

THE
GODDESS OF
NOTHING
AT ALL
CAT RECTOR

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

Many of the warnings included in this section occur later in the book, well past this preview, however it only seems fair to let you know what you're getting into.

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Don't let the beginning fool you. This is not a soft book. I don't shy away from challenging topics, and many of my characters will be pushed to their emotional limits.

This book may not be for you.

The book features scenes of:

Vulgar language

Gratuitous violence and torture

Mental, emotional, and verbal abuse

Unhappy situations for LGBTQA+ characters

Mentions of sexual coercion and rape

Death and violence towards animals

Discrimination and fantasy slurs

Death

An extensive list of warnings, tropes, and representation can be found on my website, CatRector.com

Don't forget to hydrate.

PREFACE

At the time of publication, we have no real record of who Sigyn was or what role she played in Norse Mythology, except for a single story in the Eddas that barely acknowledges her existence. This work of fiction is inspired by the few facts that we have. I've done my best to be accurate and respectful to the subject matter by doing countless hours of research, but I'm no scholar and this is no historical text. In order to make the story flow, I've had to add, subtract, and fudge the numbers, but I've done so in a way I hope is forgivable and enjoyable. Nearly every god portrayed here comes out tarnished, but this is, after all, a story of moral ambiguity.

More than anything, I've strived to claim a spot for Sigyn that doesn't relegate her to the role of battered woman, child bride, or some of the other...less kind narratives.

If you're new to the Norse myths and would like more resources, I've included a list of research materials in the back. You can also find recommendations for other works of Norse fiction on my blog via my website, CatRector.com.

Also, this book has been written and edited in British English. Don't worry, I can spell.

Usually.

Unless we're spelling Definitely. Then it's just chaos.

CHAPTER ONE

“Odin has many names; Hangi, Grimnir, and Allfather among them. He created the realms and those that dwell in them. He has many children, who are each powerful gods in their own right, and all of them are sons.”

—Asgard Historical Records, Volume 1

They say it’s courageous to persist in the face of overwhelming odds, but whoever said that obviously wasn’t dealing with Odin.

A cloud of dust kicked into the air as I swung down off my horse and landed on the stone with a thud. I straightened my skirts, the gold-embroidered navy blue discoloured with blood and dirt. There was a tear in one of the sleeves, the low collar drooping to one side. Remnants of a mission gone awry.

Odin was off his horse a moment later, stomping towards Valaskjálf. If I let him, he would disappear into the corridors of his great hall, into one of his many rooms, and I’d never find him. It was one of his tactics to avoid my questions, that much I knew by experience.

“Father.” I tried to appear calm as I strode beside him, attempting to keep up with his long gait. I knew the answer like I’d known it every other day, but I asked anyways. “So? What do you think?”

Odin huffed, taking the first of several stone steps up into the double doors that opened into Valaskjálf. The hall was decadent, like Odin himself, made of grey and white stone, and trimmed in gold like he would never run out of it.

I cleared my throat. “All things considered, I think it went well.”

“If things had gone well, we’d have come home with treaties, not bloody clothes.”

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I hiked up my skirts to keep from tripping; he was picking up speed. “There was never going to be a treaty, and you knew it the whole time. It was just another grab for power from idiots who think they can defeat gods. Their choices have nothing to do with my competence.”

I gave him a moment, and when it was clear he wasn't going to respond, I tried again. “I think I did well. None of your men were killed, I healed every wound before the ride home, and my shields provided more than ample cover—”

“You were sloppy.” Odin rounded a corner.

If I weren't accustomed to that kind of insult from him, the words might have stung. “I was not. I did everything right. What more can I do to please you?”

Odin ground to a halt, turning to glare at me with that single piercing eye. His salt-and-pepper beard was wilder than usual. He folded his arms across his broad chest, the armour glinting silver and rust-red where today's blood had dried. A splatter had even made it up to the leather patch that covered his missing eye. “Sigyn, stop interrogating me every time I bring you anywhere. You think you're ready for a title, but you're not.”

I flexed the fingers of both my hands, breathing as deeply as I could manage. “And why not? I've worked harder than anyone else had to. All Thor did was break one Jotun skull, and you gave him everything he ever wanted. The Trickster has a title, and he's *exiled*. So please, tell me why I don't deserve one.”

“Because you're not ready. Be patient.” He started to walk away.

I moved in front of him. “Last week you told me to be more assertive. Last month you wanted more dedication to my studies, and the month before that, you said I was spending too much time in my books. You don't really have a reason, do you?”

Odin stepped toward me. I'd been alive for nearly eighty years, but he was still wagging his finger like he was scolding a child. “You don't have a title because I haven't given it to you, and you won't have one until I see fit. You're impatient, demanding, and too sure of yourself. If I hear another word about this, I swear by the Nornir, I'll have you fed to a troll.”

He whipped past me and stormed away.

It was all I could do to keep my feet planted. My whole body itched to run after him, to berate and beat him until he gave me what I wanted. The frustration built under my skin until it burst from me in an exasperated scream. My voice echoed off the cavernous walls, decades of frustration boiling over. But he didn't turn around.

It didn't matter. This wasn't the end of anything.

I turned around and headed back out of Valaskjálf. Odin's halls were the centre of the city of Asgard, and there were so many other places I could be. Anywhere else.

Looking up, my eyes fell on Yggdrasil, the World Tree. The branches spanned out over most of the stone and wood city, so tall and all-encompassing that the clouds played among

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the leaves. Every time the breeze caught the tree, it shimmered jewel tones, pinks and purples and blues. And, as usual, that's where I went.

I followed my feet into the busy streets, past horses and carriages, travellers and locals. I pushed my way through the market, where the stalls were selling all manner of wares to Elves and Humans and Jotun of all shapes and sizes. Each familiar tavern and tannery passed in a blur as I wove through the streets, and by the time I'd reached the outer edge of the city, my rage had started to fade.

The bluster left me the way it always did, and the slow certainty crept back under my skin. The overwhelming knowledge that Odin had all the power. That he was not one to be swayed once he'd made up his mind. And I was at his mercy.

What play could I make if he held all the dice?

As I passed the last homes on the edge of the city, the view ahead became a wall of leafy woods, each of them rustling in the breeze. To the left was a well-worn path that led into the forest, and I stepped onto it, grateful for the familiar scent of soil and greenery, the scurry of critters, and the trill of birds. A balm for my heart.

The path let out into a clearing a few minutes later, and everything was as it should have been. In the middle of the grass sprang an enormous tree trunk, so wide that it took a full minute to walk around it. Yggdrasil rustled above me, tossing in the wind and letting sunshine dance on the grass.

Tucked up against the treeline of the forest was Idunn's tiny wood cabin, nearly obscured by the flowers she'd planted around it. The flourishing garden, full of fruit and vegetables, was larger than the cabin itself.

Laughter rose up from the direction of Yggdrasil. Wooden scaffolding was pressed against the side of the trunk, a series of platforms and ladders all for the purpose of plucking golden apples. The voices were coming from up there.

I trekked across the grass, skirting around the four deer who lived at the base of the tree, each of which refused to budge an inch. The first step I took onto the ladder shook the scaffolding, and the voices quieted. A head peeked over the side, alarmed, but the moment her eyes caught mine, Idunn's face lit up.

"Sigyn! You're home! Come up, and tell us about your trip." Her sky-blue eyes danced with excitement and her single thick, blonde braid dangled in the air, laced with white flowers. She held her hand out to hoist me up.

Idunn settled onto her knees, careful to avoid the blanket laid out with food. The platform was tight with the three bodies and the lavish spread crammed onto it, so I sat with my legs close to me.

"I see you two have been keeping busy without me." I scooped up a handful of nuts and berries from their picnic.

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Freya was next to me, sitting cross-legged in a casual violet dress. Normally, she was a woman of two sides: extravagant jewelled gowns or shimmering plates of armour. She pushed her flowing auburn hair back behind her ear, and my breath caught. A motion so simple shouldn't be so alluring, but she wasn't called the most beautiful woman in all the realms for nothing.

"The world doesn't stop just because you leave." There was bite in Freya's playful tone, and it reminded me immediately that beauty isn't everything. "Who else was going to eat all this cheese?" She reached out, the broad muscles in her arms flexing and relaxing under the sheer fabric of her sleeve.

Idunn looked me over, taking in the blood and dirt on my dress. "I take it things didn't go well?" Her lips knotted up in a frown, a look that was out of place on a woman who was made of softness.

"Let me guess," said Freya. "It was a trap."

I rolled my eyes. "It's always a trap, isn't it? I don't want to say that all trolls are mindless, but there seems to be a pattern."

"And you missed us so terribly that you couldn't even wash the musk from your body before you visited?" Freya smiled crookedly as she filled her cup with Elven wine and passed it to me.

"Pour a bucket of water over my head if you think it'll help." I took a hearty drink, wondering for the hundredth time what Idunn saw in Freya. But they were both staring, so I answered the silent question. "He turned me down."

Idunn put her hand on my knee. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have encouraged you to ask again." She sighed. "It's just...I thought with all the training you've done and the end of this newest apprenticeship..." Her gaze fell from mine. The sadness on her face brought tears to my eyes.

I squeezed her hand. "As if any of this could be your fault. If it weren't for you, I'd have given up decades ago."

Freya snorted. "I don't see how he can keep denying you. No one else had this hard of a time."

I made a face, not sure if I should take that as comradery or an insult. "Maybe he's run out of titles and can't admit it. Even if the youngest gets the scraps, you'd think he'd make me Goddess of Sheep Herding or something." I drained the wine from my cup and held it out for a refill, which Freya obliged.

Idunn started to shuffle her bottom toward me, and I held out a hand to stop her. She meant well with her kind words and cuddles, but I couldn't stand the pity. I wanted to go back to my hall, get very drunk, and cry where no one could see me. So, I swung my legs over the edge of the platform, making an attempt to leave. "I'm going home. No sense in

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ruining your sunny afternoon with all my clouds.”

“Nonsense, I love complaining about Odin. It’s almost a hobby at this point.” Freya took back my cup and gave me a sincere smile. “Things will work out. He’s a crotchety old man, but he has to give in sometime, right?”

I nodded, tears blurring my eyes. I blinked them back and fumbled my feet onto the rungs of the ladder. “I’ll see you later.” I kept my eyes on my descent as they said their farewells.

By the time I was on solid ground, the tears were streaking over my cheeks, and I was trying to hold back that annoying inhale of breath that would give my crying away. I strode across the grass, wiping them away and wishing it wasn’t such a long walk back to the centre of the city. It wouldn’t help my case if Odin found out his only daughter had been caught weeping in the market.

I was nearly at the path when Idunn called out behind me. Her always-bare feet clapped against the grass as she ran. Damn. I tried to compose myself and turned to face her. Her white dress billowed out behind her, making her look ethereal as she passed through a patch of sunlight. There was a golden apple in her hand.

“You didn’t need to bring that.” I gestured to the apple, trying to seem happy. “You gave me one last week. I know I look horrible today, but I don’t age *that* quickly.”

She stopped in front of me and held it out. “It’s not for you. I...I have an idea. I’ve thought about this a lot, but I know there’s a price to pay for offering it, so I waited. I thought that Odin would come to his senses a long time ago, but he hasn’t. So...I know someone who might be able to help you.”

I sighed. “I’ve tried everyone and everything. You have no idea the lengths I’ve gone to for this title. Who could possibly be left?”

Idunn’s fingers tapped on the apple. She hesitated. “You know how each month I take a walk to the woods on the border of Asgard and Jotunheim?”

My eyes darted open. “You can’t be serious!”

Idunn hushed me. “Not so loud. If Freya finds out what I’m telling you, she’ll lock you in the dungeons before you have a chance to think it over.” She held out the apple and waited for me to take it. When I did, she wrapped her hands around mine. “He is many things, Sigyn, but he’s not as bad as they say.”

“Then why do they call him Trickster and Silvertongue as if they’re afraid to say his name out loud? Half of the city thinks those woods are cursed because of him. He stole, lied, cheated—”

“You weren’t here in those days, but I was. If there was something to be afraid of, do you think I’d go out there alone?” She stared into my eyes, all compassion and urgency. “Think of the stories you’ve been told. Power like that could change things for you. He’s complicated,

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and doing this could land you in trouble, but he knows how to use seidr in ways that most of us never will. It could be just what you need.”

I looked away, my eyes searching the clearing as if the answers lay between the blades of grass. The Trickster had been exiled before I’d been born. People said he could walk on air, shapeshift, control the elements. Freya swore up and down that he had once broken into her chamber and stolen the necklace from around her neck while she slept. He’d been gone from the city for nearly a hundred years, and the tales had only grown with time.

Idunn pulled me out of my thoughts. “Give him the apple and tell him I sent you. If you enter the forest near the boulder at its edge, then follow the river, you’ll find his cabin. But please, wait until morning. The woods are thick with wolves, and I don’t want you getting caught off guard.”

I took a deep breath, my mind working over the details. Aligning myself with the Trickster behind Odin’s back was a bad idea. But when was the last time anything had sounded this promising? How many more decades could I spend studying botany and war history with no end in sight? I was calculating the distance to the woods when Idunn shuffled her feet and turned to leave.

I grabbed her hand. “Thank you. I have no idea what’s going to come of it, but I’ll find out tomorrow.”

She smiled, a look so warm and contagious that it spread to my lips as well. “Be safe, Sigyn. And say hello for me.” She gave my hand a squeeze, then pranced her way back to Yggdrasil.

I turned and walked down the path as fast as I could without breaking into a run. My heart was thumping in my chest, my mind racing in every direction. Another chance. I wasn’t proud of the lie, but I’d run out of patience years ago.

A couple of wolves were hardly going to stop me. I was going tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

“From this day forth, the God of Lies will be exiled from the city of Asgard. If spotted within these walls, citizens are expected to report the incident immediately. He may appear in many guises, so remain vigilant...”

—City Notice - Historical Archives

The mountains of Jotunheim loomed in the distance, grey and peaked with ice. The sun was disappearing behind them, seeming at first as if it were being swallowed by an enormous wolf, orange and red filling the gaps between its teeth. Below that, the forest stretched out before me, already bathed in shadow.

I dismounted at the tree line and tethered my borrowed horse to a strong branch. I checked everything again—an axe on my belt, rations in my bag, my thudding heart in my chest. Though there wasn't a soul around to see, I put on a brave face and stepped into the underbrush.

There didn't seem to be a path, and no wonder. I'd heard the city folk say the woods were full of beasts and spirits, and the Trickster was the worst of them all. He was the god so full of spite and treachery that Odin had cast him out of the city. The thought brought a lump to my throat. I tried to swallow my nerves down, reminding myself that time makes mountains out of molehills.

It didn't line up. Idunn had told me about her visits before; she always reserved a whole day for her journey, not because of the length of the walk, but because she stayed for supper. If he were so evil, why would he cook for her? How could he be both these things?

The forest underbrush was thick and uncomfortable to navigate. After a while, the last of the sunlight faded until there was only black sky visible through the cracks in the treetops. I

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hit my toe on a rock, cursing. I couldn't afford to twist my ankle on a root or wander past the cabin in the dark. I'd need a light.

I took a deep breath and cupped my hands in front of my mouth. I pressed myself down, grinding the soles of my feet into the soil. Energy lived in all things, and those who practiced *seidr* knew how to find and harness it. I called upon it, and it came, sliding up through the soles of my boots, warmth slipping under my skin. Gooseflesh crept across my arms, a long-familiar sensation. I whispered the runes for a lantern, letting them slip over my tongue and across the barrier of my lips without a sound. My breath escaped as wisps of light, flowing slowly into my cupped hands, turning round the shallow space until my palms were full, a ball of light coursing and churning. The lantern remained after my whispers stopped, casting just enough light to see by.

Carving a straight line through the trees was nearly impossible, but I tried, always listening for the rush of water. The woods were black, and the silence was only occasionally pierced by the scurrying of something in the brush. There was so much I couldn't see, and the fear of it settled into my chest. Anything could be out there. A rustle in the trees could be a squirrel *or* a bear.

My mind raced. Idunn had told me not to come so late in the day. Perhaps I was a fool to have come out here at all. I wanted my title more than I wanted the air in my lungs, but maybe this was too far. Maybe there was a reason that—

Crack.

Something was behind me. I whipped around to face the noise. There was nothing but darkness in the distance, my lantern unable to pierce it.

Crack.

This time from the side. Again, there was nothing. Whatever was out there was keeping out of the light. I tossed the lantern into the air above me, where it stayed suspended. I pulled the handaxe from my belt, the weight of it reassuring in my hand.

"Show yourself," I snapped, turning a slow circle, watching the trees for some indication as to who or what had found me. The answer came not as a word but as a low, rumbling growl.

Wolves.

One growl became two, then three, half a dozen, more, until I wasn't sure where one started and the other began, circling around me as I turned. I could fight off a few, but this... this was a problem.

The light caught a pair of bright yellow eyes as they took a step closer. From the corner of my vision came another pair. Another crack behind me. I planted my feet firmly and slowly raised my palm out in front of me, whispering. A glimmer surrounded me, like the glint of sunlight on ice.

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The wolf in front of me gnashed its teeth and leapt forward. Its body crashed into the barrier I'd summoned, and it fell to the ground in a stunned heap. Another lashed out, clawing at the invisible wall, tearing gashes in its surface. The barrier had bought me a moment, but nothing more. I let it fall.

I swung hard, bringing my axe down on the head of the confused wolf. The blade lodged in its skull. It crumpled into a heap, and I pushed down on its body for leverage, prying the axe back out. Blood poured from the wound, and bits of gore stuck to the blade. There were at least two more, and I needed to get out of danger.

Pain shot through my calf, and I screamed. One of the wolves had bitten into my leg, its teeth caught in material and flesh. Enraged, I beat the wolf's head with the blunt side of my axe. Bone cracked under the blow, but its jaws only clamped down harder. I screamed again and drove the handle into its eye with all the force I could muster.

The wolf collapsed, releasing me. My knee gave out, and I dropped down beside it, something warm and wet seeping down my leg. I pulled the axe back up, ready to fight, the pain twisting through me. The burning ran up my leg and down to my toes. My vision swam. I blinked and pushed it away. This wasn't my first wound, and it *would not* be what killed me. Not if I could help it.

A new wolf came out of the darkness to take the place of its fallen friend. There were more. How many could there be? What if I bled out alone in these woods? They were coming, they were coming—

Teal flames lit the air within the darkness of the trees, flashing bright and then burning out almost immediately. Only seidr wildfire could have a colour like that. One of the wolves yipped and cried out somewhere in the darkness. Branches snapped as something approached. A growl rose up from behind me. I turned away from the flame to face the next hungry maw, and I stumbled. My head was spinning again.

Focus. Kill the wolf and live.

It stalked closer, and I drew back my axe to strike.

A ball of teal flame hit the wolf, setting its fur ablaze. It yelped and jumped back, falling to its side to try to douse the fire. The sound of boots stopped behind me.

A man, towering over where I knelt, flame-red hair falling over his shoulders in waves, skin as pale as ice. A Jotun. Tall and lean, his open palm full of wildfire. It was *him*. It had to be.

More growls came from the darkness. I crawled to my feet, all my weight on my good leg.

The Trickster's gaze travelled to the bloodstain on my trousers and back to my eyes. "Let's end this, shall we?" His voice was low and coy, a small smirk on his lips.

I nodded, gritting my teeth against the pain. The Trickster's lips began to move, no

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doubt summoning up his own runes. The wildfire in his hand churned, and with one swooping movement, he lobbed the flame at the ground. It hit the dirt and burst upward, illuminating the woods like a lightning flash. I covered my face with my arm, the heat of the fire bursting against my skin. Chaos fell through the ranks of the wolves as they leapt back, whining and screeching. Then they were gone, three more wolves disappearing into the trees.

The Trickster flicked his wrist, tightening his open palm into a fist, and all at once, the enormous flame died out. All that was left was the blackened ground and the soft lantern light that shone down from above us.

Exhaustion swept over me. My leg started to give way again, but an arm caught me as I fell. The Trickster held me up, shifting my body like I was a ragdoll. My face was nearly pressed against his chest. He smelled like honey and cinders. I looked up, hazy. He was at least a head taller than I was. Small for a Jotun, really. And his face...it was sharp. Like a knife.

He settled me back onto the ground, and the pain of it shocked me back to my senses.

“Don’t think me too untoward, but I need to see your leg.” The Trickster knelt down in front of my feet, hands firmly planted on the ground next to him.

My head felt thick, but I managed a nod. I carefully pulled the leg of my trousers up over my calf. The bite was deep, made of dozens of punctures on either side of my calf, each running with blood. My skin and the leather of my shoes were painted red. My stomach lurched. I preferred my blood on the inside.

The Trickster pulled a knife from his belt and cut a long chunk of fabric from the bottom of my ruined travelling cloak. “We’ll need to get you to my cabin. I have supplies there.” His fingers brushed the underside of my calf, holding the fabric in place as he wrapped it around. I cried out, the wound burning as he tightened it. “It needs to be done, if I don’t—“

“I know. I’m a healer,” I hissed through clenched teeth.

He paused for a moment. “Good.” His hands deftly wrapped the fabric around and under and over. “I am not. You can get yourself in working order once we’ve cleaned it out. Don’t want to get slavering sickness.” A little smirk played on his lips, his emerald eyes on mine. He tucked the last piece of fabric into the binding. It was already soaked, nearly black. “Are you ready?”

I nodded. He stood and took my hand, pulling me to my feet. I readied myself to lean on him and stumble my way to the camp, but he bent down and picked me up before I could so much as protest.

“What are you *doing*?”

“You’d rather walk?”

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I wouldn't, no.

He pushed his way through the trees, into the blackness of the forest. He skirted between bush and branch with long strides, careful not to hit my legs on anything. Meanwhile, I was cradled against the chest of a stranger, one who was possibly very dangerous, and bleeding out through my leg. It might've been awkward, if I'd felt well enough to care.

There was a tiny pinprick of light in the distance, glowing teal. "I suppose that's your cabin."

"It is."

"Naturally I'd get attacked two minutes from the place I need to be. Why not?" I hissed as another wave of pain rushed up my leg.

"That tends to happen when you travel in wild places in the middle of the night. Why did you?"

I cleared my throat. This hadn't been how I'd planned to ask him. "I was looking for you."

"For me? Well, isn't that interesting." He laughed, though I wasn't quite sure what was funny. "I wonder if that makes you very brave or very stupid."

I bristled at the comment. "Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry; I assumed you'd heard of me. Loki Laufeyjaron, Trickster, God of Lies, Sky Treader, Silvertongue, disreputable male *völva*, master to the beasts in the woods and eater of babies. Pleased to meet you."

"Eater of babies?"

"Ah, that one didn't stick? Too gruesome, I suppose. You can only spin so many tales before they become too tall. And for the sake of honesty, I also don't control the *beasts*."

I tried to make out the features of his face, but I couldn't see anything but the outline of his sharp jaw. "You started those rumours?"

"Of course. It ensures a certain amount of peace and quiet."

Loki stepped out from the brush and into a clearing. The teal campfire roared in the middle, illuminating part of the small clearing. A pair of wooden benches sat at the fire's edge, and the barest outline of a log cabin was tucked into the shadows. He hurried me over to the fire and sat me down on one of the benches.

"Lucky for you, I keep a large stash of alcohol." He left, bounding his way up the stone path to his cabin.

Pain shot through me again as I pulled my leg up onto the bench. There would be no getting around it. I found the end of the fabric and started to unwind it, gritting my teeth to keep from crying out as it peeled away from the wound. The bleeding had slowed, but red was still seeping down my calf. I pulled my bag from my back and rummaged around for my

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water skin. The water burned the moment it hit the open wound, and I tried not to scream. I breathed deeply, exhaling through my teeth. After I gathered my wits again, I leaned toward it, twisting my leg at odd angles, looking for anything lodged in the flesh that didn't belong.

Loki's boots crunched down the path toward me. He handed me one of the two dusty glass bottles in his arms. It was already open, and as I put it to my lips, I caught the smell of spiced honey mead. I gulped down a few mouthfuls.

Loki sat down next to me. "Let me look." It was hard to see inside the wound, so I was in no position to argue when he lifted up my foot and placed it on his leg, my knee propped up across his lap. My white-knuckled hand gripped the side of the bench as he used the tip of his knife to edge pebbles out of the tooth marks.

I poured more mead down my throat. "Is it clean?"

"I think so," he said, taking another look.

I poured the mead over my leg, soaking both of us. There was no holding back that scream. The alcohol burned into the wound, my vision darkening. Hands clasped my shoulders as I wavered. The bottle dropped from my grip and clunked against a rock. I blinked away the darkness, coming back to myself.

"Breathe." His voice seemed far away, only a low whisper. "Are you able to heal yourself?"

I forced myself to focus. If I couldn't concentrate, there would be no way for me to fix the wound. I took a few deep breaths and held my hands over my calf. The first runes I whispered weren't correct; I knew it as I spoke. Another attempt left me with that familiar warmth under my skin as I drew up energy from the ground. This time was right.

Loki's hands stayed on my shoulders, steadying me as I worked. I kept whispering, using runes to protect against sickness, bind tissue, and grow skin. The pain was lessening, little by little. The holes became shallow, the blood stopped leaking, and eventually, all that was left were faint silver scars in the shape of a wolf maw.

When I was finished, every part of my body was aching for me to lie down. I stretched out my leg, removing it from its awkward placement on Loki's lap. At least I was whole again.

"Impressive," Loki said, turning toward the fire and pulling at his mead-soaked trousers. "It's been a while since I've seen seidr like that."

"I could say the same for you." I pulled my torn, stained trouser leg back over my calf. "That wildfire was extraordinary."

"Just an old trick." Loki picked up a still-corked bottle of mead from beside him and pulled it open. He took a drink. "So, tell me, which goddess are you?"

I froze in the act of examining the damage done to my clothing and looked up at him. "I never said I was."

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He started counting on his fingers, holding up another for each point he made. “The common folk don’t wear such extravagantly embroidered cloaks, especially out to the woods. Your seidr is far more complicated than what they use for weaving and home-making, and, if my lipreading is still accurate, you used some of the same healing runes they use in Asgard’s infirmary. Not to mention, you knew where to find me.”

“You’re jumping to a lot of conclusions.” I crossed my arms and stared at him.

“And how many are true?” When I said nothing, he continued, “Polite society demands a name, Goddess, especially since I helped drag you out of the woods.”

I sat straighter, as if I could somehow give an impression of grace after everything that had happened. “Sigyn Odindottir.”

Loki barked a laugh. “Oh, I should have guessed. You don’t look much like him, though. You’re a bit more darkly complected. Thicker hair, friendlier. Two eyes.”

I bristled, pushing down the comments that came to mind. My features had always stood out in the halls of fair-skinned and smooth-haired gods. I looked more akin to the ebony Elves than the Aesir. My mother had been a human woman from Midgard, someone who had had the bad luck of catching Odin’s eye.

“You’re very condescending for someone who lives alone in the woods.” I glared at him, refusing to break the stare.

Loki just smiled. “Fair enough. Now, what is it you want from me?”

I tried to loosen my tensed body, shifting myself to the far end of the bench. “You asked me which goddess I am, but I’m only a goddess by birth. Odin refuses to give me a title and make it official.”

His brow arched, and he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, waiting for me to continue.

“I want to buy a favour. Odin says I’m not ready, even though I’ve spent decades studying everything I can. I’m a warder, disenchanter, curse breaker, and healer. Hel, I even tried to learn smithing in case *that* was what made the difference, but nothing’s worked. I’ve heard the stories. Maybe you can teach me something that will change his mind.” I took another drink, finally feeling the warmth of the alcohol under my skin, softening the edge of the world just slightly.

“You want me to be your teacher? Ymir’s breath, if someone had told me when I woke up this morning...” Loki took a long drink of mead. “You understand that whatever Odin says is law, don’t you? If you think he’s stubborn now, what do you think he’ll do when he finds you tangled up with me against his wishes?”

I stood up and walked to the other side of the fire, my tattered trouser leg dragging in the dirt. “What did you do to get yourself banished from Asgard?”

“You see, you should have led with that question. Maybe you’ll regret asking the first.”

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He reached down into my travel sack. Before I could protest, he pulled out the cloth bag of rations and laid it out on the bench next to him. “Let’s give the highlights, shall we? I lit a few sets of drapes on fire. Some expensive, well-aged mead went missing from the stocks. I took more than a few emissaries to bed with the goal of influencing the outcomes of some trade deals, sometimes at Odin’s request and sometimes not. I snuck into Freya’s room and stole her precious necklace, also at Odin’s insistence. That bridge-troll brother of yours, Heimdall, fought me and took it back, and he’s hated me ever since. Oh, and I once let some wild boars inside the halls while everyone was asleep. They didn’t find it as funny as I did.”

I stared at him, waiting for him to continue. He didn’t. “Wait. That’s it?”

He shrugged. “That’s it.”

I threw up my hands. “I was expecting something...heinous! Murder and treason! At your worst, you’re a mildly irritating thief. What did he banish you for?”

“He doesn’t like disobedience, and I was tired of obeying. Being his Blood-Brother comes with too many caveats.” Loki sifted through the rations and plucked out a couple of nuts, popping them into his mouth. “I’m going to be honest with you, Sigyn. In my experience, Odin never gives anything freely and never against his will. If he doesn’t want you to have a title, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

I stared him down. “Maybe you would give up that easily, but I haven’t. I’ve worked too hard. I’m too close.”

“I used to say the same thing.” A smirk ran across his lips, but something else was underneath. “And after what you know about me, you still want me to teach you?”

It was a fair question. He wasn’t a good influence, but if half of what he said was true, it meant accessing locked rooms, the strength to take on other gods, command of elements, a strategic mind. All that and more. It wasn’t smart, but I’d been trying smart for decades. Maybe it was time to try sly. Besides, how bad could the price really be?

“Do you really have boots that let you walk on air?”

Loki shook his head. “Stolen by a dwarf. Such a shame; I do like the name Sky Treader.”

“How did you earn the title God of Lies?”

“By lying, one assumes.”

“Will you lie to me?”

He shrugged, nonchalant. “Not if I can avoid it.”

“And if I don’t believe that?”

“You’d be the wiser for it.”

“What do you want in return?”

Loki leaned back, eyes on the night sky. He thought for a few moments. “Affluence. I want to use the hot spring baths in Valaskjálf again. Sleep in those plush beds, eat those dainty pastries. New clothes, fine Elven wine, newly forged weapons, a hot meal I didn’t

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make myself. All of it. Treat me like a king again.”

That complicated things. With all the ways Odin had to spy on the realms, there was a good chance he had already seen me coming to the woods. If I brought Loki back to Asgard to lavish in comfort, Odin would have me strung up in the rafters in Valhalla for the disobedience.

Luckily for Loki, I was feeling reckless.

“And if I arrange this, you’ll teach me whatever I want?” I went back to sit on the bench.

Loki looked at me. “Whatever I know.”

“Prove it. Teach me wildfire.”

“Now?”

I nodded.

“Alright. Turn around.” He whipped one leg over the bench, straddling it. I did the same. He shuffled closer until our knees were nearly touching. “Give me your hands.”

I stretched them tentatively. It was a candid thing to do, having known him for the entirety of an hour. But he’d also pried dirt from my bare calf, so touching hands was frankly a bit of a step backwards. I held them out.

He cupped his hands underneath mine, holding my palms skyward. They were larger than mine, his pale skin against my bronze. Soft. And warm.

“Do you need a boost? It’s been a tough night, and I can lend you some energy if you’d like.” His skin was warming, an undercurrent of heat building in his hands where the energy was gathering. The look on his face was deceptively kind, and though I was trying to be on my guard, it felt too easy to just fall into it, to trust him.

I shook my head. “As long as I don’t have to close another wound, I’ll be fine.”

“Suit yourself. You know the runes for wildfire?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I’ve read them, but it was a long time ago. I never had much skill for offensive seidr.”

“Doubtful. Practice makes perfect and all that bearshit.” He leaned in, waiting for something. After a moment, he twitched an eyebrow. “Well?”

I leaned in as well. To use a rune, one had to whisper it into existence, a secret on a breath. To say them aloud was to strip them of that power, to expose them to the world. Even written runes only held a small fraction of their power. And so, to teach a rune, one had to learn it through a whisper.

Loki leaned in further. His face was dangerously close to mine, our skin nearly touching. When he whispered the runes into my ear, his breath spilt over my skin. Gooseflesh ran across my body, a small shiver betraying me. When he pulled away, it was clear from his grin that if he hadn’t noticed the shiver, he had certainly seen the blush in my cheeks.

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Summoning my focus away from the lingering sensation, I stretched my neck and readied myself. Exhaustion was creeping in, but I was able to draw up more than enough energy for the task. He lifted our hands, mine cradled in his, and I let the runes slip off my tongue.

Nothing.

“Try again. Watch your pronunciation.” He was watching my lips so intently that it was nearly disarming.

I drew in a deep breath, let it go, and whispered the runes again, changing the inflexion slightly. A spark flashed in my palm and disappeared, like flint striking on stone. “Oh!”

“Good, keep going.” He was leaning closer to our hands, the tension of the moment coiling up like a snake in the grass.

Another breath, another rune. And this time, the spark caught, a tiny lavender flame coming to life in the palm of my hand, flickering and dancing.

“Yes!” I leaned in to examine the flame, joy springing up under my skin. “But it’s a different colour.”

Loki stole back one of his hands and lit a teal spark on his fingertip. “Everyone’s is. Yours suits you.”

After a moment, the exhilaration of my accomplishment faded, and I realized how closely we were sitting, and how his hand was still on mine. I cleared my throat and moved away, shaking the flame to snuff it out. “I suppose that settles it.”

“I suppose it does.”

Silence settled in, neither of us quite knowing how to disarm the moment. And then I caught a sliver of gold peeking out from inside my bag. I reached down, plucked out the golden apple, and handed it to him. “Idunn says hello.”

A genuine smile lit up his face as he took the apple, brushing it off on the front of his cloak. “We have a friend in common.”

He stared into the fire as he cut slice after slice from the golden apple with his knife. I watched, curious to see what type of rejuvenation the apple would bring him. The change didn’t take long. The faint smile lines around his lips and across his forehead faded, leaving it as smooth as white ice. He hadn’t seemed all that old to begin with, but now he had the youthful look of a man in his prime. Another month on the tally of his life, however long he’d lived.

It was hard to say how much of him was honest, but I didn’t need him to be genuine. I just needed him to give me an edge towards the one thing I wanted. There would be a price; even if Odin saw logic, there would be more than one God in Asgard that would be furious with me for bringing him back. But I’d been furious for the last two decades. What did I care if it was someone else’s turn?

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When he was finished, Loki tossed the ravaged apple core into the fire. It cracked and sizzled, filling the night with the scent of baked apples. He licked the tips of his fingers and turned to me. “Time to rest our heads, I think.”

He stood and started up the stone path to the cabin, and I assumed that I should follow him. When we reached the door, he turned back to the fire, and with the whisper of a rune and a clasp of his hand, the teal flame quenched itself, the clearing falling dark.

The cabin was pitch black as well, but in the space of a heartbeat, Loki had a spark of wildfire on his fingertip. He used it to light the hearth, illuminating every inch of the tiny, single-room cabin. There was a small kitchen with shelves, and a water basin not far from the hearth. A quaint bed was pressed up against the opposite wall, space enough for one. Most of the room, however, was taken up with bookcases, each one overladen with books.

I walked to the bookcase without waiting for permission and ran my fingers down the spines. ‘*Into the Deep: An Elven Perspective on Dwarven Culture.*’ ‘*Cast in Moonlight: Seidr at Night.*’ ‘*Myths of Midgard.*’ I picked one up and turned to Loki, staring incredulously.

“What?” he asked, straightening out the unmade furs on his bed.

I slipped the book back in place. “I wouldn’t have taken you for the reading type.”

“No, I don’t imagine you would.” He held out a fresh tunic, still folded. I hesitated, and he shrugged. “Unless you want to sleep in your own blood.”

I took the tunic.

He gestured to the bed. “I’ll take the floor tonight, since there’s a feather mattress waiting for me in Asgard.” He thought for a moment. “That or a funeral pyre. I suppose we’ll see.”

He pulled a sleeping roll down from a hook on the ceiling and laid it out in the middle of the floor. He turned his back to me and started to change into drier trousers. I blushed and turned immediately, taking it as an opportunity to get out of my torn clothes. My cloak and trousers were torn, some of it stained a deep red. His tunic was big on me, but it still only came down to my knees. I hurried under the furs of his bed and pulled them up over my chest.

“Why did you agree to come back if you think Odin may kill you for it?”

He turned to me, a grin on his lips. He tossed a pillow toward the head of his sleeping roll. “I’ve been gone almost a century, darling. I’ve travelled, and I’ve behaved— more or less— and I’m bored. It’s time to do something new.” He sat down on the furs and pulled off his tunic, revealing a lean, muscular chest. A thin scar snaked from his navel to his side and a trio of scars ran over both shoulders. Claw wounds, likely. He looked up and caught my stare. “Besides, I want to see the look on their faces.”

I pulled the furs tight against my chest at the same time he crawled into his bed roll and turned toward the fire. “Goodnight.”

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“Goodnight,” I murmured back. I shifted my head, getting comfortable on his pillow. My limbs were heavy, and I felt like I’d melt down into the mattress and never return. The smell of cinder and honey floated at the edge of my senses until, eventually, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

*“The fir-tree that stands in the grove fades;
its bark and needles give no shelter:
so it is for a man whom nobody loves,
how shall he live for long?”*

—*Hávamál 50*

The sunrise was still below the branches of Yggdrasil when Loki and I approached Asgard the next morning by horseback. The light danced and glinted on the metal and gold that covered the city. Odin’s halls shone from the centre of everything, only challenged in height by Yggdrasil herself. It was built to look extravagant, desirable. To anyone unfamiliar, the city would seem a paradise.

“They know we’re coming.” It was the first thing Loki had said since we left the woods. He was doing his best to be polite and leave room between us, but that was difficult with two bodies on one horse. Why would he have a horse, he’d said, when he could fly.

I followed his finger skyward. Two ravens circled above, keeping pace with us. Huginn and Muninn, Odin’s nose-y pets. “Of course they do. Odin wouldn’t be Odin if he wasn’t two steps ahead of everyone.”

“I’m surprised you got as far as you did last night.”

I chuckled. “I haven’t been worth keeping an eye on for a very long time.”

One of the ravens screeched and dove down to land on the shoulder of a rider in the distance. There were five; four dressed in the red and gold of Freya’s militia, and in the middle was Freya herself, dressed head to toe in leather and steel armour, her auburn hair tied back in a severe set of twists and braids.

I cursed under my breath. Of all the people Odin might have sent.

We approached cautiously, but none of them moved. Freya looked ready for blood, her

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lips curled back in a snarl. “I should kill you where you sit,” she spat as soon as we were in earshot.

Loki leaned over to give a dramatic wave of his hand. “Freya, it’s been too long. You can’t imagine how good it is to see you!”

“Shut your mouth, snake.” Her head turned to me. “And you. I knew you were desperate, but if I’d had any idea how much... This isn’t the way to your title. You brought him here without a thought for anyone but yourself.”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t expect you to understand. How am I supposed to explain this to you? You’ve always had everything you’ve ever wanted.”

She threw her hand up in exclamation. “I came to Asgard as a hostage—”

“And yet you hold two titles, a stretch of land of your own, half the dead souls of Midgard, and you train Asgard’s *völur*. They call you the most beautiful woman across every realm, and the people of Midgard worship the ground you walk on.” I put my fingers on my chest. “I’ve carved out what little reputation I have line by line, one favour, one conversation, one lesson at a time. I have *bled* dedication. And it still isn’t enough for him.”

The raven on Freya’s shoulder squawked, and she looked up at it, a heavy line set across her lips. He’d hear everything I said, but I didn’t care anymore.

She shook her head. “This isn’t going to change anything. Odin will have him thrown back into the woods, or worse, if we’re lucky. And you’ll be fortunate not to spend the rest of your days sweeping pork rinds with the kitchen staff.”

Loki snickered, and all eyes turned to him. “If you think Odin is foolish enough to send his daughter to work as a maid, then you’re an imbecile. He couldn’t have the leaders of the realms thinking he’s *lost control* of something, now could he?”

He wasn’t wrong.

Freya stared him down as if she hoped he’d spontaneously catch fire.

She waved her hand, and her tiny militia moved forward, two swinging their horses around to our flanks, trapping us between them. “Let’s get this over with,” she snapped, then turned toward the city. Not having much choice, we followed behind.

Loki leaned in over my shoulder, his voice low. “Are you having regrets yet, Goddess?”

“Not one.” I tried to keep the tremble from my voice. I wanted to believe my father would see reason, would see how fucking desperate I was, and that he’d let it go. This had to work somehow. I couldn’t see any other path forward.

After we passed the farms on the outskirts of the city and the houses became dense, pressing against each other in rows, the people took notice. Asgard was full of gawkers. They whispered and stared openly, but not at me. All eyes were on Loki. Some of their faces changed from confusion to shock as others whispered in their ears, surely revealing the name of this newcomer to those who hadn’t been in Asgard long enough to know his face.

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The tension was closing around us like a fist, but no one dared move against Freya and her militia.

When we arrived, we were forced down from the horse and escorted through the main entrance of Valaskjálf, down its rich corridors like a pair of common criminals. I knew where she was taking us. Father had a flare for the dramatic and nothing was more dramatic than Gladsheim.

We turned the last corner and were met with Gladsheim's doors, so large and intricately inlaid with gold carvings that it had taken a team of dwarves two straight weeks to complete. Through the doors was the great hall itself. If ever something was built to intimidate, it was that room. It was cavernous in depth and height, empty but for the row of golden seats that sat high on a dais overlooking the hall. At the centre was a throne, and on it was Odin himself.

He was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, staring us down with his one good eye. The raven perched on Freya's shoulder leapt off, flying across the room and landing on Odin's arm. It turned upward, whispering in his ear. Odin nodded, and the bird found a new perch on the back of the throne, right next to its brother.

Every excuse, every wish, every possibility ran through my mind as we approached. The things I could say or do to convince Odin to give me this chance. Because there had to be a way.

"Grimnir. It has been an age, hasn't it?"

I looked up, torn from my inner turmoil. No one had called Odin that in a very long time.

Before anyone could stop him, Loki had sprinted towards the stairs, heading straight for Odin.

"You know, I would've stopped by, but there was this small problem with my being exiled." He stopped at the foot of the stairs, the soldiers clambering after him. "I do wish you'd written. I was beside myself, thinking about how you'd survive without me doing all your dirty little deeds for you."

It was all I could do to keep my jaw from hitting the floor. No one spoke to Odin that way and lived to tell the tale.

But to my surprise, a small smile cracked on the corners of the Allfather's lips. "You've never been anything but trouble, Loki Laufeyjarson. What makes today any different?"

"Nothing and everything." Loki took one step up the stairs and then another. Every muscle in my body tensed; my breath caught in my throat. Then he sat down in the chair beside Odin as if it was his gods given right to be there.

Leaning back, Loki draped his legs over the arm of the chair, looking every bit as

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comfortable and casual as a cat. “I’m sure you already know why I’m back.”

Odin sighed, sitting up and turning toward him. “My impatient daughter thinks you’ll be the key to her title. She may have brought you here, but you came willingly, so who do you think bears the most blame?”

Loki arched an eyebrow. “Did you really think this little arrangement would last forever, *Hangi*? I’ve played nice, but you know it hasn’t stopped me, don’t you? Exile is just a word, after all.”

Odin huffed, wagging his finger at him. “Don’t think I haven’t seen you stumbling your way around the nine. I knew every time you came into Asgard in disguise and every time you made trouble somewhere else. Word always gets back to me, in the end.”

Loki leaned his elbow on the arm of his chair, his chin resting in his hand. “As if *you’ve* spent the last century being innocent. I bet you’re still up to the same old things.” He turned to stare down at Freya. “Like that time you had me sneak into Freya’s chamber and steal that pretty little necklace from around her neck.”

Freya’s leather-gloved hand went straight for the dripping chains of gold and amber around her neck, but the scowl was pure fury. “You’re a liar. This had nothing to do with Odin.”

Loki laughed. “Oh, darling. You had your reasons, didn’t you, Odin?” Loki turned back to him, waiting for an answer.

Odin neither confirmed nor denied, and the scorn on Freya’s face shrivelled into doubt.

Loki swung himself out of his seat. “Now, if we’re done getting reacquainted, shall we get to the matter at hand?” He held out a hand in my direction, the movement full of flourish. “Would the lady care to speak for herself?”

The lady would. I cleared my throat and stepped forward. “You’ve been underestimating what I’m capable of, and I’ll claim my title by whatever means necessary. I sought out Loki because by all accounts he is more skilled in seidr than many of the masters I’ve studied under. He’s a wasted resource out in those woods while I’m stuck here begging for opportunities.” The words felt bold on my tongue. It felt like someone braver than I was, and I couldn’t bear to push them back down. “I want him reinstated in Asgard with rooms in Valaskjálf and access to whatever he needs, and in return, he will provide me with lessons that may *finally* convince you that I’ve earned my seat up there.” I gestured toward the empty chairs. “I understand he’s caused issues in the past, but I guarantee that I can keep him under control—”

Odin burst into laughter. After a moment, he took a deep breath. “You think you can keep him under control? Then you truly have no idea who he is.” Odin stood, his posture growing stiff as the laughter faded. He turned to Loki. “This has gone on long enough.

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You're here next to me like you still belong here. You don't." Loki didn't wither under Odin's gaze like I would have, but I could feel the chill of his words from where I stood. "I should have *you* killed. And you..." He turned back to me. "I should disown you for going behind my back. He was exiled to protect the realms, and that includes you."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I don't need your protection, and I don't care about your permission. You think I'm incapable of keeping him under control because you don't know anything about me. He'll be my responsibility, and you will pry this opportunity from my cold, dead fingers." Though I was staring Odin in the eye, I could still see the intrigued smirk on Loki's face.

"I vouch for him as well."

I turned to see where the new voice had come from. Idunn strode toward the dais, the white silks of her dress trailing behind her, her bare feet peeking out from beneath it. Even with such a stoic look on her face, Idunn radiated serenity.

She stopped beside me and took my arm in hers. "I've had more contact with Loki in the last century than the rest of the realm put together. If anyone has the right to judge his character, it's me."

Odin examined her and huffed. "You're overstepping your role. This doesn't involve you."

"I disagree." She left me to ascend the stairs, stopping in front of Odin. "Even with your ravens and your high seat, you don't see everything. Loki has more than served his penance for the crimes committed, and your daughter is drowning while you keep her at arms-length." She took Odin's hand between hers, clasping it gently. "You are wise, Allfather. Do the right thing."

He glared at Loki, and Loki winked in response. Then Odin's gaze landed on me. His lips pursed, the only thing I could read on his face. Finally, he snarled and ripped his hand from Idunn's. "Fine. You have three weeks. Prove to me that he is capable of returning *peacefully* and has taught Sigyn something worthy of a title, and you'll all get your way. If he steps out of line, I'll make good on my threats. Are we clear?"

Freya stormed forward. "You must be joking. You can't invite this fox back into our home. He's going to destroy us from the inside again! I won't allow it!"

Odin whipped around to face her. "Quiet! Three weeks. There will be no more discussion." He stomped past all of us, down onto the stone floor of Gladsheim, past Freya's troops, and straight out the door. Freya was quick to follow, her soldiers right behind her. And then all was silent.

When I turned back to the others, Loki had a bright smile on his face, his arms held wide. Idunn stepped into his embrace, squeezing him tightly.

"Impeccable timing, darling." Loki straightened one of the lilies braided into Idunn's

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hair.

She stepped back, waving a hand. “I knew where Sigyn was heading, and I kept my ears open. Some of the people in the market were talking about the return of the Silvertongue, and I couldn’t stay away.”

I stepped up beside her and put my hand on her shoulder. “Thank you. I hope this won’t get you in too much trouble.”

“I’ll tell you a secret.” Idunn took my arm and led me down the stairs. “When you’re the only one in the nine realms who can pick the apples that keep the gods young, you have a little sway in the house of Odin.”

I laughed, letting some of the tension run off my body. At some moments, I may have even forgotten to breathe.

Loki skipped down the stairs, his presence filling the empty space next to me. Nothing about his demeanour suggested that his life had just been in danger. “Call me impatient, but I’m ready to exploit Odin’s treasury. Anyone care for a trip to the market?”

Idunn shook her head. “Another time. I’ve got to get home to Bragi before he sets off on another of his trips around the realms.” We stopped outside the doors of Valaskjálf, ready to part ways. Idunn planted a kiss on my cheek and gave Loki another hug. “I’ll see you tonight in Valhalla. And Loki, be gentle with her. She doesn’t know you like I do.” She gave him a wink and turned on her heel, gliding off into the corridor.

Loki shrugged casually. “That leaves you, Siggy.”

“Don’t call me ‘Siggy.’ I’m not a pet, and I don’t want to go to the market.”

“What if I promise you’ll learn something?” Loki started walking down the hall backwards, clearly expecting me to follow.

Damn it. Two seconds inside the city lines, and he already knew how to twist my arm.

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