filled to the brim with it, seiðr flowing through his veins as fast as it had when Sigyn’s smoke had melded with his green light on the bridge. Not only his magic, but his body was stronger than ever before. Two months had passed since the proposition, and he’d done nothing but train his magic, his mind, and his muscles during that time.

His torturer clearly thought it was worth the risk to make him strong enough to destroy their desert with just a flick of his wrist if it guaranteed he would retrieve the cube. They’d removed whatever magic blocking barrier had surrounded his prison cell and had given him empty journals and spellbooks (gods only knew how they’d acquired such books in the first place) and had ordered him to retrain the magic that had all but ceased flowing through his veins.

After the first week, he’d self-duplicated *sixteen* times. They were not illusions. No, these had been sixteen *corporeal* copies of himself. Never had he conjured *that* many at once. Up until his fall, five had been his best effort. Perhaps he’d just needed proper incentive. Escaping from an eternity of torture and possibly saving the nine, Sigyn included, was a bit more motivating than a simple competition with himself.

Along with his magic, which had been impressive, to say the least, to the grey man and the native race which he learned were called Chitauri, his body had been forced into its top physical condition. Forcing had been hardly necessary though. He'd desired to be strong since he could remember. Asgard had little tolerance for perceived physically *weak* males, after all. But comparing himself with his impossibly stronger brother had been *slightly* demoralizing. It was why he'd never put as much effort into physical training as he could have, but there was no big brother anymore. That ship had sailed the moment the blond bastard had broken the bridge.

Loki's prior weight of five hundred pounds, which had shrunk to three hundred during his time in isolation, had returned plus some. Well toned, he hadn't bulked up to the ridiculous size of Thor, but at five hundred and fifty pounds of nothing but organs, bones, and lean muscle, he could run faster and longer, lift four times his weight, and lay waste to each bestia and Chitauri they put in the training ring with him. He was quite sure that the absurd amount of seiðr running through his veins had strengthened him more than the lifting, running, and sparring.

Biting his cheek to keep an excited smile from spreading across his face, he watched as the grey man, who he'd learned now was simply referred to as '*the Other*' (they'd thought *really* hard over that name, hadn't they) descended the stairs slowly, eyeing Loki up and down. Midgardian clothes had been fashioned for him, and as much as Loki disliked them, it would be easier to work with the humans if he at least *dressed* like them.

Black leather lace up boots hid beneath close fitting dark denim (an odd fabric indeed) pants. Clinging to his lean torso, a dark green short-sleeved *t-shirt* (what an *absurd* name for a garment) with a too low neckline was tucked into the hip hugging pants that were fastened with a black belt. He was pleased with the black leather jacket, too short in length for his liking, only reaching his hips, but the smell was perfect and reminded him of *his* clothes. He'd tied his hair back. It was a short tail, just barely curling over the black elastic band, but it was less conspicuous than leaving it loose as long as it was, and he most certainly would *not* cut it.

The Other tilted his head sideways, glaring at the fully restored Asgardian two steps down from him. "I do not think it is necessary to remind you of our terms, Loki."

Glaring back at the hideous rather aptly named Other, Loki fought to keep from snapping the man's neck right there. He may have been in their desert for three months, but he was still Asgardian royalty and deserved to be addressed by something a bit more formal than '*Loki*.' He'd been a *king* for fuck's sake.



Calmer after taking a few deep breaths, Loki nodded. "Just get on with it. I am quite ready."

The Other showed his yellow pointed teeth once more from under his black hood and nodded. "Very well, Loki."

Turning away from him, the Other looked up the stairs. Loki followed his line of sight. He'd never actually attempted to see the top of the stairs since there had been so many, and they were so dimly lit that he could scarcely see the top in the first place, but now looking up, he saw the back of a chair (more like a minimalistic *throne*) with no legs swiveling slowly from side to side. Purple in color, a large hand snaked out from the side, palm up, fingers wide. Ever so slowly, the fingers curled into a fist, a faint blue light pulsing around it.

Head tilting, Loki waited. Ten minutes went by. Sighing, jaw jutting out slightly, he rolled his eyes. *Nothing* was happening. Where was this magical tesseract portal that would send him to Midgard? Should it have taken this long? Were they playing tricks on him? Had there been no mission at all? Were they getting his hopes up just to torture him when they shattered them? No. *He* was the trickster. It wasn't the other way around. Maybe they had discovered his not so obliging intentions, though he didn't know how they would have. He was most certainly *not* talking in his sleep. The instant his magic had returned, he'd cast a dreamspell to keep his secrets safe while unconscious. Maybe his torturer simply wasn't as powerful as the Other had claimed.

Turning to him now, Loki laughed dryly. "I must say, never before have I seen such a *fantastic* display of power. Perhaps you should fetch him the tesseract owner's manual—"

His quip halted mid-sentence as a dull ache formed right behind his eyes. It wasn't too painful. Nothing he couldn't ignore. He'd had worse headaches than this. They usually dissipated with a glass of water. It was becoming more intolerable with each second though, and he winced at the growing discomfort. Closing his eyes, his brow furrowed as that dull ache right behind his eyes sharpened, the pressure increasing tenfold. He'd never felt anything quite like it. He'd been stabbed, had his ribs broken repeatedly, been kicked in the face, fallen through deep space and had felt as though he was being ripped apart, but this was the most *acute* agony he'd ever experienced. If he'd been home, he would have gone straight to Eir. He needed an ender—*Now*.

He took a deep breath. Maybe the blood would move faster and stop building up right there in that horrid spot right behind his eyes with the extra oxygen. Although now the pain was no longer behind his eyes but *in* his eyes. He felt as though syringes full of water had been stabbed into them, the plungers pushing the liquid through the needles. His forehead beaded with sweat. Gods, this was *torturous!* He feared his eyes might literally

*explode*. How in all the godsdamn nine was he supposed to accomplish anything if he was *blind*?!

The Other grabbed Loki's chin, and prying one eye open with his thumb and forefinger, he smiled crookedly. "Hello there, Blue Eyes."

Loki wanted to ask why the man had called him that, but the pain was too great for him to speak. His vision was clouding over, a bluish tinge tainting everything he saw, and he blinked at the color, instantly regretting the movement.

*Shit!* —It hurt to use his lids at all, and he slammed them shut. Jaw clenching, he rubbed them trying to relieve some of the pressure. *Blue Eyes* his torturer's minion had called him. Were they making his eyes *blue*? *No, no, no, no, no.*

*NO*—Sigyn had adored the green! Her words from what felt like a lifetime ago echoed in his mind.

*"... I started having dreams. Dreams of a pair of mesmerizing, beautiful eyes.... emerald eyes.... I must have sketched them a thousand times. Those eyes haunted me.... I looked for them in every face, to no avail. Everyone had the same brown or blue color..."*

If he ever saw her again, doubtful at *best*, what would she think of the blue? And just how blue were they? *Thor* blue? Oh gods, he hoped not. Would they change back? They *had* to! Loki of Asgard had black hair and green eyes. It may have been petty (*it wasn't!*) but he hated the thought of looking in the mirror and seeing blue eyes looking back at him. What had his mother once said to him?

*"Green is for life, and I want your life to be so beautiful, Loki..."*

Oh, how wise his mother was. What an absolute *prophetess*. Green had brought Sigyn to him; therefore, taking away the green was akin to taking away everything that had made his life beautiful. Surely this wasn't permanent. It had to be part of traveling through the cube, which he knew was blue. The great book of history in the hall of the world tree had a living picture of the ancient relic. They would change back once he was through. Yes, they would change back. He refused to think anything else. He wouldn't spend another second dwelling on it.

Despite rubbing his temples, his fingertips glowing bright green as he sent pain relieving magic into his eyes, the agony refused to stop. This truly *was* a fantastic display of power. No one had ever delivered a blow that he couldn't at least *dim* with his magic. It

had to be the cube. His torturer couldn't do this to him, not with Loki's renewed and superior seiðr.

He managed to snarl through his teeth, spit soaking his chin. *"End this! Please! I can't-"*

Bile rising and burning his vocal cords, his words caught at the back of his throat as the Other shushed him, a hand on his raven head, slowly pushing him to his knees. Not that it took much effort. Loki could hardly have stayed on his feet much longer.

Backing away from Loki, the man crooned, "There there, Blue Eyes. It'll all be over soon."

*Stop calling me that!* —Face screwing up in agony, Loki bent over, fingers splayed wide on the stone surface beneath him as sudden positively *stifling* heat gathered around him. Now would have been the ideal time to turn Jotun and spare himself from what felt like *fire* surrounding him. Gritting his teeth, he managed to get one eye open and marvel at the translucent glowing blue sphere of heat encircling him. It rippled, the strange physics of the sphere moving and bending what little light shone from the stars. Chest burning with each breath, bracing himself against the rock, he curled over as the glowing sphere pushed out further from him, the blue orb growing. He had a bit more room to breathe now, but it was still too hot, and his throbbing eyes continued to torment him.

He hadn't been told expressly, but he imagined the cube was being heavily guarded. Hopefully, no one would attack him before he'd had a chance to speak since his torturer hadn't furnished him with a weapon. He did have his magic though, and it would be more than enough to protect him. That was if he could even *use* it. He was positively exhausted already, and he hadn't even gone through the cube.

The Other, still visible through the sphere, smiled wide then as the desert faded, his grating voice echoing in Loki's ears. "Bye bye, Blue Eyes."

Agony coursing through his body, the acute pain in his eyes tripling in strength, Loki screamed then as the sphere exploded.

---

~*The Midgard Portal, Silver Lake, Asgard*~

It had been black as pitch outside the balcony of Jane's healing room, the moons covered by the twisting storm clouds when Sigyn had helped gather the papers strewn about the room and had tossed them in a satchel along with the strange contraption called a '*phone*' and the small leather thing that held American currency and plastic cards that had been in Jane's

pocket when Thor had brought her to Asgard. Moving silently through the great halls of the palace, the dark of night shielding them from the guards, they had escaped to the stables.

Riding back to the lake, now with Jane's tiny arms wrapped tightly around her waist, Sigyn considered the consequences of what she was about to do. If anyone discovered *how* Jane had disappeared, if it somehow led back to Sigyn, she would be packing her bags and moving into the comforts of the *dungeons* when she returned. She hadn't exactly been on Thor's good side lately. Not that he seemed to possess a good side *at all* anymore (maybe that wasn't fair). But the current certainly *useless* king didn't know any portals other than the one that led to Jotunheim existed, and without Heimdall's sight, with Odin still asleep, there was no way for him, for *anyone*, to see the Midgard portal.

Thor would be *beyond* pissed if he learned that she'd been withholding such information from him. No doubt his pride would be wounded further if someone let it leak that the portal had been known only to his now *beloved* brother. Thor had become *mad* with envy where Loki was concerned. There was a sound reason for the secrecy though! Loki had known that it would have only taken *one* person. One person would become two, two would become three, three would become four, and so on and so forth until *all* Asgard knew, and if Asgardians knew of the portals, the other realms would learn soon enough when random *Æsir* appeared in their lands without the bifrost. What then was to stop further invasions? Look at what the Jotuns had done when they'd discovered *their* portal!

It mattered not. She was taking Jane home regardless of the outcome. It may have seemed a small and insignificant thing, but this task was *all* she had. Without it, she had *nothing*. Nothing but despair and longing for Loki. She would walk right back into his dressing room and scream into his clothes until sleep overtook her. Day after day. Night after night. Until she found another small thing to give her existence *something* resembling purpose.

Pulling on the reins as they came to the sandy beach, she lowered Jane down easily with one arm (little thing couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds) before hopping off. Jane approached the shore, her feet wet from the waves crashing over her shoes, and Sigyn turned to Sinir, stroking his mane.

"Wait for me, Sin?" The stunning horse lowered his head and put his nose into the crook of her neck. "I will return before dawn, dear one," she said, a tear running down her cheek as she stretched up to kiss the stallion's forehead.

Jane looked nervously over her shoulder at Sigyn and pointed to the lake. "So, this, um, portal to Earth is at the bottom?" Nodding, Sigyn grabbed Jane's hand, but the smaller

woman yanked it back nervously. “Okay. That might be a problem. A *big* problem. I’m a good swimmer, but I can’t hold my breath for *that* long.”

One corner of her mouth raising slightly, Sigyn shook her head. “You won’t need to hold your breath.”

Jane furrowed her brow, confused. “What do you-”

Jane’s mouth slammed shut as Sigyn dragged her into what had once been Silver Lake, the water turning to steam as they walked down the muddy lake bottom further and further, black smoke enveloping them protectively. Mouth agape, Jane stared wide-eyed as they descended to the deepest part of the lake, the smoke barrier evaporating even the pouring rain.

“Holy *shit*.”

Sigyn smirked sideways at her. “Did I not tell you that you needn’t hold your breath?”

Unsettled by Sigyn’s magic, Jane laughed nervously as they neared a large faintly shimmering hole in the middle of the lake bottom. Sigyn looked at her then, a delighted smile spreading across her face.

“Are you ready to go home, Jane?”

Gulping audibly, Jane breathed more quickly. “*That’s* the portal? God, Sigyn, I don’t know if-

”

Without a word, Sigyn grabbed her hand and jumped into the hole, Jane’s scream echoing in the prismatic tunnel. Magic still protecting them from the water, they came through the portal, their feet landing on wet sand as steam shot up from outside the smoke sphere, fish swimming away from the thick barrier. Clinging to Sigyn as though letting go would be the death of her and positively *terrified*, Jane refused to look at their new surroundings.

Gingerly removing herself from Jane’s tight hold on her waist, Sigyn whispered, “Open your eyes.”

Hesitant to oblige, Jane peered through one squinted eye and squealed in sheer delight as they ascended the floor of what would have been a lake or ocean (how was she supposed to know what body of water they’d just *fallen* into?) and continued until they reached the shore, completely dry.

“Okay, you are officially *amazing*, Sigyn. That was *unbelievable*. You make Thor’s lightning tricks look *boring*.”

Sigyn laughed out loud at that and shrugged. What a nice change. To laugh. Genuinely. Even for a moment.

Checking out their surroundings, Jane twirled on the sand. It was a star filled night, though some light pollution was dimming the effect, and that light pollution was coming from one source: a gigantic white compound just south of the beach they’d stumbled upon.

Jane’s jaw dropped, and Sigyn looked to the building asking, “Are you familiar with that place? Do you know where we are?”

Nodding excitedly, Jane pulled out her phone and slid her finger across its glassy surface, a picture of an attractive strawberry blond woman’s face appearing on the screen.

“I can’t believe this. I mean, this is insanely convenient. I know *exactly* where we are.” Bouncing on her feet to keep warm in the strong sea breeze, she put the phone to her ear. “Pepper? Hey! Yeah, it’s Jane! Um, yeah, I’m fine....Oh my god, really?....How the hell did you know that?....Erik is there?.... Well, so this is gonna sound absolutely crazy, but bear with me.”

Pursing her lips, Sigyn listened to Jane’s side of the conversation as she sat down and ran her fingers through the soft white sand. It was slightly cool, refreshingly so. Oh gods, how *marvelous* to sit outside with not a cloud in sight! It had been three months since she’d felt the fresh air without the sting of freezing rain hitting her cheeks, and sighing, she leaned back and lied down. Huh, so *this* was Midgard—It was surprisingly lovely. She couldn’t stay, obviously. Sinir wasn’t the only creature waiting for her. Frigga needed her desperately, and she refused to simply run off while Thor destroyed her home with his idiotic rule.

Jane’s high-pitched voice broke through her thoughts. “Sigyn?”

Still gazing at the stars, Sigyn sighed. “Hmm?”

Jane began speaking so rapidly that it was difficult for Sigyn to make sense of her words. “So that huge house over there is *Tony Stark’s* summer home. Or at least, one of them. I’ve been here before. I mean it was a while ago, but I recognized it obviously. Can you believe that? Of all the places in the world, the portal is right here off Catalina?! Right by Stark’s place? That is insanely convenient.”

Sitting up, Sigyn blinked at her. “Stark is the Iron Man, correct?”

Jane paused before waving her hand and nodding. “Oh right, I’d forgotten that I’d told you about him. So, his assistant, Pepper Potts, is an old school friend of mine. She’s at the house right now and told me to come on up. And you know what’s better? *Erik* is there, which is awesome, though it sucks that he got pulled into all this S.H.I.E.L.D. shit. Apparently, Stark is working on something for them that relates to my research, so they flew Erik in to help. I’m so glad that I don’t have to get an airline ticket to New Mexico. Did I mention how insanely convenient this is? I really can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done. Seriously, I really appreciate it.”

Smiling, Sigyn nodded once and stood, brushing the sand off Loki’s leather jacket and her leggings. “You’ll be alright then? There is nothing more I can do?”

Waving her off, Jane chuckled. “No, I’m good. So, um, I guess, travel safe?”

Sigyn nodded again with a small smile, and Jane turned and trudged through the sand in the direction of the compound. Sighing heavily (she wasn’t exactly *eager* to return to her stormy grief laden Asgard) she walked back into the waves, and feeling her magic swelling within her, the smoke sphere appeared once more around her. *Wait.*

Pulling the magic back into her fingers, eyes squinting, she turned on her heel to face the compound once again. Everything had taken on a faint blue hue. She blinked at the color.

“What the Hel...?”

It hit her like a ton of bricks. Fullness. Wholeness. *Completeness*. For the first time in three months, her mind wasn’t remotely fuzzy but clear as daylight. The dull chronic ache in every muscle that had plagued her since that day on the bridge disappeared. She felt *strong*, and she wasn’t even using her magic. She inhaled deeply as the breeze turned colder.

Peppermint.

Woodsmoke.

*Leather.*

Sometimes she got a whiff of it in Loki’s chambers, though it seemed more like a memory rather than an *actual* smell. This, however, wasn’t just the lingering scent on his jacket that she was wearing. No, this was not a memory. This was the real and *living* smell of his

*throat*, and it was on the breeze that was coming directly from that obscenely large compound. It was pulling her like a magnet, filling the empty spaces in her bones, in her heart, in her mind. The half of her that had disappeared from the bridge three months ago was reappearing out of nowhere.

Norns, help her—*The bond*. How in the universe was she feeling *that* again?! What sort of cruel trickery was this? Only one thing could stir up that amount of energy within her, and that was impossible because that one thing was dead.

*Loki*.

Eyes wide, she bolted after Jane, and catching up quickly, she grabbed her by the elbow. “I’m coming with you.”

Gaping at her, Jane whispered heatedly, “*What?* Sigyn, did you forget what S.H.I.E.L.D. did to Thor? They would do the same to you! You can’t be here! We’ll have to tell the whole story about the portal! If it was just me, I could say I didn’t know how I’d gotten back because my mind had been wiped or something! But if *you* come waltzing in there? My god, you are basically a walking red flag. They thought Thor was *crazy*. I mean, do you wanna be locked up?”

Jaw clenched, glaring at the compound, Sigyn walked ahead of her. “Thor had been *stripped* of his power, Jane. Of course, they thought he was mad. I can easily prove that I am not of this realm. A little fire. A little show of strength. Honestly, though, I could care less if they think I’m mad. I’m coming with you either way.”

Taken aback, Jane ran after her. “Okay okay, so you’re coming with me. But *why?*”

Sigyn stopped then, and eyes wild, she looked back to Jane. “Tell me, do you believe in ghosts?”

Blinking rapidly, Jane fumbled for words. “*Ghosts?* I, uh, I don’t, um, know, uh, I mean science, or reason, that is, doesn’t really—”

Rolling her eyes, Sigyn turned back to the compound, and stalking towards it, she spoke over her shoulder.

“Well, *start* believing, Dr. Foster, because you’re about to see one.”



## Chapter 14: I Will Find You

~Tony Stark's Catalina Compound, California, USA, Earth~

"For god's sake, stop *whining*, Tony," Pepper said, brushing a strand of strawberry blond hair behind her ears and rolling her eyes as she placed a dark roast pod in the Keurig brewer. "You don't have to talk to her. I know Jane isn't exactly your favorite person. You don't even have to be in the *same room*."

"You think I'm concerned about talking to Pipsqueak?" Tony snorted, raising an eyebrow. "Hardly. No need to open my mouth since she won't ever shut up. You'd think that a fellow scientist, you know, someone who speaks *my* language, would be able to hold my attention for longer than two seconds. Actually, no. Two seconds is too generous. Oh, and '*not exactly my favorite person?*' Congratulations, baby. You've just won the gold medal for the understatement of the century."

"*Your* language?" she scoffed. "Science? Really? Tony, the only language you speak is *arrogance*."

He didn't look at her as he scrolled through his mentions on Twitter. "I could have *you* do this, you know? You should be grateful for the sacrifice I'm making here. Doing this myself. I mean there are *thousands* of these. Aw, look. More heart eyes emojis and proposals. Cute."

Pepper smirked. "Such a *sacrifice* for you to see people worship you."

Furrowing his brow, he pursed his lips. "What exactly is a '*bae?*' That word is everywhere. Thank god for Urban Dictionary. And what the fuck is with people calling me '*dad?*' That is so far beyond creepy. I'm never gonna be able to have kids. '*Dad*' is ruined for me. Maybe I could have them call me daddy instead."

He shivered. "No. That's even worse. Ick. Stop asking me to follow you. God, how old are you? Thirteen?" He mumbled something about crazy fangirls, and Pepper, eyes narrowed, snatched the phone from him.

"I feel like you aren't listening to me when you look at that thing instead of me. Actually, I feel like you aren't listening to me even when you *are* looking at me."

Brown eyes glinting with boyish charm, Tony smiled. "Baby, you know I'm an excellent multitasker."

"I wouldn't go that far, Stark," Agent Coulson deadpanned, walking into the expansive kitchen.

He joined them at the counter setting a transparent tablet in front of the billionaire. Glaring at the high level S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, Tony swiped his finger across the screen, a holographic image of a blue cube springing up from the glassy surface.

"This thing is really starting to irk me, Coulson. I've been working on extracting the tiniest bit of its energy for months. It refuses to do what I say, and I've nearly been electrocuted ten times. Actually, I *have* been electrocuted. I swear I've heard an evil laugh every time it's shocked me. It's worse than Dum-E. Am I right, Jarvis? Back me up here." He looked toward the ceiling, an electronic male voice with a crisp British accent piping up.

"I think it is more likely that the small electroshocks alter your hearing momentarily, sir."

Fighting back laughter, Coulson and Pepper eyed each other.

Turning to them, Tony scoffed, "Did that little A.I. of my *own* making just suggest that I am hearing voices?"

Whistling, his plaid shirt wrinkled and untucked, Erik Selvig then strolled into the room and made a much-needed cup of coffee, gesturing to the holographic cube.

"High stress environments are known for causing auditory hallucinations, Tony, and nothing is more stressful than attempting to control an energy source as powerful as the tesseract many times over without success. Especially for someone of your genius-"

"True," Tony cut in with an enthusiastic nod. "I have no equal when it comes to intelligence."

"-and *controlling* nature." Erik finished his thought. "She simply can't be controlled. She has a mind of her own. What Jane and I saw in New Mexico had the exact same molecular structure. Something with that much power is beyond even *you*, Tony."

Erik rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He'd been awake for forty-eight hours now. He just couldn't see where the damn thing was pulling its power from. He'd been trying to understand it for months and was getting nowhere. The thing really did have a mind of its own. When would S.H.I.E.L.D. accept that and just lock it up somewhere safe? Every report

he and Stark had filed about the cube described it as unstable and incapable of providing the green energy source that they wanted to distribute for trillion-dollar profits. No good would come of attempting to manipulate it. As far as he could tell, the agency was led by a bunch of greedy power-hungry crooks. He wasn't interested in their so-called *green energy* program. He had just wanted to find a way to get Jane home, and he was quickly losing hope that the tesseract would help him do just that. Not that he needed it *now* since she had miraculously made it back somehow.

Walking to the wet bar in the main living room across from the kitchen, Tony sighed and running a hand through his hair, he poured himself a shot of whiskey, shaking his head in frustration.

Joining him, Pepper huffed, "Can we get back to the matter at hand? Jane Foster will be here any minute now. Rather than scratching our heads and walking in circles about the impenetrable and impossible to control cube, maybe we could get some insight from her. She *was* in some alien world that had swept her up with the same energy as the cube, wasn't she? *I* for one want to hear that story."

"I think we all do," Coulson said, nodding and putting his hands in his pockets just as something—something *big*—crashed outside.

Rolling his eyes as several S.H.I.E.L.D. agents dashed into the room with them, Tony looked out the floor to ceiling window. *What NOW?* His jaw dropped at the sight of a woman standing amidst what was left of the metal gate at the entrance to his driveway.

"Did Pipsqueak come back as a fucking *she-demon*?!" Tony shrieked, pointing out the window. "Look what she did to my gate!"

Erik sighed and ran after Pepper who had left at the sound of the crash. He hadn't seen Jane in three months, and he wanted to know where Thor had taken her, and how the hell she'd come back.

---

It hadn't been *that* long of a trek to the compound (two miles at *most*) but Sigyn had still needed to slow her pace for Jane to keep up. Every few minutes, Jane had yelled for Sigyn to '*slow down, please!*' Running short on patience, she had almost screamed for the tiny shrill scientist to shut her trap. Instead, she'd simply broken into a full run, ignoring the protests behind her.

Black and utilitarian with square metal slats, she arrived at the ugliest gate she'd ever laid eyes on. Upon inspecting the unsightly thing, she couldn't find a latch or lock. How did it open? Should she just climb over it? Shrugging, she decided climbing was the best course of action. Just as she set her boot into the metal rod at the base that held the slats together, a blinding white light shone on her, and a voice through a megaphone shouted at her.

"Step away from the gate. I repeat, step away from the gate. This is private property, and you are trespassing."

Approaching her from the other side of the gate, a group of four men and women in black suits aimed their 9mm pistols at her. Jane came up behind her, finally, and waved her arms at them.

"It's okay! I know Pepper! I'm Dr. Jane Foster and-"

Shutting out the rest of Jane's words, Sigyn set her jaw. She didn't give a damn who these people were or what they considered '*private property*.' She didn't know how it was possible, but Loki was somewhere in that house. Shielding her eyes with the back of her hand, she angrily kicked at the gate with all the force in her right leg.

It didn't *quite* shatter from the contact, but it did bust open loudly, and the metal slat that she'd kicked had a small indentation in the shape of her boot. Shots fired immediately. Yelping from one of the rounds that grazed her, she hissed and closed her hand over the wound just below the crook of her right arm as the suits came at her. Were these people completely *mad*? She'd just kicked in a gate that probably wouldn't have dented if one of their *trucks* had crashed into it! Had it not crossed any of their minds that she might be more than capable of withstanding a few bullet wounds or a little tackle?

"Take your hands *off* me!"

Cursing under her breath, she struggled against them. Gods *dammit!* They were stronger than she'd thought they would be. Her smoke was dangerously close to seeping out of the tips of her fingers. One more hand on her, and she would absolutely *destroy* them. She didn't want to resort to violence (kicking the gate in did *not* count) but if she didn't get in there and find Loki in two minutes, she was going to burn them to *crisps*.

Running to them quickly, Jane grabbed a suit's shoulder. He knocked her back, and frustrated, she kicked at his back, surprised by her own brazenness. Eyes wide, maybe in fear, maybe in shock, she shouted at them.

"Hey! *Stop!* Let go of her! She's with *me!*"

Scrambling away from Sigyn when Coulson shouted at them to stand down, the suits kept their guns aimed at her as she stood to her feet. She took a few deep breaths, managing to reel back in the smoke that had just begun to escape her fingers. Fuming, she shot one of them a murderous look, and to her surprise, he holstered the weapon and raised his hands looking back and forth between Sigyn and Jane.

“Sorry, ma’am, but you kicked in the gate! That isn’t just an act of aggression. It’s a downright *threat*. We were only doing our jobs and looking out for the safety of everyone else.”

“Oh, your little gate can be reconstructed easily,” Sigyn shouted. “I wasn’t going to hurt any of you. Of course, then you *shot* me.” Sigyn glared at him and waved off his words. Who cared about the stupid gate? This Tony Stark person had billions of that American currency that she’d seen in Jane’s wallet.

Pepper ran to Jane and gave her a quick squeeze as she eyed the disaster. “Long time, no see, huh?”

Jane laughed weakly as Erik wrapped her in a tight hug. “Oh, I’m so relieved that you’re alive, Jane!” he said, kissing her temple. “When Thor took you god only knows where—”

“Asgard,” Sigyn answered the non-question and redid the raven side braid that had come loose during the scuffle. They were wasting time. She needed to get *inside!*

“What’s that?” Pepper’s asked, her voice shaking somewhat, clearly nervous.

Jane piped up quickly. “Asgard is where Thor is from. It’s his home planet... er.... realm. Thor was.... or.... is.... I mean.... basically, an alien.”

Pepper winked at her old school pal and lowered her voice. “Yeah, the best-looking alien I ever saw if the pictures from Coulson’s file are accurate. To think you slept with him.... gotta admit, I’m a little envious.”

Disgusted by the blond woman’s words, Sigyn rolled her eyes. They should see Thor *now* in all his decided *non*-glory. Fucking blond *brute*. The thought of these women swooning over him made her want to retch on the ridiculously trimmed grass. Who kept grass this short? Why not let it breathe a bit? She shook her head—*Really? You’re thinking about GRASS at a time like this?* She cleared her throat, and all eyes were on her immediately, a small silence ensuing as they looked her up and down. It was as though they had only *just* realized that she was slightly..... *different*.

Erik was the first to speak. "Can I safely assume that you, too, hail from Asgard?"

"Indeed, I do," Sigyn said, nodding once. "I was Jane's.... *ride*, so to speak. Dr. Selvig, I presume?" She offered a small smile to the man as he held out his hand. She looked down at it, brow furrowed in confusion, and put her hands behind her back. She wouldn't allow another man to kiss her knuckles when she knew that somewhere within that house was the love of her life.

Jane elbowed her. "It's *really* rude to not shake hands when introductions are being exchanged, Sigyn."

"Shake hands?" Sigyn had no idea what that meant.

Jane demonstrated for her and looked at her questioningly. "How do you greet each other in Asgard?"

Sigyn shook her head and shrugged as she took Erik's proffered hand. "Forgive me, Dr. Selvig. I did not know. In Asgard, men grasp men's forearms. Women kiss women's cheeks. Men kiss women's hands." Picking grass out of her hair, she fought the urge to tap her foot and cross her arms like an impatient child.

"May we come in, please?" she asked, trying to keep her tone kind(ish). "I imagine Dr. Foster is quite cold."

Hesitant, unsure what to make of Sigyn, Pepper finally nodded. "Yeah, yeah. Uh... sorry. Come on in." Pepper looked at the suits, their weapons still drawn, and then to Coulson who cleared his throat.

"Come on, guys. I told you to stand *down*," he said and turned to Sigyn, cautioning. "I would suggest not pulling any more stunts like that gate one, though."

Tilting her head sideways, Sigyn smirked. "Or what? You'll tell them to stand *up*? I assure you, Agent....?"

"Coulson. Phil Coulson," he offered.

Nodding, she continued as they approached the front door. "Right. *Coulson*, they have far more to fear from *me* than I from them. Therefore, I would suggest they keep their weapons holstered."

Clearly exasperated, Pepper turned on Sigyn once they entered the absurdly huge white foyer. "I'm sorry, but what is wrong with you? You helped Jane get back, which is great, but now you seem intent on hurting her friends."

Jane cleared her throat. "Pep, I wouldn't exactly call S.H.I.E.L.D. agents my *friends*."

Ignoring Pepper's question, Sigyn hurried through the hall and into the next room. *Where is he?* She spun in a circle, scanning her surroundings, annoyed at how huge the place was. It would take her *ages* to get through each room. The bond was there. She could feel it. She was absolutely *not* going mad. He was there. She was certain of it. Lost in her thoughts, running her hand through her hair absent-mindedly, she pulled her braid unknowingly. Huffing at the tangles she'd created, she yanked out the tie to loosen it completely. She wanted to just *scream* for him. Would he answer? If she could feel the bond, *surely*, he could, too. Was he looking for her?

"*Yowza*. Looking for someone? Don't bother. I'm right here, gorgeous."

She'd heard enough about Tony Stark to assume it was his voice. Rolling her eyes, she looked up from the floor that she'd dropped to in order to peer under the couch (*as though Loki would have been hiding under it, come ON*). She could have facepalmed right there.

Tony approached her as she stood, and brushing off her knees, she blew her hair out of her face.

"Impressive cosplay, sweetheart, but I'm pretty sure you got on the wrong flight. San Diego is eighty-six miles southeast of here. That, and Comic Con was two months ago."

All she could do was stare, one eyebrow raised, completely unimpressed with this man who seemed to think he owned the world. What made him think he had any right to call her *sweetheart*? Mustering the slightest of smiles, she spoke plainly.

"You must be Tony Stark."

He smirked and grabbed her hand for a quick kiss. "The one and only. Seriously. What's up with the costume? I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm loving the Lady Morgana look. Very sexy. You a Merlin fangirl or something?"

Sigyn brushed past him into the kitchen, his ridiculous words completely lost on her. Who the Hell was Lady Morgana? Oh right. She'd read that one. Morgan le Fay. The Arthur Pendragon legend. That still didn't explain what a *fangirl* was, though. And had he really just called her *sexy*? She snorted. Oh, he was so fortunate that Loki hadn't been there to

hear that one. The *not-as-clever-as-he-thought-he-was* billionaire would have had at least six daggers in him.

Tony hurried after her into the kitchen. "Listen, lady—"

"Sigyn." She couldn't believe the manners on this man. "My name is *Sigyn*. Kindly, do call me as such."

She stopped herself from opening cabinets as though Loki could fit in the tiny compartments. She was behaving like a madwoman. To be fair though, she felt that she *was* going mad. Ridiculous thought. She was *not* going mad. There was just a great deal of house to search through and people kept *interrupting* her. Coulson alongside Pepper came into the kitchen, ten suits following soon thereafter. She felt cornered. She was a caged animal. She could have pulled her hair out right there. She needed answers. She needed to know where he was. He was close. She felt as though he was right next to her. Was he secretly there underneath an invisibility cloak?

*Oh, come now, Sigyn! Don't be absurd!* —If he were there, if he could see her, he would be on her in a *second*, his hands in her hair, his mouth on hers. Shivers shooting down her spine, she gripped the edge of the counter at the thought, the marble crumbling under her hand.

"Hey, *easy!*" Pepper ran to her, prying her fingers from it. "Do you have any idea how *expensive* that marble was? Good god, what is *with* you?" She hurried from the room shouting for Jane to explain Sigyn's presence.

"What is *with* me?!" Sigyn called to the shrewd blond woman and dashed after her. This kitchen was a dead end, and she had a good mind to *slap* that infuriating woman.

Jane grabbed her hand as she rounded the corner. "Sigyn, I think it's time that you explain what you're doing here. You're kind of freaking everyone out. Including *me*. I mean, what *ghost* were you talking about?"

Fighting back tears, unbelievably angry that she could *feel* him but had no idea where he was, she plopped down on the couch. It sagged under her weight as she held her head in her hands. Claustrophobia set in as everyone crowded into the room. They were only *humans!* Why was she so scared of them?! She answered her question silently. It was because they had him. They were hiding him from her. They must have hurt him. But *how?* What could they possibly have done to subdue an *immortal frost giant?*



*Stupid girl*, she scolded herself. It was perfectly conceivable that they had captured him considering he had fallen through space and time with gaping holes in his side and thigh. He would have been nearly *dead*, his body *broken*, when they'd found him—*If* they'd found him. She rubbed her temples. She didn't really have any answers. She was merely speculating, and honestly, *none* of it made sense. How could he have survived? Had he landed here? Or had someone sent him here? And if so, *who*? And *why*? Wiping the tears from her cheeks, trying to calm the fear and anxiety with deep breaths, she finally answered Jane's question.

"Loki."

Jane opened her mouth, but it was Erik who spoke first. "As in the brother of Thor? *That* Loki? The one from Norse mythology?"

Norse mythology? Oh right. Midgardian legends of the gods of Asgard. They *were* nothing more than myths now, weren't they? Sigyn blinked at him before slowly rising to her feet.

"Yes. *That* Loki. Though he's not a *myth*. He is quite real. I assure you."

Running a hand through her hair, Jane laughed dryly. "Seriously? Your ghost was Loki? As in your *dead* boyfriend? You think he's here? *Come on*, Sigyn—"

"Don't you dare '*come on, Sigyn*' me! You've no idea what we shared or what I feel, and if you ever speak of him as my '*dead boyfriend*' again, consider *this*—" she pointed between herself and the tiny woman "-over!"

What exactly could she call her relationship with Jane? Friendship? Certainly not. Little thing was annoying as Hel. Partnership? Alliance? Waving her hand frustrated, she fought to hold the smoke in. A roaring fire was in the hearth not twenty feet away, and candles were everywhere. This place could go up in flames *so* easily.

Tony rolled his eyes. "So, my house is now haunted with a mythological dead god. Got it." He paused, running a hand through his hair. "Why is it always the gorgeous ones who are absolute *nutjobs*? What a waste. Am I right?" Looking to Coulson for a nod of agreement, he threw up his hands when all he received was a shrug and turned to Sigyn.

"Does this Loki person happen to resemble a little white rabbit?" He snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. "Alice? Alice? *Wake up*, Alice. This isn't *wonderland*. It's *my* house in Catalina just off the coast of southern California, and I'd love to know how you kicked in my gate and crushed my countertop with your *fingers* and nearly broke my couch when you sat

down just now. You can't weigh more than 120! What, is this like some serious case of roid rage? What are you *on*?"

"Stop badgering her, Stark!" Jane said, feeling extremely defensive on Sigyn's behalf suddenly. "She really *is* from Asgard, like she said, and Asgardians are crazy strong and live for thousands of years. Actually, I think they're immortal unless they get killed obviously. Thor was like nine *hundred* years old." Jane pulled out her phone and scrolled to one of many videos she'd taken during her extended stay and handed it to him.

"It's like a completely different planet, but they call it a realm. Erik, you can vouch for me. You saw Thor and the bifrost."

Erik started to speak, but Coulson cut him off. "Stark knows who Thor is and has seen the footage we took from New Mexico. There's no need to rehash it. Let's just get back to *her* deal," he said, pointing to Sigyn.

Hands on her hips, Jane glared at him. "You haven't seen footage *from* Asgard."

Tony raised an eyebrow and flipped to the next video. "So, what you're saying is, this chick is an *alien*. A really pretty, really strong alien. Can she impregnate me? Is a toothy little monster gonna rip itself out of my stomach? Although she has more of *Species* look to her."

Ignoring Stark's quip, Erik rubbed his chin. "What I still don't understand is *how* you got back, Jane. Our equipment didn't read any heat signatures like the one in New Mexico. We didn't see the same bifrost, as Thor called it. How else would you get here?"

Sigyn stared blankly ahead and responded for Jane, her tone flat. "We used a different mode of transport, and do not bother asking what it was. I won't answer.... and neither will Jane."

She closed her mind to their chattering then, uninterested in hearing them discuss just how insane they thought she was. Reaching out with her mind, she refocused on the magnetic pull of the bond, which was becoming stronger by the minute. Tilting her head to the side, her eyes landed on the stairs in the huge foyer. Walking towards them, her vision tinted bluer still. *There*—Not the stairs going up, but the ones going down to a lower level called to her. Moving with purpose she made it to the top step before Tony appeared behind her and grabbed her hand. She'd been so focused that she hadn't noticed anyone following her.

"Just where do you think *you're* going, Alice?"

Pointing down the stairs, eyes narrowed, she snapped, "I suggest you stop calling me that. I'm not a character from a children's story. Now tell me what is down there."

Arms crossing, Tony raised an eyebrow. "My lab. Why?"

"I need to see it," she said, taking another step down, but he hurried to the step below and pushed her back.

"Let me clarify. It's my *private* lab, and you don't need to *see* anything other than a shrink."

Scoffing (did he really think he could stop her?), she pushed past him and dashed down the stairs where she was met with a glass wall and no visible door. Frustrated that she couldn't enter, she peered into the lab. Tables littered with glass bottles, transparent screens with glowing words and diagrams, various red and gold suits of iron, and other items she couldn't make sense of were scattered throughout the space. There was, however, *one* thing that she recognized immediately. *The Hel?*

Glowing blue and looking exactly as its living picture in the world tree room in the palace, the tesseract hovered inside a spherical metal contraption. What the Hel were they doing with the *cube*? Did they have any clue of what it was capable? How *dangerous* it was? Turning sharply to face him, she gaped.

"Dear *gods*, what are you doing with the *tesseract*? Where did you even *find* it? Odin himself buried it deep in your realm ages ago! Why do you-"

"Wait a second," holding up his hand, Tony cut her off. "You know what that is?"

Pressing his hand on the glass, it slid sideways into the wall, and she followed him in as the rest of the crew came bounding down the stairs behind them. Several more suits appeared out of the shadows of the lab, eyes following her every move. Circling the cube, she nodded. Had this been why everything looked blue to her? Did everyone else see it too? She sucked in her cheeks.

"Of *course*, I know what it is. All Asgardians know what that is, and I was promised to the *king* of Asgard for Hel's sake."

Tony's eyes blew wide. "Wow. Asgardian royalty, huh? The costume makes more sense now."

"It's *not* a cos-"

Tony waved a hand. "Whatever. So, Alice-"

Pulling her black dagger from its thigh holster, she put it to his throat. "Call me *Alice* one more time!"

Holding up his hands in surrender, he nodded to the suits who had drawn their weapons. "Okay okay!" he croaked, coughing nervously as they swarmed around her.

Jaw set, she released him and faced the others. "I truly mean no harm, so long as everyone stops insulting my intelligence and avoiding my questions. Now," she turned back to Tony, "what are you doing with the tesseract? You *are* aware just how dangerous this is, yes? Forged from an original singularity of the universe? Do you even know what it does?"

Erik stepped in before Tony could answer. "After heavy research, we know that it has the same heat signature as the bifrost, which leads me to believe that it can be used to create an Einstein-Rosen bridge, though I don't know how to do that just yet."

Tony shook his head. "That's *not* why we have it. S.H.I.E.L.D. didn't hire me or *you*, Selvig," he shoved his finger into Erik's chest, "to open some *wormhole*. The tesseract has enough energy to-

"Fuel a nuclear bomb?" Sigyn cut him off with a hiss. "Yes, Dr. Foster mentioned that to me already. Do you mean to use it to make such a weapon? Do you not already have enough of the dreaded things in this realm?"

Glaring, Tony crossed his arms. "Listen, I've dabbled enough in weapons technology to know that would be an *idiot* move. We aren't making *weapons*. We're trying to utilize its energy to create something sustainable, as in not using up Earth's natural resources, as in not *destroying* our ozone layer. Can you fault us for that? Who are *you* to tell us what we can and can't do with it?"

"I am a nine-hundred-year-old *immortal* who knows a bit more about the universe than you do, and *dabbling* in weapons technology is a far cry from wielding the cube. It's not meant to provide sustainable energy to power your little earthly technologies. It's a powerful transportation device, otherwise known as the Space Stone."

Erik smiled smugly and crossed his arms. "What did I tell you, Stark? It *does* open up wormholes."

Skepticism creasing his brow, Tony frowned. "You're telling me that this thing could send me to the other side of the goddamn *universe*?" he scoffed.

Beyond frustrated, she ran her hands down her face. “There is no race so *arrogant* as humanity! Here I stand before you, showing more strength in my *fingers* than you in your entire body, Dr. Foster shows you live images of Asgard, Dr. Selvig and Agent Coulson show you footage of the bifrost, and yet you still question the validity of my words! Don’t be a *fool*, Stark.” She turned then to face the others.

“That goes for *all* of you. This-” she pointed to the tesseract “-is the most powerful, unstable, and lethal object in your realm. That is, assuming one of the other stones isn’t hiding somewhere else here. You absolutely *cannot* control it.”

Coulson’s voice interrupted the heavy silence that had fallen over the group. “Can *you*?”

Sigyn faced him, her lips in a thin line, and shook her head. “No, but the Allfather can, and it belongs in Asgard where it would truly be safe from those who would seek to use it as a weapon capable of destroying your world. I can get it back there. Come now, the cube isn’t the *only* energy source available to you. You will find something else. Something less *volatile*. You must allow me to take it back to Asgard.” She’d completely forgotten her original reason for coming to the house in the first place, all thoughts of Loki replaced by the cube.

Tony laughed out loud. “Well, slap a nurse’s white uniform on me and call me Ratched, you really *did* fly over the cuckoo’s nest, didn’t you? Here-” he strolled to the metal sphere housing the cube “-let me just *hand* it over to you. No biggie.”

She could hardly be surprised by his response. She hadn’t expected any of them to comply with a random woman, Asgardian or not. Regardless, they were absolute fools. They had discovered it and were now manipulating it, or attempting to, and had unknowingly alerted every realm of its location. Exhausted, she ran a hand through her hair and sighed heavily. She had no desire to discourse at great length how someone could come through the portal right then and there if he or she or *it* was powerful enough.

In that moment she realized where the pull had come from. The lot of them were bickering loudly, weapons drawn and still aimed at her, but she was unaware of anything other than the cube, which was now shooting off small blasts of blue energy in greater strength than it had been when she’d first descended the stairs. The pull, the magnet, the *bond* had been calling to her from the *tesseract*.

*Someone could come through at any moment.*

Her hand flew to her mouth as a positively *monstrous* blast of blue energy shot out of it. All arguing ceased, everyone jumping back, shielding their eyes from blinding light. A small

glowing blue translucent sphere appeared on the other end of the blast which seemed to be powering it. It grew bigger by the second until it was big enough to cover the entire back wall of the lab. Staring at their shocked faces as Tony's lab was engulfed in the blue haze that had clouded her vision since that moment on the shore, she clutched her chest before returning her gaze to the sphere, squinting. Was there someone inside of it? She thought she saw a shadow. Maybe? Gods, she needed to know!

*Please be him. Please be him. Please be him. Please be him. Please be him.*

Her insides were melting, her legs turning to rubber, and she could no longer stand. The possibility of seeing him again was too much. For a moment she thought she might vomit all over Stark's sterile floor. Sweat beading on her forehead, her eyes stung suddenly. *NO!*—Falling to her knees, she rubbed her temples, her body curling in on itself from the pain.

Then she heard it. The most wretched cry of pain ever to reach her ears, even more so than her own screams on the bridge when he'd fallen, filled the lab. She covered her ears, the sound breaking what was left of her already broken heart. It was the voice she loved, the voice she *adored*, but it was twisted and garbled and distorted.

Everyone dropped to the ground then as the sphere exploded outward, everything in the lab shattering from the blast, save only for the steel wall frames. Even the safety glass windows had been blown out. Her ears rung, but at least the horrid pain that had built up in her eyes out of nowhere dissipated. She managed to raise her head and look at the space where the sphere had been. On his knees, was a man, his head bent forward hiding his face. His hair was pulled back at the base of his neck.

*Long raven hair.*

Eyes wide, breathing faster, she continued to study him. He was dressed like the humans: short black leather jacket, dark pants... just without the gold buckles and silver straps. His broad shoulders straightened, and he raised his head a bit. Sharp cheekbones created a shadow across his face.

*Oh gods....*

Raising his head further, his features were finally in plain sight. Defined jawline, long gracefully veined neck, thin lips, straight nose with a barely-there indentation on the thin tip, pale skin, inky eyelashes, not even the slightest scratch marring his beautiful face. His eyes, oddly blue in color, danced back and forth. She knew that face. She *adored* that face.

*Loki.*

Frozen in place, she stared. He raised one dark eyebrow as though trying to get a handle on his surroundings. He was right there. Loki was *alive* and not thirty feet from her.

Jane's voice broke the silence. "*Oh. My. God.*"

Loki turned his head sharply, eyes squinting to see her better, and pushing up with his arms, he stood to his full height.

Pistol aiming at Loki, Coulson shouted. "Put your hands up where we can see them, sir!"

With twenty guns now aimed at him, Loki raised his hands, palms facing them. Sigyn, still frozen on her knees, stared as the lump in his throat bobbed and finally spoke, his voice the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard, even more so than she'd remembered.

"I mean you no harm."

A shot fired then and Sigyn, shocked out of her stupor, screamed. "*NO!!*"

Wincing as the bullet bounced off his shoulder, he turned at the sound of her voice. Was he *dreaming*? He was in Midgard, right? Was that.... was that *Sigyn*? That *couldn't* be her!

She scrambled to her feet, smoke shooting from her fingers. The suit who had fired the weapon, maybe accidentally in a panic, maybe not, went up in flames then and dropped to the ground rolling until the fire dissipated. All guns pointed at her then as she turned to face Loki. They locked eyes, neither believing what they were seeing.

"Loki...." it was more an exhale than a spoken name as tears spilled down her cheeks.

Jaw dropping, he took a step forward, not blinking, afraid that she would disappear. But she didn't. She was there, dressed in her armor and *his* jacket, her black hair longer than he remembered, her hands clutching her throat. Brows raising, he blew out a breath.

"*Sig?*"

At her nodding, a small wobbling smile spreading across her wet face, he closed the distance between them despite the warnings from the black suited humans to '*stay right there!*' and not '*make another move!*' He could care less. Why or how she was in *Midgard*, he had no idea, but *dammit* if he didn't need to have her in his arms right then.

"*Loki,*" she sobbed, clinging to his neck as his arms came around her.

"*Sig*, oh gods, love..." he trailed off into her hair, tears soaking his cheeks as she stood on her tiptoes, her hands in his hair, tugging it loose from the tie.

He was saying her name. She was genuinely *hearing* his voice, not just remembering it. His arms, even stronger than before, pulled her so tightly into his body that she could barely breathe. She *had* to be dreaming. If she was, *sweet Valhalla*, she hoped to never wake up. Her nose to his throat, inhaling the most wonderful aroma in the universe, she felt her insides turn to lava, despite the cold of his skin. His hands moved lower to her thighs, and he hoisted her up, her legs encircling his waist. It was then that she looked at him—*Really* looked at him. She put her forehead to his, their noses touching, and she couldn't help but return the wide smile that now stretched across his face.

"You're alive," she whispered, kissing his nose, his cheeks, his jaw, his eyes, his forehead as he nodded and held her tighter still.

"I am." Eyes closing, he swallowed back a sob.

She was real. He wasn't dreaming. Sigyn was back in his arms, and by the Norns, he would never let go. Why couldn't he pull her closer? He'd thought he would *never* see her again. It had been an impossible dream, and yet here she was, her legs wrapped around him, kissing every part of his face, pulling at the roots of his hair.

"My god, I missed you," she said those three words over and over until she had to stop and catch her breath.

"Not as much as I missed you," he breathed, his heart racing in his chest.

"Impossible," she rasped, her mouth hovering over his.

One hand still at her waist, he moved the other up her spine and gripped the back of her neck. Looking from her eyes to her mouth, he licked his lips and kissed her. By far the deepest kiss he'd *ever* given her, it was a kiss for the three months they'd lost. For three months of death and torture. Three months of misery, sorrow, grief, and absolutely *shattered* hearts.

"Oooo-kayyy," Tony cleared his throat and grimaced, "please tell me they aren't gonna start fucking right here on my lab floor."

Eyes wide, Pepper leaned toward Jane and whispered, "Who *is* that?"



Jane bit her bottom lip before blinking rapidly. “He’s not dressed like he is in the pictures I’ve seen of him, but that is *definitely* Loki. Thor’s brother. Thor’s supposedly dead brother. And, obviously, her boyfriend or fiancé or whatever.”

Pepper nodded and muttered again. “How *tall* is he? He is uh ... gorgeous.”

“I heard that.” Tony glared sideways at her.

Pepper huffed, “Like you care.”

“Maybe I *do*,” Tony snapped back.

“Good god just shut *up*,” Coulson rolled his eyes. Looking to his team, he nodded for them to holster their weapons once more. “Somehow, I don’t think those two are gonna cause any trouble for the time being.” He looked to Jane. “So, this guy was supposedly dead? Is he dangerous? Can he do that weird smoke thing that *she* did?”

Jane shrugged and whispered to him. “I don’t know about the smoke thing. I never saw Thor do *that*. I don’t really know anything about Loki. I mean he’s Asgardian like Thor, so he would be super strong at least. But yeah. He was killed, or everyone thought he was, three months ago. Huge battle in Asgard. Like devastating of biblical proportions battle. Loki was their king since Thor had been exiled and sent here. Their dad fell asleep or something. I don’t know exactly what happened. I *do* know that they gave him the biggest and saddest and most beautiful funeral I’ve ever seen. I mean, I didn’t even *know* the guy and yet I was *sobbing*. He was *legit*. Thor is king now, and they don’t like him that much.... or at *all* really since he broke their bifrost and incidentally killed a lot of their people, but Loki was like a hero to them, I think.”

Jane couldn’t help but stare at the pair and didn’t blame them one bit for the *major* PDA. She tried to imagine what it would be like to watch the love of her life die and live without him for three months and then see him again, alive and well. She’d be having a serious make out session, too. Plus, he was *shockingly* good looking. Didn’t look a thing like Thor, but just as attractive in a different way. That, and he looked like an incredibly good kisser—*Seriously*. That was one *epic* kiss, and it was still going. That kiss belonged in a damn movie. Like *Legends of the Fall* or *The Princess Bride*. Aw! Westley had come back from the dead, too, in that movie! Jane had to stop herself from sighing embarrassingly.

Tony turned to Coulson, “So I’m thinking that the tesseract is not exactly what we thought it was.”

"No shit. How did that guy come through?" Coulson pulled out his phone. "There might be some validity to what that Sigyn lady was saying about the cube being a bit volatile. I mean, *that* guy looks pretty harmless, other than being a total *lady killer*," he laughed at his own pun, and Tony eye rolled himself so hard it hurt, "but who's to say that someone bigger and badder might not have come through instead? I'm gonna call Fury. Rogers, too."

Tony pulled a face, "Ew, why Rogers? That guy is a *dinosaur*. Oh wait, that's right. I forgot you have a total boner for the guy."

Eyes narrowed, Coulson scowled and put the phone to his ear. "I do not have a *boner* for him. I *do* have a great deal of respect for him and think he could shed some light on the matter. Maybe offer some much needed and even *humble* wisdom. And Director Fury needs to know for obvious reasons. He's our boss."

Tony held up a finger. "*Your* boss. *I've* been doing this for the greater good."

"S.H.I.E.L.D. works for the greater good, too, Stark."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that," Tony said with a wink and slapped his shoulder.

Erik came up behind them. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

"What?" Tony looked at Loki and Sigyn who had yet to separate. "Alien mating rituals? Yeah, I see that. I've been trying to *un-see* it."

Coulson chuckled as Tony shivered dramatically, and Erik rolled his eyes. "I'm not talking about *them*. Look *up*."

They did as he said, jaws dropping at the sight. Blue light, the energy blast from the tesseract, had gathered under the tall ceiling and was swirling around the space, shooting out in all directions, and growing bigger by the second.

Tony frowned, eyebrows knitting together. "That's not good."

Coulson turned to Jane and Erik. "Time to go?"

Jane nodded. "Yep."

Tony put on his fire-resistant gloves, and grabbing the tesseract, he placed it gingerly in its protective steel case.

"Tell me my house isn't about to explode, Erik."

Erik found his laptop, which amazingly had survived the tesseract's energy blast and spoke flatly.

"Your house isn't about to explode, Stark."

Scowling, Tony sighed. "Liar. Roof. *Now*. Jarvis, I need those birds spooled up stat."

Jarvis responded promptly. "Yes, sir."

"Sigyn!" Jane shouted as she ran to the Asgardians who were still lost in their own little world and grabbed Sigyn's shoulder hard enough to get her attention.

Sigyn set her feet on the ground and pulled away from Loki, his growl at the interruption causing Jane to stumble back.

"Sorry, but this place is about to blow," she pointed to the ceiling, "we're going to the helipad on the roof. We've gotta get outta here."

Nodding once, Loki grabbed Sigyn's hand. "I am *not* losing you again," he said, and they dashed after Jane up the stairs, ten suits in tow.

Climbing into one of several helicopters ready to launch, Loki pulled Sigyn into the seat next to him, and wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he addressed Tony.

"The cube is in that metal case, yes?"

Gaping at each other, Pepper and Jane looked as though their eyes were turning into actual hearts.

Pepper whispered, "My god, his *voice*."

Jane nodded and swallowed audibly. "*I know*."

Glaring at Loki who had one eyebrow raised in question, Tony stiffened. He didn't like this guy one bit. Pepper and Jane were gazing all heavy lidded at him like he was some sort of sex god. Come on, he wasn't *that* good looking. Straightening his shoulders, Tony smirked, confidence in place.

"Nice to meet you, too. Why do you ask? You planning on telling us how to use it? Or how you came through it? Or why? You can call me *Stark*, by the way."

Small laugh escaping his lips, Loki smirked as they took off. "Well then, *Stark*, all that matters for the time being is that you have the cube, that it is not *lost* to you. There will be plenty of time for answers later." He paused, gesturing to the house as they took off. "I suggest you take one last look at your humble abode."

Tony had to stop himself from punching him—*Goddamn prick*. "You call that *humble*? Who do you think you are? *Royalty*?"

Shrugging, Loki turned and kissed Sigyn's temple. "That depends. Would you call a *king* royalty?"

Frowning (he'd forgotten that Sigyn had said she was engaged to Asgard's king), Tony watched as his massive Catalina compound imploded, the entire western side of the island with it. Looking down at his hands, he shook his head.

"Fuck," he muttered.

Erik turned to face him, a look of sympathy on his face. "So where to now?"

Tony sighed, "Stark Tower Two, obviously. Hey," he nodded to Sigyn, eyebrows wiggling, "ever been to LA?"

Brow furrowed, she shook her head, glad that Tony Stark had this flying contraption or else she and Loki would have been *toast*.

He smirked at Loki then. "So, you think the compound was humble, huh? You should see a high rise in Hollywood, *your majesty*."

Sigyn pressed further into him, his other arm wrapping around her as she spoke in his ear. "You should know that Thor is king now, Loki."

Sucking in his cheeks, he moved his mouth to her ear, a shiver running down her spine at his cool breath on her skin.

"He won't be for long, love. Not for long."

Asgard's throne belonged to *him*, and he would take it back, no matter the cost. Nothing would stop him. Kissing Sigyn's hair, their fingers entwining, he looked out the door as the glowing orange sun came up over the hazy Los Angeles skyline.

The Frigid Immortals Trilogy concludes in Part 3:  
**Fearless Immortals**

Read Part 3 on the author's official website [Frigid, Fallen, Fearless](#).

(E-books coming soon)

Other works by Jennifer Rutherford:

[New Year Same Habit](#)

[There's a First for Everything](#)

[Dead Already: A Novella](#) (in progress)

[Frigid Immortals](#)