



# REMEMBER

A CHRISTIAN FANTASY OF DRAGONS AND MYTHICAL  
CREATURES AND THE DIVINE WAR WITH CHAOS

— SCARLET AND THE TRICKSTER | BOOK 2 —

SHANNA TERESE





# REMEMBER

*Scarlet and the Trickster*

*Book 2*

by

Shanna Terese



# *REMEMBER*

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# CONTENTS

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FORWARD . . . . .	ix
Chapter 1 . . . . .	1
Chapter 2 . . . . .	12
Chapter 3 . . . . .	35
Chapter 4 . . . . .	67
Chapter 5 . . . . .	108
Chapter 6 . . . . .	139
Chapter 7 . . . . .	165



HOWEVER MANY YEARS A PERSON LIVES,  
LET HIM REJOICE IN THEM ALL.

BUT LET HIM REMEMBER THE DAYS OF DARK-  
NESS, FOR THEY WILL BE MANY.

ALL THAT COMES IS VANITY.

---

*~Ecclesiastes 11:8*





# FORWARD

---

*Four years ago, I died.*

*There was this bus crash, and a bunch of kids died—including my brother, and me.*

*We're not still dead, to be clear.*

*She brought thirteen of us back to life. Because, something about us being dead, about bringing us back, allowed her to change us.*

*Change us into monsters. Shape-shifters. Leviathan. Dragons.*

*Oh, and she is Tiamat, mother of the gods. Except, they call themselves the Ageless now.*

*And we're like them now, Immortals—or, that's what they call us, anyway. There are many different types of Immortals: Ageless, Djinn, Fairies, Elves, and the other shape-shifters, the Harpies and the Valkyries.*

*And then us, Leviathan. Tiamat's special creation.*

*See, something like ten thousand years ago, there was this war. Tiamat wanted to wipe out the rest of the Ageless, and she created the Leviathan to do it. But Tiamat lost.*

*Immortals use these things called rifts to travel between planets. They trapped Tiamat on another planet, inside a volcano. It was her prison for ten thousand years, until, a few days ago, the prison broke, and Tiamat went free.*

*When that happened, the thirteen of us, who died in a bus crash, who were rescued from Tiamat by the Ageless—we got called back, back to the volcano, back to her. Apparently, she controls our minds now...*

*Except for me.*

*She doesn't control me.*

*Then Loki—my guardian, I guess you'd say—used my mind to block Tiamat's control over my brother's mind.*


*But we're it, the only Leviathan in the universe who are not under Tiamat's control.*

*Because Tiamat can't control me.*

*And I don't know what that means . . .*

## CHAPTER 1

---

ist rose from the Earth, like the primordial waters that had nurtured the first living cells. With it, above the peaceful waters, rose the noise of battle, the cacophony of sword on sword and shield on shield, the snarl of men who became wolves, and the violent bursts of energy as Elves and Aesir both cast their spells.

They fought against each other today, the Elves and the Aesir. Ten years ago they had fought together against the Fairy kingdoms. Ten years before, Fairies and Aesir fought against the Elves. The wolf packs changed sides too whenever they felt like it. There was no sense to be made of it, Scarlet thought, as she stood on the hill, overlooking the battle. The Immortals cut into each other, a thousand fanged wolves against a thou-

sand swords, against a thousand spells. Red blood poured out across the green forests and mountains of prehistoric Europe. Few of the fighters would actually die. Immortals were hard to kill.

And still, they tried so very hard.

Scarlet didn't care. She had never been good at swordplay, and the thrill of battle was not something that interested her. And she had no love for the Aesir. She didn't feel she owed them anything, even though they had raised her. There was only one thing she cared about, only one reason she stood on that hill, drenched in predawn mist.

In the center of the battle, Sif, granddaughter of Odin, princess, and warrior, raised her sword and slashed, two twists of her wrist, through two Elves. The mist rose around her like a cloak, and her body merged into it, more and more translucent the higher the sun rose. Her pale hair and skin became one with the surrounding mist, making it impossible to tell if she were real, or an illusion brought on by the adrenaline of the fight.

So she moved through the enemy, a silver wraith only half-seen. Many people wondered how she managed such a trick, because it wasn't the type of thing that Aesir magic could normally do. A few people suspected the truth, that it was really Scarlet, standing on the hill, and casting the deceptive spell over the one person in that fight for whom she cared.

And then, like a snap, the world changed. Hill and battle vanished, and instead, Scarlet had just come through the rift in Loki's compound, greeted by red-brown stone carved to look like the wooden beams that held up Viking longhouses.

Directly across from her stood the open wall, supported by three pillars, traveling back into the dark recesses of the rest of the building. Windows, narrow slits lining the walls high up near the ceiling, let in some light. They were too high up to offer a view outside. There was nothing really to see anyway,

just volcanoes, constantly erupting. Otherwise, the room was empty.

Scarlet couldn't remember where she was coming from or why she would have left in the first place. But it felt natural for her to be stepping back through the rift right then. It also felt natural for Effa, a woman she had only met once before, to step through the rift behind her. Strangest of all, it felt entirely natural for Scarlet to begin explaining where things were in the enormous compound where she had lived for less than a week.

"So, guest quarters that way," she said, pointing through the open wall in front of them. "Right, left, fourth right, third left. Or, I say guest rooms, but... I mean... I think there should be a room with a bed over there somewhere. Haven't actually checked. New place, you know. Just getting used to it."

"New?" Effa paced a few steps toward the open wall, sending a glance at the enormous stone beams that ran across the ceiling. She had long, thick blond hair, half of it in a braid pinned to the back of her head, the rest hanging loose, and looked young, but Scarlet knew that meant nothing. All the Ageless looked young. They were *ageless*, after all.

"Yes, a gift from my father," Scarlet said. "Attempting to make amends for... I don't know. What exactly do you call five thousand years of having absolutely nothing to do with your child? Neglect?"

Effa raised her eyebrows. "It's a word to start with, I suppose."

"Although," Scarlet said, "he wouldn't have given me this place if the Ageless Council hadn't forced him to. He also chose the least appealing planet he could find—so I'm not sure he's making up for anything, to be honest."

"Hmm." Effa crossed her arms and fixed Scarlet with an appraising, critical look. "So you're just going to let me stay here?" she asked.



Scarlet shrugged. "Why not? I mean, aside from the whole, you're a fugitive... thing..."

"Do you even know what I did?" Effa asked.

"I think it's... you murdered someone, or..." Scarlet waved her hand in front of her face as if chasing away an annoying fly. "Details are hazy. But who has time for details? The kitchen..." She turned again to the open wall. "You might want to know..."

"I can't pay you anything," Effa said. There was nothing apologetic or cautious in her voice. She was probing for answers. "The whole fugitive situation, you know."

"Oh, don't worry," Scarlet said with a shrug. "The way I live, I'm bound to need a favor sooner or later. Probably sooner, if we're being honest. Favors are more useful than currency, in any case. Right, now, kitchen... I think it's the second left . . . no, right, then the second left..."

Then, suddenly, a blinding flash of light scorched Scarlet's eyes, and a second later, she realized those eyes were closed. She opened them to find herself on her back in bed in the room she shared with her brother.

The light on their nightstand was strobing, telling them it was time to wake up. Scarlet hated this method of waking, but Kurt preferred it to an alarm. She threw a pillow at the wall, which was enough movement to catch the motion sensors and shut off the light. For a while, she lay there, staring at the ceiling, the image of the rift room and Effa's face lingering in her mind.

"Well, that was weird," she said aloud



At breakfast that morning, Kurt talked, moving his hands in wild and fantastic gestures, with their new benefactor, Loki.

Their conversation that morning, over burnt egg, cheese, and tomato omelets, revolved around something you would expect a smart kid like Kurt to be interested in: the rifts.

“But how do they work?” Kurt asked. “What does ‘weak point in the fabric of reality’ even mean?”

“I’m sorry, I just can’t give you a scientific explanation for that,” Loki said, pushing the salt shaker at Scarlet. He had noticed she wasn’t eating, and something about having salt was supposed to fix that, apparently. “This is a problem that modern Humans, even religious modern Humans, run into all the time. It’s why Humans have never noticed the rifts exist. The rifts have to do with the soul of the universe, and until you accept that such a thing exists, your science won’t explain them.”

Kurt raised his eyebrows. “The universe has a soul?”

“Well, no, of course not,” Loki said. “But it’s the only way to describe what it does have. All created things are connected to all other created things because they are created. The dust of the stars is the blood in our bodies is the ice that melts to rain in spring. We all come from that same source, traced back to the moment when that first light burst out across the Abyss. The energy from that explosion animates our souls, as it animates the universe itself. It is a temporary power lent to us. Nothing in this creation is self-sufficient, and nothing is forever. That fact binds us all together.”

“But you’re forever,” Kurt said. “Unless you’re killed, you and the other Ageless could live for all eternity.”

“No,” Loki said. “We could live until the end of time. But time will end. This universe will crash again into the oblivion from which God raised it. Only the Creator is eternal, because the Creator stands outside our universe. Creation itself will die, and if nothing kills me first, I will end then.”

Kurt sat for a moment, thinking hard—a typical pose for him. “But what does that have to do with the rifts?”

“Ah yes. Because everything is connected, pain in the souls of living creatures causes pain in the universe. If the pain is great enough, reality itself tears, and we get the rifts.”

“But haven’t some rifts just always existed?” Kurt asked.

“We think so.”

“So where did they come from?”

“Good question. No one knows. Eat your eggs.”

“Loki,” Scarlet said, looking up from her plate, “I kind of need to talk to you.”

“Oh, look at the time!” Loki said.

Scarlet wasn’t sure what to make of the outburst. Knowing Loki, it was possible he said it to avoid her question, and equally possible he really had just lost track of time.

“I have to get you to school. Eat, quickly. Chewing optional.”

“Chewing is not optional,” Scarlet told her brother, then turned to Loki. “What are you talking about?”

“Okay, yes, you probably should chew. But you’re Leviathan, so choking can’t actually kill you, so...”

“No,” Scarlet said. “I mean, you claimed us, which means we don’t go to school anymore.”

“Right, but you’re teenagers,” Loki said, digging something out from under his chair. “I have to do something useful with you. So, I made up some stuff I’m calling ‘school.’ Kurt, here.” He slid a sheet of paper across the table.

Kurt skimmed the two handwritten sentences. “You want me to read as many books as I can in a week and eventually tell you what they’re about?”

“That’s right,” Loki said. “To the library with you.”

“Sweet!” Kurt jumped up and ran out the door.

“And, Scarlet...” Loki was getting up, checking his watch. “We have to intercept your lesson plan in the rift room, actually, so come, quickly.”

“Loki,” Scarlet said, following him into the hall. “Did you

hear what I said?"

"Yes, yes, you need to talk to me. Can it wait? We have three minutes before your lesson plan vanishes."

"And what does that mean?" Scarlet shook her head, running after Loki down the twisting halls, toward the rift.

"But I don't want it to wait," she said as they came in sight of an open wall. Between its two pillars, she could see the rift room, all red and brown, and more brightly lit than the hallway. It was exactly as it had been in her dream. "Loki, it's about Effa."

"What about her?" Loki asked, skipping down the steps. "Oh, good, they haven't been here yet."

Scarlet was tired of not having his attention. "Did Effa ever murder anyone?" she asked.

Loki's attitude changed as abruptly as she had expected. He turned and grabbed her arm. "How do you know that?"

"It's true," Scarlet said. "Oh, crap, it's true."

"Scarlet, how..."

"Yeah, you remember when you linked your mind to mine to save Kurt, and I saw all those memories from your life?"

"Things you told me you couldn't remember?"

"Well, I couldn't at the time!"

"What do you remember?"

"Nothing, really. It was just this bizarre dream—or two dreams, I guess. One Sif was fighting, and I was shielding her with mist, or something. And then, about Effa, and we were in this room, and I was inviting her to live here, I think, and we started talking about her having killed someone... and... other things... So, my question is, was I really you and that conversation real?"

Loki's eyes narrowed. "Wait... say that last sentence again."

Scarlet opened her mouth to clarify, but never got the chance.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

It was a familiar voice, from the hall behind Scarlet, one that made her cringe and hesitate to turn around.

Loki leaned in closer to whisper, “We will finish this later,” then released her arm. He took a step toward the open wall, holding out both arms in welcome.

“Luke, Asok, good, you’re here!”

Scarlet closed her eyes with a dramatic sigh, and turned, crossing her arms as she did.

Luke, the seventeen-year-old Djinn boy she had almost killed less than a week ago, stood seven feet away, under the open wall. With him stood his cousin, Asok. The almost killing thing had been an accident, a fact that Luke and Asok did not take into consideration. Even facing death together two days earlier had not healed the breach.

Both Djinn wore black sweatshirts, baggy and generic, over baggy black jeans. All Djinn dressed this way, no personalization, no jewelry, no differences between genders. The Fairies Scarlet and Kurt had lived with before Loki said the Djinn had no individual personalities and were basically automatons built to torment the other races. But then, Fairies didn’t like Djinn.

Actually, no one liked the Djinn.

Luke pulled the hood of his sweatshirt back from his head so they could see his face. A tattoo—swirling lines wrapping around each other like stylized smoke—twisted up from his neck onto his face. It covered his chin and left cheek, going up over his nose and onto his forehead. The lines were pure black, so he must have had them redone recently, maybe even that morning. Immortal healing abilities made it impossible to make permanent marks on their skin. Djinn tattoos faded within days. Scarlet would probably only keep one for hours.

“Loki,” Luke said with a nod of respect. “What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here?” Loki asked. “This is my rift room. What are you doing here?”

“Um... going to school,” Luke said, raising his eyebrows.

There were seven Djinn students at the school where all Immortal children got sent. They stayed in such a tight clump together that Scarlet had assumed they came from the same place. But Asok and Luke were apparently the only young people on Loki’s world. Or they had been, until a few days ago.

“Oh, right, yes!” Loki shot a glance back at Scarlet. “That reminds me. You’re not going to school today.”

Asok had drawn back her hood too. She had a tattooed lace mask on the upper half of her face, accenting the almost-black, brown eyes she shared with all members of her species. Her black hair hung loose and thick around her face. Male Djinn cut their hair shoulder-length and usually tied it back in a ponytail. Female Djinn grew it longer and let it hang loose when not fighting or training. It was the only difference anyone ever saw between their men and women. Their loose clothing disguised all the others.

“Explain,” Asok said, raising one eyebrow.

“Yes. You will stay here and help Scarlet train,” Loki said.

Scarlet’s mouth dropped open. She meant to say the word *What?* but it came out as a croak. At the same time, Luke gave a flat-out, “No.”

Asok put a hand on her cousin’s arm, her eyes on Loki. “You cannot be serious.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” Loki asked. “I assure you, as often as I choose not to be serious, I am indeed capable of it!”

“Years,” Asok said. “Years we have been asking you to claim us so we didn’t have to keep going back to that place, and all you’d do is insist it would completely screw up our futures...”

“And it would,” Loki said. “You don’t want to be claimed. Being claimed is a death sentence for Djinn...”



“And then you go and claim those two,” Luke said.

“Well they’re not Djinn, are they?” Loki said.

“The point is,” Asok cut in, “if we’re not claimed, we have to go to school until we’re nineteen. Which leaves another two years on our sentence.”

“Please!” Loki scoffed. “Do you know how many favors Donar owes me by now? I called one in—well, two, technically.”

“And you couldn’t do that before?” Asok asked.

“The point is,” Loki said, “Scarlet can’t go to school anymore because she’s claimed. She needs someone to help her train. I am not a fighter. You two are. More than me, anyway. You three will be sparring partners, or you two can go back to school. That’s the deal.”

Luke’s eyes narrowed. “For how long?”

“As long as you can keep it up without killing each other,” Loki said.

Asok snorted.

“She’s already crossed that line,” Luke said.

“Starting now!” Loki made a wild gesture at the ceiling with both hands. “Seriously, did fighting to keep each other alive do nothing to mend fences?”

The three teenagers stood there awkwardly, looking at each other in fleeting glimpses.

Luke took a deep breath. “No school?”

“That’s the deal,” Loki said.

Asok and Luke exchanged a glance. “I suppose we could try it,” she said.

“Great!” Loki clapped his hands. The noise ricocheted off the marble around them, coming back twice as loud as it had really been.

“Wait! Do I get a say in this?” Scarlet asked.

“Uh... not really... sorry... no...” Loki hurried off toward the open wall. “So glad you two are on board. Scarlet, show them to the gym.”

“Wait! Hey!” Scarlet shouted. “I don’t know where the gym is!”

Loki’s face peaked back around one of the pillars holding up the open wall. “You don’t know where the gym is? How do you not know where the gym is?”

“Um, maybe because I’ve lived here for a whole five days and spent two of those in the Underworld.”

“Oh, right... All of you, follow me to the gym!” He moved off so quickly they had to sprint to catch up.

“Don’t expect us to take it easy on you,” Luke said as they fell into a brisk trot down the winding halls. The Djinn walked shoulder to shoulder, with Scarlet forced to walk behind them.

“Hey, I beat you, remember.”

“I basically remember teeth in my neck,” Luke said.

“I won fair and square before that!” Scarlet said.

“And here we are!” Loki stopped without warning so that they almost ran into him, and Scarlet did run into Asok.

To their right was a door that looked exactly the same as every other door in the place.

“How do you ever find anything in this maze?” Scarlet asked.

“Hey, don’t blame me. Ea designed it,” Loki said.

“And you’ve lived here for three thousand years and never redesigned it?” Luke asked, raising an eyebrow. “Dad says they knocked down every wall they could the second they moved into our section of this place.”

“Yeah, well, I have a short attention span.” Loki pushed the door open for them. “Enjoy. Don’t kill each other—that’s my only rule. Well, don’t hurt each other either. And... Keep the fighting civil... Treat each other the way you want to be treated... Yeah, that should do it. You know, if everyone just followed that one rule, the world would actually work. Anyway, bye.”

And without further instruction, he walked off.

## CHAPTER 2

---

**T**his is stupid!" Scarlet clawed at the strip of cloth tied around her eyes until she ripped the knot loose.

Asok stood thirty feet away, behind a folding wooden table, studying her nails on one hand with a file in the other. "I thought it was going well."

"Well, of course you're enjoying this!" Scarlet said. "You get to hurl sharp objects at me and keep up with your beauty routine at the same time!"

Asok raised her eyes to Scarlet's without tilting the rest of her head up, slid the file across one nail, and blew against it.

Immortals, typically, had very little control over body modifications. Tattoos disappeared, piercings healed, severed limbs even grew back—to a point. But hair and nails were made

of dead cells, and could, therefore, be controlled as Humans controlled them. Scarlet usually ignored her nails until they became bothersome. But it turned out that Asok, under the baggy clothes, was very careful about her personal grooming.

“Come on, snake,” Luke said. He came around a mass of training equipment and dropped another box of throwing disks onto the table. “This is a perfectly legitimate sensory training exercise.”

“Yes, and it gets you to think fast, too.” Asok flicked her hand, and the disk on top of the box flew at Scarlet. She batted it away, avoiding the sharp rim and sending it down into the floor with a bunch of bladed metal circles just like it.

“Stop that!” she said.

Loki’s gym was huge, the size of three football fields at least. There were open spaces, like the one in which they stood, whole fields of weightlifting equipment, a full obstacle course, and just about any weapon or type of target imaginable, all stored in the dozen equipment rooms lining the walls.

The three of them had spent the entire first day exploring.

They spent the second day exploring again.

Now, on the third day, Luke and Asok came up with this brilliant way to throw things at Scarlet without getting in trouble for it.

“Put the blindfold back on,” Asok said. Both she and Luke had stopped wearing their sweatshirts. They still dressed all in black, but Asok looked more like a girl than she ever had before, with her hair pulled back in a high ponytail, short, but perfectly sculpted nails, and a sleeveless shirt that actually fit her body.

“No, this is stupid!” Scarlet dropped the strip of black cloth on the floor and marched to the table as dramatically as she could, over the clutter of throwing disks. “Loki could hurl objects at me himself if that’s what he wanted. You’re here to teach me to fight, so let’s fight.”

Luke raised his eyebrows at her, and suddenly she got it. They were scared of her.

“Oh come on!” she said.

“You almost killed me last time,” Luke reminded her. “I have an eternal life span, and I almost died at age seventeen, because of you.”

“And I,” Scarlet reached for the bag beneath the table and pulled out a water bottle, “have pig’s blood this time.” She stuffed it back into the bag and glared at them. “We’ll warm up with something simple. Asok, you and me, no weapons, no dragon, no claws, no spells, no magic. Just straight up hand-to-hand. Think you can handle that?”

Asok set her nail file on the table. “No,” she said. “You’re a shape-shifter. You’re way stronger than either of us, whether you change forms or not.” She smiled, causing the lines in her tattooed mask to crinkle in a mischievous pattern. “But we’ll let you take both of us.”

“And if we win, we go back to throwing sharp objects at you,” Luke added.

But Scarlet won.

---

“Asok?” Scarlet called, on her hands and knees inside a narrow, pitch-black tube.

“I’m right here!” the Djinn girl snapped.

“Where’s here? This place is scrambling your voice.”

“This would be so much easier if you were telepathic!” Asok said with a groan.

“I *am* telepathic, we’re just on different frequencies. Just... bang on something. I’ll follow the vibration...”

“We’ve tried that. It never works.”

“Do it!”

Asok stomped, hard. The tube rattled, a shock wave coming from everywhere at once, no way to trace its origin.

“Who built this thing?” Scarlet said, giving the tube her own rattling kick.

They were in a part of Loki’s obstacle course, separate from the larger tangle of tubes and trap doors. From the outside, it looked laughably simple, a few winding, sealed tubes that only took up about thirty square yards. Getting from one end to the other was too easy. Near as they could figure, one person was supposed to enter at one end, the other person at the other end, and the goal was to find each other in a pitch-black maze.

Luke and Asok tried it first. They were both Djinn, and cousins, linked together on a psychic network that went down to their DNA. They had found each other in two minutes. Scarlet and Asok had been in the maze now for over an hour.

“This is ridiculous!” Asok said, exasperation leaking through her voice. “Luke, time?”

“Coming up on eighty minutes,” Luke’s bored voice came in from the other side of the plastic tubes.

This was ridiculous. The maze was not that big, and Luke’s voice came through from outside, clear, with no distortion. Scarlet put her hands on either side of the tube and squatted, trying to see through the darkness. She had tried everything, even growing scales—because morphing usually improved her eyesight. It was as if every heightened sense she possessed had simply switched off. Sound jumped around, making her dizzy. An hour in, Asok had even tried cutting herself. The smell of blood bombarded Scarlet from all sides at once, lingering in every particle of the air. They were not trying that again.

They had tried everything else, too. Scarlet sitting still while Asok searched. Asok sitting still while Scarlet searched. Going back to the beginning and starting over—except they couldn’t find the beginning now either, which was slightly terri-



fyng. Asok could teleport out at any time, but Scarlet was just trapped.

“This place has to be enchanted,” Asok said. Her voice, as usual, bounced off every wall at once. “The tubes are moving. That’s the only explanation.”

“If they are, I can’t see it happening,” Luke said.

Scarlet slammed her head back into the curved wall and slouched down.

“Hey wait, is that you?” Asok asked.

“What?” Scarlet lifted her head. “I just banged my head...”

“No,” Asok said. “Coming toward me right now. I feel body heat.”

“Asok, I’m not moving.”

“You must be. I’m right here. Give me your hand and I can teleport us out.”

Scarlet pulled herself as far up onto her feet as she could. She was almost six feet tall, and the tube was barely four feet tall, which added to her disorientation. Maybe Elves had built it. “Asok, you’re not anywhere near me.”

“She’s right,” Luke called from outside. “I can hear both of you, and your voices are coming from completely different places.”

“What are you talking about? I can hear you breathing,” Asok said.

Scarlet reached around in empty air, finding nothing. A sick feeling rose from her stomach, with wire fingers that constricted around her chest. Something bad was happening. “Luke, where is she, what direction?”

“I don’t... north, of you, I guess... but, it’s not straight north...”

“Scarlet, give me your hand!” Asok said.

Scarlet stooped in her tunnel, trying to figure out which direction was north and how to go that way.

And then, Asok screamed. Not a shout, not surprise, not

anger, but a real, terror-soaked scream.

“Asok!”

The instant he shouted her name, Scarlet knew what Luke was about to do. “Don’t you dare come in here too,” she said.

“Asok, what’s happening?”

“There’s something else in here!” Asok screeched.

Scarlet heard the sounds of thrashing, coming from all around. But it was only one person thrashing, she could tell that much. “No, there isn’t. It’s just us,” she said. Those sick, wire fingers were wrapping themselves around her throat. She needed to get to Asok. She really, really needed to get to Asok.

“It grabbed me. It felt like a Harpy!”

Harpies. Djinn were afraid of Harpies like mice feared owls—a primal fear, the bird of prey’s descending shadow, passed down through genetic memory. “Asok, listen to me,” Scarlet said. “There’s nothing in here but you and me.”

“You don’t know that!” She had stopped thrashing, and Scarlet could picture her curled up against the tube wall, knees to her chin, eyes on the darkness. “It’s coming. I hear it.”

“No, you don’t, Asok, it’s the maze!” Scarlet said. “The maze is controlling the sound, and the smell, and when that didn’t break us, it moved to the next step.”

“It’s com...” Asok’s words dissolved into another scream.

“Just get out of here!” Scarlet started crawling, praying this random direction might be north. “I mean it. Teleport, now.”

“I’m not leaving you with this thing!”

For some reason, that made Scarlet angry. “There is nothing here!” she said, rising to her feet and sliding forward. “Get out...”

And suddenly the floor dropped from under her feet. She hit the wooden tube hard on the side of her head, and for some reason, her healing abilities did not keep her conscious.

Scarlet found herself sitting in the kitchen. It looked different. There was no refrigerator, and that space instead was stacked with dried, salted meats. There were no cabinets, either, just bins stacked on top of each other. And the sink was just a tub, no faucets. But the same long table ran down the center of the room, and across from her at that table, sat Effa. They each had a bowl of something in front of them. Scarlet kept her eyes on her food, but Effa kept looking at her.

"Where did you go?" Effa said, finally.

"Out," Scarlet replied. "I go out. It's not your business."

"Loki, you were gone for five days," Effa said.

Loki. This wasn't her memory, and this wasn't a dream. This was Loki. Scarlet looked up. For a moment, she saw her own face, reflected in the polished metal door of the pantry, and then, it melted into his. She was Loki.

"So?" he asked, smiling. "It doesn't bother you when I'm gone, does it?"

Effa rolled her eyes, setting her spoon down with a sharp click. "I'm not asking because I'm keeping tabs on you," she said. "It's none of my business what you do. But you saw fit to leave a near-perfect stranger alone in your home for five days..."

"There's nothing here I actually care about," Loki said. "And if you're tired of the solitude, you can always leave."

"I think you're tired of the solitude," Effa said, picking her spoon up again.

"I didn't leave to find company."

"No, because you can't stand any of your own kind. And you also can't admit that you're lonely. You have twelve hundred and eighty-seven thousand square feet of living space already built on this planet, but you refuse to rent any of it out. The closest you can come to admitting that you want company is to take in a stray murderer."

"I don't want tenants!" Loki said. "You get tenants then

you have to deal with tenant problems. You have to fix everything for them. And then they brake things just to annoy you. I don't want tenants!"

"And what exactly do you call me?" Effa asked.

"Well you're not paying me anything."

"Which I'm not entirely comfortable with, to be honest."

"You want to leave?"

"No!" Effa sighed and shook her head. "I have nowhere to go, anyway."

"Right, the whole, wanted for murder thing." Loki leaned over the table. "Who did you kill, Effa?"

"Someone no one liked and everyone misses," she said.

Scarlet gasped and opened her eyes to find Loki looking down on her.

"That's it," he said, with a hand behind her neck, helping her sit up. "Come back awake. Drink this."

It was the bottle of pig's blood from her bag. Scarlet rolled her eyes at the thought, but her head throbbed too badly to object. She drained the bottle, then looked around to get her bearings. "What happened?"

To her right stood the maze, to her left, the rest of the obstacle course. Asok and Luke stood nearby, looking down at her, and Loki crouched beside her. Asok's face looked strange, bloated maybe. Her eyes, under the black tattoos, were red.

"I got Loki," Luke said with quiet sobriety.

"Yeah..." Loki sighed. "In hindsight, I probably should have warned you about that maze..."

"They didn't have any problem with it," Scarlet said, nodding to the cousins.

“No, they would have found each other too quickly,” Loki said. “Same if you and Kurt had gone in. The maze needs time to work.”

“Kurt is never going into that place,” Scarlet said.

Loki was looking at her with a cold, calculating expression. “My point is, the entire thing is enchanted. It throws out psychic interference to keep the players from finding each other. Only the strongest of psychic bonds can cut through it.”

Scarlet put her hands out behind her and leaned back. “Magic doesn’t work on shape-shifters.”

“Spells don’t work on shape-shifters,” Loki said. “This enchantment is deeper than spells. It’s magic like the rifts, like the psychic networks themselves.”

“Why do you even have it?” Asok asked.

Loki sighed. “A friend of mine built it. She designed most of this room, actually.” He looked at Scarlet, and that cold, calculating look came back into his eyes. “The point of the maze is to find the other person while finding and facing your fears. I’m sorry. I should probably put a note on the door, or something.”

“You think!” Asok snapped. Luke whispered something to her in Djinn, and she shouted back in that language. Then Loki spoke firmly and in Djinn, turning to Asok. He put a hand under her chin and said something more gently. She nodded.

Meanwhile, Scarlet’s eyes met Luke’s. For a split second, they exchanged a look of mutual concern, before coming back to their senses and looking away.

“Asok is going to take the rest of the day off,” Loki said. Again, Scarlet’s eye met Luke’s. “I’m sure the two of you can manage for...” He checked his watch. “Three hours.”

“Can I throw sharp objects at her again?” Luke asked. Scarlet rolled her eyes.

Loki shrugged. “What do I care? Here, I’ll take you

home.” He took Asok’s arm, and they both vanished.

Luke and Scarlet stood for a while, looking at the spot from which Asok and Loki had teleported. “So...” Scarlet asked after several seconds. “After I passed out—How bad did it get?”

“Bad,” Luke said

“I didn’t know she was that afraid of Harpies.”

“It wasn’t just Harpies,” Luke said.

Scarlet sighed. “So, why didn’t I start seeing things?”

“Do you actually expect me to have an answer to that?” Luke asked.

“No,” Scarlet said.

“Come on, let’s do some hand to hand,” Luke said.

Scarlet frowned. “Really?”

“Yeah, I feel like hitting something.” He was already marching toward the section of empty mats they had designated their sparring zone.

“Oh, so you think you’ll get a hit in?” Scarlet shot after him. He didn’t respond.

---

The fight did them both good. Luke lost, but every day it took Scarlet longer to win. His mood seemed better after the fight too, looser, less angry. Perhaps he really had just needed to hit something.

They took a break at the water fountain afterward. It was an actual fountain, with a large reservoir of water—a pool about three feet deep—the only thing in the entire room that might be called ‘decorative.’ But it was also the only source of water for probably a mile.

They filled their bottles from the reservoir, then sat on the wide rim, sipping their water in silence. The fountain sent a



steady, cool spray against their backs, soothing after the fight, and whatever that maze had been.

“So,” Scarlet asked after a while, “do you know this friend who designed this place?”

Luke shrugged. “I think her name’s Effa. That’s all I can figure, anyway. She hasn’t lived here since before I was born. *Immee* mentions her sometimes, though.”

“Who?”

“Oh, sorry. *Immah* means ‘mother,’ and *immee* means ‘my mother.’”

“Oh. Who is your mother?” Scarlet blurted out. It had suddenly occurred to her that she knew nothing about Luke and Asok, except that they were cousins, and their grandfather, Kobah, was the leader of their kin group.

“Irina,” Luke said. “You met her, sort of. She’s one of the healers who helped Loki after the whole Tiamat encounter almost fried his brain.”

That had only happened because Loki essentially sacrificed himself to save Kurt, after Scarlet begged him to. Was Luke trying to remind her of that? If he were, Scarlet chose to ignore it. “And she’s Kobah’s daughter?”

“Well, yeah, but not by blood,” Luke said. “*Avvee*—my father—is Kobah’s son. His name’s Mohasa. Mom came to us when her kin group died out. That was a thousand years ago, or so.”

“And Asok’s parents?”

“Kobah’s daughter, Eshon, and her husband, Mark,” he said.

“Mark?”

“Yeah. Is something wrong with Mark?”

“Well, no, it just sounds so totally... normal.”

“You realize all our names sound normal to me, right? In fact, Scarlet is the weirdest name I have ever heard. It’s not even a name. It’s a color.”

“Yeah, whatever!” Scarlet took a long drink from her water bottle, then reached back to refill it in the fountain. “Is Kobah married?” she asked. “I mean, obviously you have a grandmother, so... but...”

“Yeah, he’s still married, to his... I think Humans these days would say... second cousin. Or... Yeah, I don’t get how the whole cousin thing works.”

A joke came to mind, about inbreeding, and the reason Asok might be so high strung, but Scarlet swallowed it back. She didn’t need Luke wanting to kill her again.

Luke looked at her sideways. “You know the whole marrying relatives thing works differently for us, right? I mean, only sixty years ago, even Humans were marrying their cousins all the time. Every Human on Earth is technically ‘inbred’ at some point in their family history. And most people here were born back when even marrying your sister was considered normal.”

“Yeah, I know all that was normal once upon a time. But then we wised up when we discovered genetic diseases because half the royalty in Europe got hemophilia,” Scarlet said. She was rather proud of herself for remembering that word. Maybe she had been paying attention in history classes after all.

Luke laughed. She had never heard him laugh before, and it was shocking, like seeing a bear turn into a rabbit. “Yeah, well, thing is, we don’t get genetic diseases the way Humans do, so, if that’s the only real reason not to...”

She had to ask: “So, you and Asok then...”

“What? No!”

“You just said it’s normal...”

“Second cousins are fair game,” Luke said. “But, our culture always mimics Humans, so actual cousins are a little too close these days, even for us. Besides, I could never feel that way about Asok, she’s just... my cousin.”

The way he said that made it sound like cousin meant

more to him than girlfriend ever could. “Can I ask you something else?” Scarlet said.

“I suppose.”

“Promise you won’t get angry, because I really just want to understand?”

“Okay, starting to change my mind...”

“The whole kin thing, why is it so important to you?”

Luke looked at her. His eyes were lighter than they had ever looked before, not really black at all. Or maybe she was just paying attention now.

“Family is everything,” he said surprised by her question. “It’s safety and love and one small example of how the Human race was always supposed to live together. Why is Kurt so important to you?”

Scarlet hesitated. “The Fairies told us something about a communal identity—like you’re not individual people, or...”

Luke snorted. “Yeah, well, Fairies are idiots.”

“No, seriously!” Scarlet said.

“Okay, seriously...” He took another drink, then reached back and submerged his bottle in the fountain to refill it. “We’re individual people, we just put the good of the family before our own personal good. If that’s a communal identity, so be it. But...” He hesitated, drawing his bottle out of the fountain. “There is the whole magic thing.”

“What magic thing?”

Luke paused, thinking. “You know that the Djinn are more powerful, in terms of spells and such, than any other race, right?”

Scarlet nodded.

“It’s because of where our magic comes from. The Ageless have their own personal magic. They’re only as strong as one person. But for us, magic flows through the connection we have to our family. We’re each individually as strong as our entire family is strong. Even when we’re not actually with them,

our magic is tied to them.”

“So, if your whole kin group were to die...?” Scarlet said. Luke’s eyes flashed, looking black again. “I mean, just, hypothetically...”

“Hypothetically I would be powerless, yes,” Luke said, his voice dark.

Scarlet hesitated, but she’d already made him mad, so why not risk a little more? “So, your mother? You said her family...”

“My mother is a part of this kin group now,” he said.

“So, that can happen? I mean, you can be part of a kin group, even if you’re not blood-related?”

“She is blood-related,” Luke said. “My blood, and my brothers’...”

“You have a brother?” The words just tumbled out in her surprise.

Luke raised an eyebrow. “My parents have been together for a thousand years.”

“Oh... right...”

“I have two brothers. Asok has a brother and a sister.”

“I take it they’re...”

“A lot older than us, yeah.”

“So how did you two end up the same age?”

“Oh, they planned that,” Luke said. “My oldest brother grew up as the only child in the kin group, and my parents said they’d never do that to any of their children again. They didn’t know we would end up exactly the same age, but the four of them planned to have children around the same time.”

“So you two were literally made for each other—to be best friends, I mean,” Scarlet said.

“Yeah, it would really have sucked if we’d ended up hating each other.”

They both laughed.

“Come on,” Luke said, pressing the lid onto his water bot-

tle. “We really should stretch out, I guess.”

“Yeah...” Scarlet reached back, submerging her hand into the fountain along with her bottle. “Be right there.”

Luke was about five feet into the nearby field of weights and weight machines when Scarlet drew her hand out of the fountain. For a moment, as she reached for the bottle cap with her other hand, drops of water glistened off her skin. Then the water in the bottle turned scorching hot. She looked at her hand and saw red-yellow drops, molten rock, searing her skin as it dripped down onto the stone beneath her. The fountain had filled with magma. She leaped away with a screech, heart pounding in her ears, breathing in the sizzling smell of sulfur. The bottle went flying.

And then it was water again. Water in the fountain, water spilled at her feet, water still leaking from the bottle as it rolled on the floor.

Luke had come back over to her. “Scarlet?” he asked.

She looked down at her hand, shaking in front of her face. Her skin was still wet. Wet. Not burnt.

“I thought my hand was on fire,” she said, fighting to catch her breath.

“What?” Luke asked.

Scarlet focused on the air—fresh, normal air, filling her chest with every breath in. She shook her head.

“That maze must have done something to me after all.”

Luke took her hand to look at it, with a concern in his eyes that she had not realized Djinn could feel. They were almost the same height, she noticed, with Scarlet maybe an eighth of an inch taller. That had nothing to do with the Leviathan. Scarlet had always been tall. It was part of the reason she started getting into fights as a child—as the biggest in the class, people just seemed to expect it. That, and her little brother was born the dorky weird kid who needed protecting.

“Are you... afraid of fire?” Luke asked.

Scarlet shook her head. “Not fire. Lava. Like that lake in Tiamat’s volcano, the one they locked her in for all those thousands of years...” Scarlet realized her voice was shaking, and she was saying more words than she meant to.

The moment, a week ago, when she, Luke, and Asok had returned to the caldera assaulted her mind, the memory of lava spewing from the lake in all directions, and of the black-eyed face, Tiamat. The face was always there, now, in the dark, shut up places of her mind, though she had never seen it with her own eyes.

She glanced back at the fountain. “I thought the basin was full of lava. Why are you looking at me like that?”

Luke’s concern had hardened into cold contemplation. “You really know nothing about magic, do you?”

“I’m a shape-shifter!”

“Enchantments can be placed on places, objects, or people. They can’t affect anything except that on which they’re cast. If that enchantment is on the maze, it can’t affect you out here.”

Scarlet rolled her eyes and pushed past him, then past the sagging racks of hundred and thousand-pound weights. “I think it’s time for some good old sharp object throwing. Where’s that blindfold?”

Luke followed, and she could feel his eyes on her all the way over to the stacks of sharpened throwing disks.

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There had never been such a crowd in Loki’s rift room. Scarlet stood in the middle of it, shouting out directions like “No, no, lift, don’t drag!” and “Human feet, children. We want to use our Human feet indoors!”

The Harpies—over a hundred of them dragging their

belongings through Loki's rift room—all had black feathers growing in their dark hair. Some of the older children kept shifting partway into bird form because, from what she could tell, they liked the feel of the marble floor under their talons. Otherwise, they looked Human, though thin, with pinched features.

They wore very little, because to change forms safely and fully they would have to take their clothes off, and they always wanted to be ready to change form. Most, both men and women, wore what looked like a knee-length robe, tied around the waist and made from gorgeous, lightweight, flowy fabric. Some of the robes went to the floor, but these were slit up to their knees, leaving wisps of fabric to flicker and billow around their feet as they walked. Some robes had sleeves, some didn't, but all of them had bare backs, to allow for the growing of wings even while still partially in Human form. They did not wear shoes or jewelry of any kind, and their hair was always loose.

A tall Harpy stood beside Scarlet, reading the contract for at least the fifth time. It was a very short scroll, pressed papyrus on a reed rod—the kind the Egyptians had introduced to the world back on Earth. In long and winding statements, it said that Scarlet and the Harpies agreed not to cheat each other, and if either party did, then fairly typical consequences would ensue. Perhaps it was too straightforward, and that was why the Harpy read it over and over. She had one eyebrow raised, but she had held that expression since stepping through the rift, and Scarlet had chose to ignore its negative implications.

"And you can promise us no confrontations with the Ageless?" she asked at last, carefully rolling the papyrus sheet.

"None of my people will ever come here," Scarlet said, for the ninth time. "Oh, I do have a Vanir staying, for I don't know how long, but you'll like her, she's... well, a her to begin with."

The Harpy rolled her large blue eyes. "I do not have a problem with men," she said. "Just men like your father who have a problem with women."

Scarlet smirked. Both the bird races, Harpies and Valkyries, were led by women, matriarchies that clashed with the patriarchal and usually chauvinistic Ageless. In particular, Scarlet's father, Ea, lost all the political debates he had with the bird races because he was too busy trying to figure out how women could understand politics in the first place. It was a hysterical scene every time, which Scarlet never grew tired of watching.

But Scarlet's father was not Ea. Scarlet had barely even known her father, and he had certainly known nothing about Harpies. A dull pain stabbed through her skull, two identities bleeding through her.

Behind them, the rift closed. "That is the last of my people," the Harpy said. She placed the scroll into a loop on her belt. "This contract is... fair."

Scarlet smiled and spoke as if her head were not throbbing. "I try. And for the record, I don't have a problem with women."

"No..." The Harpy eyed her. "You, Hermes, are altogether not your father's son."

Hermes. Loki's other name. The word sent a shock through Scarlet that melted the pain. She was Loki. "What a wonderfully nice thing to say," he said.

The Harpy nodded. She took a few steps backward, then turned to follow her people into the dark hall.

The rift had opened again, bringing a familiar person through, then her voice from Loki's shoulder. "Are those... tenants?"

"Shut up," Loki said. The Harpies were gone, so he left the rift room behind, without looking at Effa.

Effa followed, a fact that did not exactly make him unhappy.



“So now I understand why your rift has been busy for the past six hours,” she said as they passed into the dimness beyond the open wall. “You’re moving an entire planet in here.”

“Five hundred and seventy people is hardly an entire planet,” Loki said. The Harpies turned left at the first junction, and he went right. “And where were you?”

“Out.” They were walking shoulder to shoulder now. “After eight years shut up here, I figured some air would be good.”

“I didn’t realize this place was such a prison.”

“I didn’t say that. So, explain the tenant situation.”

“Yes, they’re tenants, I took on tenants.” He stopped short in the hall and pointed a finger straight in her face. “No gloating. No ‘I told you so.’ No comment of any kind. I needed the money.” He started walking again.

“Oh, sure you did,” Effa said.

“Shut up,” he shot back.

“So when exactly did this pressing monetary need arise?” she asked.

“I started advertising quite a while ago,” he said. “Which you would know if you hadn’t disappeared for three weeks.”

He turned, abruptly, into one of the hundred identical doors lining that hallway. On the other side was a dark room. Effa followed, stopping at his side a few feet beyond the doorway.

“Oh come on!” She crossed her arms and looked at him with a smirk. “It doesn’t bother you when I’m not here, does it?”

“What? No! I’m not bothered!”

She raised her eyebrows at him, still smirking. He could feel himself turning red and leveled a finger in her face again. “No. You are wanted for murder, remember?”

“Oh, so you’re worried about me,” she said.

“Shut up! I’m worried about me. What if you lead them

back here?" He turned around in a circle. "Where's that torch? It's pitch dark in here."

"Right," Effa said, sarcasm burning through her words, "Because with all the bad blood between you and the Ageless Council, harboring a murderer will really make the top of the list."

"Well, that depends on who you killed, doesn't it," he said. "Oh, forget the torch!"

He said a series of words in an ancient language Humans had forgotten long ago, and light burst across the ceiling. The room was circular, and empty, except for some shelves half built around the walls, and a large stone basin standing dead center.

"What is this?" Effa asked.

"A library. I'm building a library. You have a problem with that?"

Effa raised her hands in surrender, then used one to point at the basin. "Is that a database?"

"Of course it's a database!" Loki said, sitting on its rim. "What kind of a library doesn't have a database?"

"What about the communications hub?"

"That's a communications' database. This is a library database."

"Right." They stood and sat in silence for a moment before Effa asked, "So why Harpies?"

"They answered the ad! Besides, what's wrong with Harpies? Harpies are fine. I got to know them pretty well back when I was transporting prisoners down to Hades' Underworld."

Effa pursed her lips. "What you mean is that you learned how to fight them really well because they would frequently attack you while you were transporting prisoners to the Underworld?"

"Technicalities."

“Hum...” Effa shook her head. “Why don’t you just admit that you have a thing for monsters?”

“We’re all monsters, Effa,” Loki said, sitting still on the rim of the database. “We all came from evil powers. We all have the same violent impulses. The Ageless just learned to assimilate into Human society better.”

“We’re no more violent than Humans themselves,” Effa said.

“No, but we are more dangerous in a dark alley at night.” Loki got up and paced to the other side of the basin. “Besides, all the rifts to Earth have been sealed. We don’t have to worry about Humans anymore, just each other.”

He could feel Effa’s eyes on him, watching. “You never told me why you chose to come when they sealed the rifts. Hades stayed behind. So did one of the Ereshkigals. They were your closest allies, from what I understand. It would have made sense for you to stay too.”

Loki looked up. “What about you, Effa?”

She shook her head. “The Vanir were never given a choice.”

“Oh, but that’s not what I mean.” He stepped around to the other side of the database, the tips of his fingers dragging over the stone rim. “In fact, I’m fairly certain your choice was made long before anyone ever considered sealing the rifts.”

Effa did not look away, though he could tell a part of her wanted to.

“You speak of monsters,” he said. “You have more experience with them than even I do, I think.”

Finally, she did look away, a quick glance to the wall, and back. “How long have you known?”

“I’ve seen the scars.” On an impulse, he reached out and took one of her crossed arms, pulled it away from the other to reveal the underside of it.

On Earth, an upstart named Alexander had just con-

quered the world—what they knew of it, anyway—and the real conqueror had been everything Greek, Greek science, art, literature, and clothing. The Immortals adopted those clothing styles, as they always adopted Human styles. So Effa's dress was Greek, flowy, and sleeveless. The scars on her arms were faint, but visible. White hairlines across pale skin.

"Not much leaves marks like that on us," Loki said. "And I don't think you're old enough to have fought in the war with Tiamat, which leaves only one place where you could have gotten these."

She nodded and took her arm back. "I was born in the last years of the war."

"I thought so."

"When it was over, before I was fifty, the Vanir were divided into three groups. Those who were young enough, who posed a small enough threat, were allowed to remain as a labor force for the Ageless."

Loki took over the narration when her voice faltered. "Those who were old and dangerous were sent to the Underworld. And by dangerous, of course, we mean potentially able to inspire a rebellion. But to make a point, a spectacle, to prove their ultimate power over the Vanir, those considered most dangerous, most frightening to the power of Anu's Council..."

"...were exiled to Tiamat's volcano," Effa finished.

"And after we sealed the rifts, the Aesir decided to release you."

"The Aesir decided to claim us," Effa said. "A new world deserves a new symbol of shame for my people. People had begun to see us as defiant heroes fighting the dragons in the depths of their own caves. Better to see us as helpless slaves."

"So you are claimed?" Loki asked.

"No," Effa said.

"You know, all of this just begs the question," Loki said,

eying her carefully. "What, six thousand years ago, makes a girl of fifty one of the most dangerous Vanir alive?"

"Oh, Loki," Effa said, taking a step closer, "unless I am very much mistaken, you worked that out a long time ago." She held his gaze for a moment more, then walked past him, brushing his shoulder with hers on the way.

"So, should we finish putting up these shelves?" she asked. "I have nothing better to do with my day."

And then Scarlet woke up, to the lights flashing in her room. She sat straight up and dropped her head into her hands.


"Loki..." she hissed.

On the other bed, Kurt was getting up, ready to go about a perfectly normal day. Scarlet threw her head back into the bed, pulled the pillow out from under her, and stuffed it over her face.

What was going on?

## CHAPTER 3

---

oki, I'm serious, we need to talk," Scarlet said, trailing after him when he left the kitchen that morning. Kurt had already hurried off to the library, leaving the two of them alone—something Loki had been avoiding for the last few days.

"Yes, and we will," Loki shot back, only marching more quickly down the hall.

"When?"

"After school today."

"You've said that for days."

"And have I meant it?"

"No!"

"Oh..."

“Loki, my legs are as long as yours, and my species was bred to outrun anything. You cannot outrun me!” She made a sudden burst of speed, flew down the hall and stopped in front of him, putting a hand out to catch his shoulder.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Fine! What do you want to talk about?”

“Why am I having dreams about your life every time I go unconscious?”

“You are not having them every time you go unconscious,” Loki said. Then his eyes narrowed. “Wait, are you?”

Scarlet sighed. “No. It just sounded more impressive.”

“I think I’m rubbing off on you,” Loki said.

“Yeah. Literally. In that, I’m having dreams about your life!”

Loki shook his head, shouldering past her. “It’s just a side effect of a deep telepathic connection. It will wear off.”

“Oh, don’t give me that! This scares you. I can tell. Which means it isn’t normal. Don’t tell me it’s normal!”

“Shouldn’t you be going the other direction?”

“Loki!”

“Yes, the gym is definitely in the other direction.”

“Loki, I have no idea where the gym is!” She needed him to stop talking about random and unimportant things. She needed him to focus, for once, and help her. They were his stupid memories, after all.

Loki stopped dead, turned, fixed her with a bewildered look. “How do you not know where the gym is?”

“Because it’s impossible to find anything in this place!” Scarlet said.

“Again, blame Ea, he built it.”

“I usually get lost,” Scarlet said. “And they get sick of waiting, so Luke finds me and teleports me straight in there.”

“So Luke and Asok know where the gym is,” Loki said.

“No. They teleport straight there from, I don’t know, their

home in the Djinn compound, I guess.”

“Are you telling me I’m the only person here who actually knows where the gym is?” Loki asked.

“You’re the only person here who knows where anything is!” Scarlet said. This wasn’t the point. Why wouldn’t he shut up about this?

“Again, Ea’s fault. And why don’t you just use a map?”

“There are maps?”

“Oh, well, no . . . I should make some.”

“Yeah,” Scarlet said. “One for every junction, with nice little ‘you are here’ stickers. Can we get back to the point?”

“Doesn’t teleporting make you sick?”

“It did. I’m getting better at it.”

“Good for you.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of proud of myself actu...” She leveled a finger at him. “You are trying to distract me!”

“Ah, well, I knew it wouldn’t work for long.”

“Tell me what you’re not telling me about these dreams!”

“Okay, honesty?”

“Please!”

“Okay, um...” Loki pressed his hands together, looked at her, looked at the ceiling, looked at her, glanced off to the right...

“Loki!” Scarlet said.

“Yeah, okay, okay. The Ageless learned a long time ago, at the very beginning of our history, to extract memories telepathically, to copy them, and store them.”

“Yeah, they taught us all this in school,” Scarlet said, crossing her arms. It was the Immortal version of record keeping, memories stored in special databases designed and licensed to contain them.

“Right, but, the whole thing was discovered accidentally, when our people discovered they were telepathic and began connecting with each other telepathically, like you and I did.”



“When you saved Kurt?”

“Yeah.” Loki sighed. “I knew this was a possible side effect. And, in my defense, I did warn you that you could die, so I think any other side effect is pretty much covered under the whole ‘possible death’ umbrella...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just tell me what happened!”

“Simple, really. My memories, at least some of them, were copied into your brain. It happens. And now, for whatever reason, your brain is accessing them.”

“Well, did my memories get copied to you?” Scarlet asked.

“Possibly. But my brain has defenses that would have deleted them as soon as the link broke.”

“Why?”

“For the same reason we store memory extractions in databases, not in people,” Loki said. “It’s like... injecting someone else’s blood into your bloodstream. Your body will reject it.”

“Not always.”

“In this case, yes, always.”

“Okay...” Scarlet took in a shaking breath. “So, what happens to me, if...”

“It will take a long time for any actual damage to happen.”

“What damage?”

“It doesn’t matter because it’s not going to happen,” Loki said. “All we have to do is extract the memories from your mind.”

“So do it!”

“Ah...” Loki’s face froze halfway between a smile and a wince. “Yeah...”

“Loki?” Scarlet said through clenched teeth.

“No, it’s just, *I* can’t.”

“*You* can’t?”

“Extracting memories, safely, requires a very specific skill set that I... don’t... have...”

“But there are people who do?”

“Oh, sure, tons.”

“And so...?”

“And so, since you first told me about the dreams, I’ve been trying to get one of them to help us. See, I’m not a totally irresponsible adult.”

“Trying?” Scarlet did not like the sound of that word.

“Well...” Loki winced. “I... suppose... I’ve... kind of... managed to alienate all of them at some point over the last few millennia...”

“All of them?”

“Well, there aren’t that many!” Loki said. “And they’re all Ageless, and most of them are men, and I don’t get along with either of those things very well!”

“You don’t get along with men?”

“Not typically, no. Again, I blame Ea.”

“Okay, so...” Scarlet pressed her palms together, touched the tips of her longest fingers to her nose, trying to think. “So, basically...”

“Basically, you are fine.” Loki put his hands over hers. “Scarlet, we have time, and I will fix this, I promise. I have a last resort, which will definitely work if it comes to that. You will be fine.”

Scarlet took a deep breath in through her nose and nodded. “Okay, so, what about the dreams?”

“Trust me, no one wants you having those dreams less than I do, but there’s nothing to be done about it.”

“Cool,” Scarlet said and flashed him an over-sweet smile. “At least I get something out of this then.” She turned and marched off back down the hall.

“Ah, yes, Scarlet...” Loki came after her, speaking as if the vibration of his words might set off a grenade. “So... about what you may be seeing in these dreams...”

“Oh, all kinds of terrible stuff, I assure you,” Scarlet said.

“Um, this is actually kind of serious,” Loki said.

“Sorry, I have to get to school,” Scarlet said. “We can talk at dinner, maybe?”

“You don’t know where the gym is.”

“Doesn’t matter. Luke will find me soon.”

“And how does he find you if he doesn’t know where the gym is either?”

“I don’t know, he uses his super Djinn senses or whatever, teleports to my location then teleports us both straight back to the gym. Why do you live in a house where no one can find anything, by the way?”

“It’s not a house,” Loki said. “It’s a labyrinth. At least, I’m pretty sure it’s meant to be a labyrinth, because, I’m pretty sure Ea intentionally had it built that way to torment me.”

“Paranoid much?” Scarlet couldn’t help herself.

“It’s not paranoia if it’s consistently proven true,” Loki shot back.

“You two have a really screwed up relationship.”

“Yes, we do.”

Scarlet stopped walking, turned to face him, and crossed her arms. “And I suppose you never redesigned this place because you would rather spite your father than make life easier on yourself.”

Loki shrugged. “Well, that, and I just like labyrinths, so the entire thing really backfired on him from the start. And I do live here alone. Well, mostly.”

“Speaking of which,” Scarlet took a step closer. “How long, exactly, did Effa live here?”

Loki looked at her, pointed at her, opened his mouth, dropped his finger closed his mouth, pointed at her again, and said, “You’re right, you should go to school.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Scarlet said.

At almost the same moment, they heard another voice, shouting down the hall, “Snake! You are late! Do you know

how much effort it takes to teleport another person?”

“And that would be my ride,” Scarlet said, turning to find Luke scowling at her.

“Luke!” Loki said, clapping his hands together. “Good morning!”

“Yeah, good morning. *Li-heat ra’ahcha*.” Luke had already grabbed Scarlet by the arm. She took a deep breath, because that seemed to help, at least in her imagination. Then they vanished.

“Oh, I meant to ask before we got here,” Scarlet said, breathless, as soon as they came back from whatever vacuum the Djinn crossed when teleporting. “Is Asok here?”

“Where else would I be?” Asok’s sharp voice bit at her before Luke could respond.

She stood loading bullets into magazine clips at a folding table three feet from where Scarlet and Luke had materialized. An array of guns, big and small, covered the table beneath her hands.

“Hey,” Scarlet said, taking a few steps towards the table. “You okay?”

Asok’s head snapped up, and her eyes shot fire. “What’s it to you?” She slipped the full clip into a forty-five caliber semi-automatic handgun and cocked it.

“Okay, so we still hate each other. Good to know,” Scarlet said.

Asok loaded two more guns, tossed one to Luke, then came around the table with the other two. “I thought we’d start with target practice,” she said, shoving one of the forty-fives against Scarlet’s chest. “Because, you know, you’re horrid at targets.”

Scarlet grabbed the gun before it could drop onto the floor. It had no safety. Immortals copied all their weapon designs, like their clothing and everything else, from Humans. But they modified these designs and tended to skip things like safety features.

Scarlet had been shot a few times during training at Donar's school. Bullets hurt, badly, but couldn't kill any of the Immortal races. For target practice, they used what the Immortals called 'blanks'—fully loaded, live rounds made only of lead and gunpowder. They were useless, except possibly as a last resort to slow an enemy down.

For actual battles, bullets were made of other things—silver, to which Valkyries and Harpies were allergic, spelled bullets for Djinn and Ageless, hollow bullets filled with various poisons that could affect one or more race.

It got complicated, because almost nothing affected all Immortals in the same way, so you had to know what you were fighting before you could pick your ammunition. The exception was Leviathan venom. Forged into bullets, the venom would cause severe pain. If it got to the heart or brain, it could knock out any member of any Immortal race for up to an hour. Still, Leviathan venom could not kill unless it came straight from the source, a living Leviathan. Bullets could not kill. Very little could.

"Our goal today," Asok was saying as she straightened the targets, "is to get the snake to make ten dead center shots in a row." The targets hung on posts that could be dragged around the floor. Lines on the floor marked off different distances, and Asok dragged three targets to the twenty, thirty, and fifty-yard lines.

"She's moving them with her hands, why is she moving them with her hands?" Scarlet asked. Over the past few days, she had seen Asok rearrange half the room with a snap of her fingers. She was starting to envy the Djinn and their magic.

Luke sighed. "She's in a bad mood."

"Yeah, noticed."

"Djinn have a tendency to do things by hand when we're upset."

"The maze?"

"Yeah, don't take it personally."

"I can hear you!" Asok came toward them, wiping her hands off on her sweatshirt. She was wearing her sweatshirt again, Scarlet noticed.

"All right, Scarlet," Luke said. He raised his gun, aimed, and shot all in one smooth motion, dead center in the target thirty yards away. "The trick is to actually hit the target."

Scarlet let out an exasperated groan and raised her gun. "You two are awful teachers. You know, I brought down a Leviathan when I was eleven. Shot it straight in the heart. And I'm not talking about one of us thirteen kids. I mean a real, grown-up, fire-breathing dragon."

Or, she assumed it breathed fire.

Luke and Asok both looked at her with raised eyebrows, which distracted her from aiming down the barrel of her gun.

"You did what?" Asok asked.

"Yeah," Scarlet said. "First time I ever held a gun. Effa—the woman who saved us—handed one to me to guard the doorway, and I shot a Leviathan in the heart from way further away than this."

The cousins looked at each other. "Beginner's luck?" Luke asked. Asok muttered something in Djinn, then marched over to Scarlet, tucking her own weapon under her arm.

"You're holding it wrong," she said as she twisted Scarlet's fingers around on the grip.

Before she had finished, they heard the door to the hall open. A shower of voices followed, high-pitched and shrill. Scarlet didn't have to turn to know what they were. Their smell rushed into her to stab at some part of her brain designed to

tell species apart.

Harpies.

Before she could do more than think that word, Asok spun around, gun up and gripped between both hands.

“*Chayah!*” Luke snapped at his cousin, the Djinn word for stop.

Asok froze, finger on the trigger, eyes focused straight ahead. Scarlet could hear the beat of her heart, smell the rust scent of blood beneath her skin as it sped faster and faster through her body.

Three dozen Harpy women, full-grown warriors, stood across from them. Their friendly chatter stopped short, and sharp, black claws sprouted from their fingers, thin and agile like the quills of a porcupine. Their eyes were dark and their lean bodies ready to spring.

“What’s your business here, Arab Elf?” one hissed at Asok.

“*Abahet et-hagun,*” Luke said, leaning over his cousin’s shoulder, telling her to lower the gun. But Asok had frozen, a glass figure in the arena.

“So why are you here?” Scarlet asked the Harpies.

“Leviathan,” one of them hissed. A smoldering rage, born of fear, burned within her voice as she took a lunging step at Scarlet. Another of the women, however, caught her with an arm across her chest. The aggressor made a harsh cheeping noise, from deep inside her throat, in protest.

“Don’t give me that!” the other woman said. She had the same pinched face, thin arms, pale skin, and black hair as all the rest of them, and was actually shorter than most. But an air of command emanated from her. She was in charge. “I’m not stupid enough to let you attack Loki’s claimed girl!”

Another Harpy came forward, her eyes a black shadow against Asok. “And what about the other two?” she asked.

Asok’s hand twitched on the gun. Scarlet’s adrenaline

spiked, hardening every muscle in her body.

And then, just before something happened, a male voice cut across the tension.

“My bad, my bad!” Loki said from behind the line of Harpies.

Relief, as intense as the adrenaline, flooded Scarlet. Loki pushed through the Harpies and into the space between them and the Djinn. His eyes took in Asok with the gun and Luke holding her arm, but he made no comment.

Instead, he turned to the lead Harpy. “Crae! Good morning! How’s the weather out your windows? Volcano five still erupting?”

“What are they doing here, Hermes?” the Harpy woman, Crae, asked.

“Ah, them... yes...” Loki pointed over his shoulder at the teenagers. “Um... my bad. Really, this is totally my fault...”

“It’s our day,” Crae said.

“Yes, so it is.” Loki glanced back at the teenagers. “Thursday. It’s Thursday...”

“So why are these Djinn under the impression . . .”

“Oh for heavens’ sake, Crae, they’re children!” Loki said.

“They are pointing weapons at us!” Crae shot back. Luke whispered something at Asok, who said “No.”

“Asok, do as he says!” Loki said, and finally, rolling her eyes, she lowered the gun.

“And you,” Loki said, turning to Crae, “they’re guns loaded with blanks. Could you overreact any more?”

“How do we know it’s not silver?”

“Because it’s not. They are target shooting. Use your brain!”

“It’s our day!” Crae said. “Why are the children under the impression...”

“Because I gave them that impression,” Loki said.

Crae raised a delicate black eyebrow. “You forgot about



us?”

“No!” Loki said. “I... forgot about... Thursday...”

“What?”

“I thought you were still on Saturday, okay!”

“That was sixty years ago!” Crae said.

“Yes, which I realized—five minutes ago. Look, the point is, we’re all good here. Honest mistake. No one needs to shoot anyone, or gouge anyone’s eyes out. Okay? Good. Ladies, the gym is yours. You three,” he grabbed Asok by the arm, “come with me.”

“I’m already bored,” Asok said, dropping into a stuffed, red chair. Scarlet perched herself on the arm of a pale, sick-looking green chair with stuffing coming out of its seat cushion. Luke sat on the footstool matching Asok’s chair.

Already in the library, Kurt sat sideways in a large, yellow chair, his legs over one of its arms. The chair was covered in cheap-looking velvet upholstery and had a massive back, shaped like an open fan, curved inward so that Kurt could sit sideways and still rest his head against the backrest. He had a book open in his hands and looked over the top of it at the three other teenagers with a curious expression.

All around them were more mismatched chairs, stools, and small study tables, thrown together without even the pretense of organization. Around these, bookshelves, two or three stories high, covered every inch of the circular wall. In the very center of the room was a stone basin, like a well in the old fairytales—the database.

“Bored!” Asok repeated.

“Oh, stop complaining!” Loki came in and shut the door behind him. “I always meant to do this, eventually. I guess

eventually's just going to be now. Okay!" He clapped his hands together, and sat on the rim of the database, facing the teenagers. "I thought I had until Saturday to put this together, but..."

"What's going on?" Kurt asked, still sprawled sideways on his chair.

"Harpies kicked us out of the gym," Scarlet said.

"Right. Kurt put the book down," Loki said. "All of you, time for a history lesson."

Asok groaned, and Luke whacked her on the arm. She whacked him back. Loki ignored them and leaned backward, extending his hand into the database.

Inside was a pool of blue mist with streaks of electricity running through it. These were data-streams, thousands and thousands of terabytes of information, condensed and stored in what was basically the memory core of a supercomputer. Loki had in this single database digital versions of every book Humans or Immortals had ever published—and who knew what else. He reached his hand into the mist, and dozens of electric strings surged up from below, attracted to his fingertips, only to fade back into the mist when he drew his hand out again.

"Scarlet, have you ever done this?" he asked.

Scarlet had been busy watching Luke and Asok arm wrestle each other. Startled, her head snapped toward Loki. "What?"

"Have you ever worked a database?" Loki asked.

Luke and Asok stopped struggling, their forearms still pressed together. Scarlet glanced to them, to Kurt, and finally to Loki again. "Um... Well, the Fairies wouldn't let us near theirs, and the one at school only worked for Aesir..."

"So, no," Loki said.

"I mean..." Scarlet let out a nervous laugh. "Will it even respond to Leviathan telepathy?" It was a stupid question, and she realized that halfway through speaking.

"Um..." Kurt raised his data-disk into the air. He, another

Leviathan, had been pulling books out of that very database for over a week.

“Your brother picked it up pretty fast,” Loki said.

“Well, yeah,” Scarlet said. “But he’s, you know, smart.”

“Scarlet, get over here,” Loki said.

She sighed and slipped off the arm of her chair. She made it within a foot of the basin, near enough to see the blue mist inside and stopped short.

“Why are you scared of a database?” Asok asked. She had leaned forward, chin supported on the knuckles of one hand as if she were watching something interesting unfold on TV.

“I’m not scared!” Scarlet felt like she had on that day in fourth grade when the teacher made her do math problems on the board in front of the entire class. Scarlet had never been good at math. For everyone else, they were review problems, from a unit two weeks back. The teacher thought Scarlet was lying about being confused and sent her to the board for her defiance. Scarlet had outright hated math ever since. “There’s just...” She tried to ignore Asok and focus on Loki instead. “There’s so much information in there. How are you supposed to find what you need?”

“It’s much easier than it seems like it should be.” Loki said slipped off the stone rim, put a hand on her arm, and pushed her forward, to stand directly over the basin. Inside, the blue mist moved in gentle waves. A single streak of electricity shot across its surface, like lightning between clouds.

“This is our technology,” Loki said. “We copy almost everything from Humans, but this is ours. Telepathic storage, created by us before Humans had even invented writing. It interacts directly with our brains. Think, and you will find.”

Scarlet swallowed. She could feel everyone watching her and wished the floor would open up and swallow their chairs. Or, Asok’s chair, at least. “Think of what?”

“I want you to open all the Species’ History files.”

“So I just think ‘species’ history’?” Scarlet wasn’t even sure what that meant.

“First thing’s first,” Loki said. “Put your hand in.”

“Shouldn’t I know what I’m doing first?” Scarlet asked.

“No. Put your hand in.”

“Okay, whatever!” Scarlet thrust her hand down into the mist before she had time to think more about it.

Instantly, a warm tingling sensation took hold of her hand, traveled up her arm, shoulder, neck, and head. Strings of electricity had risen from the mist, drawn straight to her. Her skin felt numb wherever the strings connected, but it was not painful. “Whoa!” Her mind felt bigger, something like coming from a dark, narrowed cave out into a sunlit plain.

Loki was smiling. “Pretty cool, right?”

“It feels like I know everything,” Scarlet said.

“In a way, you do. Right now all the information in the database is directly connected to your brain through the nerves in your hand. Your conscious mind can’t process it all, but it’s there.”

Scarlet blinked, and only then realized something was wrong with her eyes. It wasn’t exactly that she couldn’t see, and it wasn’t exactly that her vision was blurry, or distorted, or wavy. She could still see the database in front of her, but at the same time, it wasn’t really there. The room around her had become some kind of mirage. It would melt into vapor if she tried to touch it. “Um, Loki...”

“Your eyesight’s fine,” he said. “Your brain’s just conserving energy. Everything will go back to normal as soon as you’re disconnected.”

“So what do I do?”

“Information is stored in layers. When one layer fills, another is created. The more recently something is downloaded, the closer it is to the surface. What files you access is controlled by your mind and where your hand is physically in

the mist.”

“So I just think and move my hand?”

“Basically. You move your hand down through the layers until you find what you’re looking for.”

“And how do I know I’ve found what I’m looking for?”

“You’ll know it.”

Scarlet took a deep breath and focused on the two words Loki had given her. *Species’ History*. She pushed those words to the front of her mind, and suddenly, a thousand, thousand tiny lights swarmed all around her. Or, they seemed, somehow, like lights, but she wasn’t seeing them, not with her eyes anyway. In front of her eyes, she could still see the basin and the library, like some unreal ghost plane. But somewhere, somehow, she also “saw” a thousand points of light rushing towards her. They flew past, fell away, or blinked out, all faster than a second. But some caught in her mind as in a net.

“Find it?” Loki asked.

The lights, the ones she had caught, grew brighter. Scarlet thought she heard voices coming from them, or saw images, but it wasn’t exactly either, just like she wasn’t exactly seeing lights at all. She suddenly knew exactly what *Species’ History* meant and felt that she had always known. Every glowing point of light was trying to tell her something, but she couldn’t quite hear it, and at the same time she knew exactly what it was saying.

“I think so.” The effort it took to say those few words surprised her. The words themselves felt almost meaningless to her. She winced as they left her mouth, pain shooting through her head. Her vision was getting worse.

“Yeah, you shouldn’t stay connected much longer,” Loki spoke from very far away. It took her quite some time to figure out what those words meant. The outside world was becoming less and less real. “Keep moving down,” Loki said.

“There’s more?” she asked.

“You just scanned the first layer. Keep going.”

And she did, moving her hand down twenty, thirty, forty, a hundred levels of information, each taking less than a second, each time collecting more points of light in her brain. She kept reaching down, until she touched the smooth bottom of the basin and found her nose in the blue mist.

“And come back up,” she heard Loki say, from very, very far away.

Slowly, not sure she wanted to, Scarlet pulled her arm and hand out of the mist. A few strings of electricity followed her fingers for a few inches beyond the surface, but eventually, even those faded back into the basin.

Scarlet felt the connection break. The surge of energy running up and down her arm vanished, and the world around suddenly felt real again. But she still couldn’t see right. “Loki why...”

“You’re not connected to the database anymore,” he said. “But all the information you downloaded is still inside you.”

“What?” Scarlet blinked because she thought she could still see lights, glowing bright behind her eyes. They were becoming painful.

“Do you remember what a flash drive is, from your Human days?” Loki asked.

“Yeah.”

“Think of yourself as the flash drive, and the database is the computer. You’ve downloaded a bunch of files onto the flash drive so you can transfer them from the computer, to these.” He held up a thin silver disk, one of dozens that littered the stone rim of the database.

“The information is inside my head right now?” Scarlet asked.

“You’re just a container,” Loki said. “Your brain is shielding most of it from you, because it’s artificial, and can’t be processed directly by an organic mind. So you have to download

it.” Without warning, he tossed the data-disk at her.

Scarlet caught it, but with much less grace than she normally would have. Her body felt sluggish, and her depth perception was all wrong. She caught the disk with both hands, flipped it between her fingers, and asked, “So what do I do?”

“It’s already done.” Loki snatched the disk back. “Telepathic technology. The disks automatically find and copy the information in your brain. Kurt, catch!”

He tossed the disk past Scarlet, straight at her brother, and threw another one at her before she had time to blink.

Scarlet almost dropped the second disk. “I still see the lights.”

“Of course,” Loki snatched the second disk and tossed it at Luke. “Data-disks just copy. All the information is still in your brain. Two more.”

“So how do I delete it?”

“You don’t. Because databases don’t copy, they download. The master file is in you right now, and you have to put it back into the database.” He snatched the third disk from her and tossed it to Asok, then threw Scarlet a fourth.

“And I do that how?”

Loki took the fourth disk from her and tossed it onto an empty seat. “That is where you were sitting, right?” he asked.

“I honestly don’t remember.” The lights were getting brighter, and they burned.

“Don’t worry, you will as soon as we get all that information out of your head.”

“And how...”

“Hand.” Loki took hold of her hand and held it again over the basin. “Close your hand into a fist and extend it over the database, palm down. Good. Now touch the surface.”

Scarlet lowered her fist until it grazed the surface of the mist. She felt the electric surge again, running up and down her arm, into her neck and brain, as the strings of electricity

rose up to meet her fingers.

“Now,” Loki said, “if you were just putting the information back in, all you’d do is open your hand and draw it out as quickly as you could. But I want you to display the files for everyone to see. So, what you’re going to do is flip your fist over, palm up, and at the same time, open your hand. Got it?”

Scarlet nodded.

“Go,” Loki said.

Scarlet flipped her hand over and opened it. Streaks of blue light flew up from her palm into the air. The lights vanished, and suddenly she could see again. She took a deep breath and realized that she had smelled nothing for some time. The air was heavy now with dust and paper and the scent of life force lingering from long-dead trees. She gasped as her thoughts closed down to their normal size. “Whoa!”

“It’s a rush, yeah?” Loki was smiling at her.

About five feet above their heads, directly above the basin, hovered maybe a hundred ghostly images—all the files that Scarlet had downloaded, displayed like a hundred tiny TV screens, just without the actual screen. Some images were moving, others still.

“So, it’s all in the database again?” Scarlet asked.

“Yup,” Loki said. “Go have a seat.”

Scarlet could remember exactly where she had been sitting now. She couldn’t remember anything those points of light had been saying to her, and she needed Loki to explain what he meant by *Species’ History*. In fact, she couldn’t really remember the points of light at all, just knew, vaguely, somehow that they had been there. Her own mind didn’t feel small anymore. Her head hurt a bit, but she figured that was a side effect of having thousands of books and images downloaded into her brain.

“Okay,” Loki was saying, “so if you will all refer to your data-disks...”



Scarlet tried to sit on the arm of her chair, miscalculated the distance, and slid off of it. She caught herself before falling, but not before Luke noticed and shot her an annoyed look. Dizzy, Scarlet kept one hand on the back of the chair while reaching for the data-disk Loki had tossed on her seat.

“You should have somewhere a file called On the ‘Origins of the First Race,’” Loki said.

“Are we really doing this?” Asok asked.

“Yes.” Loki reached up over the database and touched one of the see-through images. It stuck to his finger, and he moved it down, between the database and the rest of the screen-less TV screens.

“Did we do something to deserve torture?” Asok asked.

“You don’t know what torture is, Asok,” Loki said.

Scarlet couldn’t tell what the image Loki had chosen was supposed to be, whether it was moving or standing still, how to open the data-disk in her hands... She blinked and felt her entire body sway toward the floor.

“This wasn’t a part of our deal,” Asok said.

“Hey!” Loki jabbed a finger at her. “At school, you’d spend half of every day in lessons like this. I’m asking for one day a week.”

The data-disk slipped out of Scarlet’s hands. It clapped on the marble floor, and the noise sounded like a stone, dropped into far off water.

“Stupid Harpies,” Asok said.

“Loki!” Luke shouted, jumping to his feet. At the same moment, Scarlet felt her body slide, off the arm of the chair, down like a stone into water. Her head and shoulder struck the side of Asok’s chair on the way, and the Djinn girl screeched in surprise.

Loki pounced a split second too late to catch her. Asok was out of her chair and Kurt scrambled over seats and stools to get to his sister.

Scarlet didn't move or hear anything after Luke shouted for Loki. She thought her eyes were open, but her vision had gone fuzzy. She blinked, and her eyes remained half-closed.

For a second, she saw Loki looming over her, his face shocked. Then she blinked again, and this time her eyes did not open.

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"Seriously, Loki, where did you put the plates?" Effa snapped.

"Where did I put the plates?" It was getting easier for Scarlet to tell where her life ended and Loki's memories began. She still had some strange sense of herself, standing in the background and muddling things up. But she knew that she was him, Loki, standing in the kitchen and looking at Effa.

Once again, there was no refrigerator, with the racks of salted meat standing in its place. No cabinets, either, and bins filled with water instead of a sink.

But more than that was different this time. The entire place looked cleaner, no pile of dirty dishes in the wash bins, no pots and plates sitting out in random places on the counters. The entire room was dusted and washed, and a vase of fresh flowers sat in the center of the table.

Effa had just pulled her head out of the large, upright chest where dishes were stored. She stood with the door gaping open, glaring into it.

"How should I know where the plates are?" Loki asked. "I don't do the dishes. You insist on doing them, to pay me back, or something for some reason, so why would I know where you put the plates?"

Effa rested one forearm against the chest and put the other hand on her hip. She wore a deep red dress, not Greek this time, a northern style, heavy fabric with long sleeves, that fit

closer to her body. With her hair wrapped up in braids around her head, she looked like the Aesir warriors he had grown up with. "I've been gone for the past week," she said.

"Oh... right..."

"When I left—" she used both hands to point at the chest—"the plates were here. They move again every time I leave. Where did you put them?"

"I... Well... You have no proof I'm responsible!"

"We're the only ones here!"

"No... There's... Harpies!"

"Right!" Effa rolled her eyes. "Of course! It was the tenants who don't have keys to this place and live fifty miles away. Just tell me."

"Oh, and, hey, I was gone too," Loki said.

"That was two months ago."

"No, not that trip, I mean the... Oh... Wait, was it?" Loki shook his head. "You still have no proof I'm responsible."

Effa crossed her arms, but before she could say more, the kitchen door opened.

In the doorway stood a tall, lean woman dressed in a dark purple robe and carrying a large bag. The robe reached the floor, but was slit in four places up to her knees, and also had no back. Her dark hair had black feathers growing in it.

"Am I interrupting?" she asked.

Loki pointed at her, then down at the floor. "Harpy, in the kitchen... See! They can get in!"

Effa rolled her eyes. "Get the stew off the fire before it burns," she said.

"So I assume," the Harpy woman said, taking several steps down into the kitchen, "this is the house guest you mentioned? The staying for I don't know how long, house guest?"

In place of the stove stood an open fire pit with a grate suspended over the top of it. Loki grabbed a large pot off this grate and moved it to the table. "Effa, meet Basilia leader of

the Harpies who live here. Basilia, Effa.”

“A pleasure,” the Harpy said, with a disdainful note in her voice.

“I’m sure,” Effa said in the same tone.

“Are we going to have a problem?” Loki asked.

Effa and the Harpy Basilia were staring at each other.

“No,” Basilia said. “She’s Vanir, which makes her as much a victim of the Anunnaki as I ever was. Just give me a moment to get past the Ageless of it all.”

“And,” Effa shot back, “give me a moment to forget all the years spent watching the skies to make sure black birds weren’t descending to devour me.”

Basilia smiled over sweetly. “We don’t hunt our own kind anymore.”

“Technically, I’m not your kind.”

“True.”

“Okay,” Loki said, clapping his hands together. “Has anyone found those plates yet?”

“You realize you’re renting space from an Anunnaki, right?” Effa said.

Basilia shrugged. “Well, legally Anunnaki, anyway. Only half Anunnaki by blood. Or so I hear.”

“Oh really?” Effa turned to Loki. “What’s the other half, then?”

Basilia raised one slender eyebrow. “No one seems to know...”

Loki looked at Effa, opened his mouth, looked like he would point at her, then turned the finger on Basilia. “What are you doing here?”

“Ah.” Basilia nodded, reaching into her bag. “You’ve been our landlord for three years now. I figured it was time we had a nice, casual dinner.” She drew out a sealed animal hide jug. “I brought the wine.”

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“Is she dead?” Asok’s voice broke through into Scarlet’s ears. Scarlet realized her eyes were open when she saw Luke whack his cousin on the arm.

“Well, she looks dead!” Asok shot back.

“Is she dead?” Kurt squeaked from somewhere near her head.

“I’m not dead,” Scarlet said moaning, trying to sit up. Kurt put an arm under her shoulder to help her.

“Of course she’s not dead.” Loki appeared overhead and crouched down, handing Scarlet a white cup. “Exactly two things can kill a shape-shifter, and neither has happened to her. Really, Asok? Don’t say such things! Especially with ten-year-olds around.”

“I’m eleven,” Kurt said.

“Hey, one year off is not bad for me,” Loki said.

Scarlet smelled blood in the white cup and snatched it from Loki, then had it emptied before she realized what she was doing.

“I am never getting used to the blood thing,” Luke said.

“Yeah, I don’t care, you can shut up about it!” Scarlet said, setting the cup on the floor. She was half lying between her chair and Asok’s, with Kurt sitting beside her, and the two Djinn standing nearby.

“Do you know what I said?” Luke’s face, under the tattooed swirls, looked concerned.

Scarlet rolled her eyes. “You’re standing two feet away. Yeah I know what you said.”

“Scarlet,” Asok said, “he was speaking in Djinn.”

Scarlet looked at them blankly. “No he wasn’t.”

“He was,” Kurt said.

“Okay, okay, everyone back to your seats,” Loki said, standing and clapping his hands.

“Is she okay?” Kurt asked, getting to his feet only after Scarlet did.

“She’s fine. We’re wasting class time. Back to your seats.”

“We’re still doing this class charade?” Asok asked.

“Seats!” Loki took Scarlet’s arm as if she might need help to balance.

“What happened?” she asked, leaning in close as he held her arm.

“You passed out,” he said.

“It’s what happened before, in that maze. I just passed out.”

“Scarlet...”

“Using databases doesn’t do stuff like this,” she said. “This has to do with your memories.”

“Yeah, and it’s all perfectly normal, and you will be fine as soon as we get the memories out of your head.” He grabbed her by her shoulders, moved her a few feet to the right, and pushed her down onto the seat of her chair. “We can’t do anything about this at the moment, and the best way to ignore things you can’t change is just to continue going about your day as usual. Now . . .” he straightened up. “Data-disks. History. Origins of the First race.”

“Yeah, Loki, Asok and I know all this,” Luke objected from his seat on Asok’s footstool.

“Great, gold stars for you,” Loki said. “So what is this an image of?”

They all redirected their attention to the ghost screen above Loki’s head. It was a single, still image, and ancient-looking, carved onto a flat slab of rock. On it they could see what looked like a mouth, with no face, gaping wide to swallow the dozens of tiny people who ran from it.

“Is it Chronos swallowing his children?” Kurt asked.

“Well, possibly it’s where that myth came from,” Loki said.

“Is it who what?” Scarlet asked.

“You know,” Kurt said. “Chronos, the father of the Olympian gods. He was so scared his children would kill him that he swallowed them all when they were born. But his wife saved the youngest and hid him, and he grew up to be Zeus, and eventually killed his father and freed all his brothers and sisters.”

“Are you talking about those storybooks Mom used to read us?” Scarlet asked.

Kurt rolled his eyes and turned to Loki. “So, Chronos wasn’t real?”

“Oh, no, Chronos was real,” Loki said. “He was actually a nice guy, before his bouts of paranoid schizophrenia kicked in, and he started imprisoning his children for make-believe reasons. And yes, Zeus overthrew him, but that’s hardly anything to celebrate, because Zeus was one of the more evil creatures to ever inhabit this universe. Sorry, did I say that last part out loud?”

After a confused pause, Luke asked, “Okay, so what’s the picture of?”

Asok rolled her eyes. “Are you all just dense? It’s Sheol swallowing the Nephilim.”

“Good,” Loki said. “You get a gold star for the right answer. Unfortunately, I have to take it away because you called your classmates dense... And, I don’t have any gold stars to hand out, anyway, so...” He looked at Scarlet. “Dense is an insult in at least one version of contemporary vernacular English, right?”

“Um... It’s an insult,” Scarlet said, unsure what the rest of those words meant.

“Right... anyway...” Loki glanced up at the image, though

he couldn't possibly see it very well from his seat on the basin. "Sheol swallowing the Nephilim . . . So, the Ageless refer to our kind, all the races, together as *Immortals*, which is actually an amazingly inappropriate description for what we are. In reality, we're all just as mortal as Humans. We do not last forever, we can all be killed, and every race except for the Ageless and the Djinn does age, and will eventually die of old age."

"Great," Scarlet said.

"Oh, please, it will take forty thousand years for that to happen to you," Loki said. "You're much more likely to be dismembered by another dragon or have your heart ripped out by the Ageless Council because one day you happen to do something you didn't realize was treason."

"Like I said, great."

"The point is," Loki said, "there has always been a better name for our kind: *Nephilim*. Humans today get that word from Hebrew, but it's..."

"It's actually a Djinn word," Asok said. "Which is why the Djinn, even today, don't call our kind Immortals—stupid name."

"It is a Djinn word," Loki said. "But the word itself is older than the Djinn language. The languages we know are born from older languages, just like animals are born from older animals. The word Nephilim comes from the language that gave birth to both Hebrew and Djinn, and Aramaic, and Arabic, and a few others. But this is all beside the point."

"Yeah, what is the point?" Scarlet asked.

"To torment us," Asok said.

"The Nephilim," Loki said, "are the creatures born when Humans and Watchers decided in all their great wisdom that it would be a good idea to breed monstrous children together. Watchers, of course, are what Humans today call angels or demons."

"Yeah, we all know this story," Luke said.



“You literally made me read it to you the day after we met,” Scarlet said.

“Humans and Watchers,” Luke said, “broke the laws of nature and forced Human women to give birth to a hybrid race that would be connected to magic in the way Watchers are, but have physical bodies like Humans do. These hybrid monsters killed their mothers as they were born and then wreaked such desolation and terror across the entire Earth that God himself was forced to reach down and throw them all into Sheol. Like I said, everyone knows this.”

“Wait, what is Sheol?” Scarlet asked. “Is this another in your never-ending list of names for—” she raised her hands to make quotation marks—“the Abyss.”

The other three turned to look at her with raised eyebrows and annoyed expressions.

“Um... no...” Asok said. “The Abyss is pure nothingness...”

“Okay?” Scarlet asked.

“It’s the Void before creation in which nothing can exist,” Asok said, her tone patronizing. “As in, the opposite of creation... as in, there’s nothing there...”

“Okay?”

Loki stepped in. “The Void, or Abyss, or Chaos is the opposite of creation,” he said. “Sheol is part of creation. It can also be called the Land of Shadow or the Land of the Dead. It’s where the soul of every living creature goes between this life and the next.”

“So it’s... hell?”

Asok groaned, and Kurt hit himself in the head with his data-disk.

“No,” Loki said. “And it’s not heaven either. No one in the living world has ever been there, and therefore no one in the living world should ever pretend to know exactly what it’s like. All we know for certain is that it’s there, that it is the last barrier between life and nothingness, and that at the end of

time, creation will be remade, and every soul trapped in Sheol will be released.”

“Okay,” Scarlet said. “So when you say ‘God threw the Nephilim into Sheol,’ basically you’re saying God killed them.”

“Sure, whatever,” Asok said.

“Not exactly,” Luke said with a groan.

“Let’s just say, yes, for now,” Loki said.

Scarlet, however, was not done objecting. “But didn’t you just explain that we are the Nephilim?”

“Not the first generation,” Asok said.

Loki held up a hand. “The first generation of Nephilim were pure monster. Technically they were capable of intelligent thought, but their violent nature overwhelmed them. Think, Scarlet, of the hunger you feel for blood every time you get hurt. Then magnify that hunger about ten times and imagine living every second of every day like that. The first generation had no choice but to be insane. In a very real sense, they were victims. The Humans and Watchers who had made them were ultimately responsible for their evil. And the great catastrophe,” he pointed at the image above his head, “which threw the Nephilim into Sheol, also wiped out the Humans who made them.”

“Yeah, the Flood, I remember that from Sunday school,” Scarlet said. “I don’t remember anything about Nephilim though.”

“It’s in there,” Luke said.

“Yeah, everyone, there should be a document titled Human evidence for the first race, somewhere in your packets. Please open it, now, and read the first quote.” Loki said.

They all obeyed, some with more snide comments than others. The first quote was only a paragraph long:

*And it was, as the Human race was multiplying on the face of the Earth, and daughters were born to them, that the Sons of*

*God saw the daughters of the Human race, saw that they were good, and took as wives for themselves whichever of them they chose. And the LORD said, “my Spirit will not keep fighting with the Human race forever, for he is flesh, and his remaining days will be a hundred and twenty years.” The Nephilim were in the Earth in those days, and also afterward, when the Sons of God came into the daughters of men and conceived children with them. These Nephilim were the mighty men of ancient times, men of renown. Genesis 6:1-4.*

“Sons of God?” Scarlet asked, eyebrow raised.

“Later called angels or demons,” Asok said.

“It’s basically a catch-all term, referring to any supernatural being,” Loki said.

“Has that always been in the bible?” Kurt asked.

“Yes,” Loki said. “But Humans today don’t quite know what to make of it, so it never finds its way into Sunday school classes.”

“I thought God sent the Flood because Humans were evil,” Scarlet said.

“Yes, but what were they doing that was so evil?” Loki asked. “Well, a lot of things—murder, exploitation... And allowing their daughters to be abused by demons in order to create a hybrid abomination.”

“Did you just refer to everyone in this room as a hybrid abomination?” Scarlet asked.

“Maybe,” Loki said with a shrug. “Anyway, for more Jewish discussion about these creatures, I refer you to the following few quotes.”

“And I refer you to the fact that it’s lunchtime,” Asok said. “You are releasing us for lunch, at least, right?”

Loki waved an annoyed hand at them. “Yes, yes, be gone with you! And don’t bother coming back either! I’ve had enough griping for the day!”

Asok stood and teleported on the spot. Kurt slouched back and picked up his original book.

“So... we’re doing this every Thursday?” Luke asked.

“Unless you’d prefer to go play with the Harpies,” Loki said.

Luke put up his hands. “I’ll get Asok on board.”

“Good luck with that,” Scarlet said. Luke exchanged a smile with her before they both realized what they were doing. When they did, he frowned, looked at the wall as if it had asked him a question, and vanished.

A few minutes later, Scarlet ambled behind Kurt to the kitchen. Loki had stayed behind in the library, and she knew he wasn’t telling her something. But then, why would she expect him to? Loki was a stranger. He was charming and handsome and oddly endearing, and all of that fooled her into thinking she knew him better than she did, fooled her into trusting him when she probably shouldn’t. He was the god of mischief, trickery, and thieves, after all.

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Loki had gone from the library when they got back. Kurt went back to reading, and to stave off boredom, Scarlet played with the database.

“Should you really be doing that?” Kurt asked what she was already thinking. She assured him she wouldn’t stay connected for more than a minute or two at a time, then launched her search, moving down through the layers, looking for anything about Loki or Hermes. She came up with thousands of files, but wasn’t patient enough to sort through them. The files she did read were all just ancient fairytales, written thousands of years after the fact.

Then it was time for dinner, and finally, sleep. Scarlet lay

on her side in the darkness, perfectly still, watching Kurt fall asleep. She decided, as the hours dragged by, that she had gone about this search all wrong. Loki would not answer questions about himself, and he wouldn't leave things in his own database that he didn't want found. But she had something better already inside her. She had his own memories, who knew how many, perhaps all of them. What if it didn't have to be random? What if she could access them at will? They were in her head. It was just another form of telepathic technology, like the database—think and you will find.

So, Scarlet closed her eyes, and for the first time tried to summon Loki's past, focusing on the last image she had seen, on the Harpy queen, standing in the kitchen doorway. She wore a red silk robe, which reached the floor but was slit up to her knees on both sides of both legs, an animal skin jar in her pale hands.

"I brought the wine," she said, to Loki, in the very same kitchen where Scarlet ate every day, two thousand years ago at least. Her hair was black, like her slender eyebrows, with black feathers growing in it. She was beautiful. Scarlet fell asleep wondering if that last thought belonged to her, or to Loki.

## CHAPTER 4

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**B**asilia the Harpy refilled her cup. It was carved from animal horn, so thin one could almost see through it. Behind her, the open firepit, standing in place of a stove, burned bright, but most of the light came from a glowing ball that hovered above the table—cast there by a spell from Loki. Two years ago, he would never have dared to perform a spell in front of a Harpy. Shape-shifters usually found displays of such magic threatening, and Harpies did not react well when they felt threatened. But Basilia, he now knew, was not one to lose her head over such simple things.

Basilia corked the wineskin and set it back on the table. “So, Effa,” she said, “you’re Aesir?”

Effa and Loki sat across from Basilia. They had never sat

on the same side of the table before, and Loki wasn't sure he liked having her so close. Her arm rested on the table next to his, almost touching. Her leg had bumped against his once. He felt pulled, wanting to move and stay put at the same time.

"Aesir?" Effa asked.

"I mean, descended from Odin," Basilia clarified.

"Ah." Effa shook her head. "My parents weren't descended from either Odin or Anu." She reached across the table for more bread.

"Oh..." Basilia raised an eyebrow. "Your lineage is old then, from a time before Tiamat's family split into the two bloodlines, older even than me. You are older too, I think."

Effa ripped off a chunk of bread and used it to wipe clean the edges of her bowl. "I thought Shape-shifters aged"

"We do," Basilia said. "But slowly. And Harpies age more slowly than the wolves."

"So you're...?"

"Five thousand, give or take."

"Loki's age," Effa said.

"And you have, I'm guessing, a thousand years on us?"

"One thousand three hundred—but, what's a millennium or two between immortals?" Effa said.

Basilia's eyes moved to Loki. "Indeed." The bench had no backrest, but as she leaned back, she held her balance perfectly, at an angle that most would find awkward. "You're a warrior though," she added, watching Effa. "It's in the way you move, even the way you sit."

"And you're a Harpy woman, which means you must be a warrior as well," Effa said.

Basilia inclined her head ever so slightly. "I hung my shield up a long time ago. You become a leader and suddenly everyone has problems with putting you on the front lines of battle."

"I wouldn't know," Effa said.

The Harpy tilted her head to one side, and for a moment,

even her Human face looked very much like a bird. “One of the first things we built here was a gymnasium,” she said. “Which I’m sure is the last thing on Hermes’ list of home projects. You should come sometime.”

“Your people need experience hunting creatures on the ground?” Effa asked.

“Well I’m sure you could use some practice fighting creatures from the sky,” Basilia said.

“Less than you might think.”

“Then we could really learn something from you.”

Effa held her gaze for a while, then smiled, and stood. “I’ll think about it,” she said. “If you’ll excuse me, that’s quite enough wine for me tonight. I’ll do the dishes tomorrow.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “I can do the dishes!”

“I am not freeloading. Do not touch the dishes,” Effa said, making him roll his eyes again. “Basilia, good evening. Loki, find those plates, and don’t touch the dishes.”

“So what do I do if I find the plates?” Loki asked.

“Not answering that,” Effa said.

The Harpy watched the door shut behind Effa. “Your friend,” she said, “is not exactly pretty. Not unattractive, but I wouldn’t say pretty.”

“I think she’s been through too much to be pretty,” Loki said, grabbing another hunk of bread.

Basilia was staring at him, with the keenly wise gaze only a bird can muster. “And here I was half expecting you to say ‘I hadn’t noticed.’”

“Stupid thing to say. Everyone notices things like that. It’s impossible not to.”

“Hum.” Basilia sipped her wine, her eyes still on Loki. “Who exactly is this person to you?”

“Why, exactly, do you ask?”

The Harpy’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve heard a lot of stories about you,” she said.



“Stories? I like stories.”

“From a few thousand years ago, back when you were running around with Thor and them.”

“Oh, those stories. On second thought, stories aren’t all that great.”

“There were a lot of women in those stories,” Basilia continued. “Lots of women across a lot of different species...”

“Yeah, like I said, not my favorite stories...”

“Then there were the killings, of course. And something about a son, or two sons, maybe...”

Loki cut her off. “What you are talking about,” he said, “is one small part of a very long life I have tried to leave behind.”

“Ah, yes,” Basilia said over another sip of wine. “Your whole meeting God moment after you started working for Hades.”

“And what do you think of God, Basilia?” Loki asked, refilling her cup, then his. Such conversations went better with wine.

Basilia cocked her head. “You must be aware of the effect Hades had on my own kind. He took in an entire race of shape-shifters when the rest of the Ageless would have annihilated them. We have always respected him for that.”

“Ah yes, the Cerberi. Nice group. The most mellow shape-shifters I’ve ever met. You know, I heard that Humans these days refer to them as a single, giant dog, named Cerberus, who guards the Underworld.”

“Yes, I heard he even has three heads.” Basilia laughed. “Human mythology is nothing if not imaginative. But the point is, Hades is a good man, and if one of my kind will admit that about one of your kind, it must be true.”

“But his God?”

“You mean our God. The one we all know exists and never talk about.”

“Do you fear him too?”

“Him?” Basilia raised one slender eyebrow. “We call this being her. Of course, that only makes sense. The powerful of my kind are women, the powerful of your kind are men. We picture God accordingly. It seems obvious to me that such a being must be beyond the concept of physical gender—except in that she saw fit to create gender, for some reason.”

“To keep life interesting, I always thought.”

“And give us a way to ignore the opinions and needs of half of our population.”

“Gender is only one of the many excuses we use to hate each other.”

“True.” Basilia raised her glass and took a long drink, her eyes on Loki the entire time. Finally, she set the cup down, tracing one finger around its rim. “What I believe of God, Hermes, is that, if she were not merciful, I would have been struck down with lightning from heaven, many, many years ago. I do not mention your past errors to shame you. We have both been the monster in the night.”

“So why do you mention them?” Loki asked.

Basilia didn’t speak for a moment. “Curiosity, I think,” she said at last. “I’m, trying to figure out how the man sitting before me—the generous, goofy man—could be the same person pictured in those stories.”

“Well like you said...” Loki raised his glass. “God must be merciful.” They toasted each other and drank in silence.

“So this woman, Effa,” Basilia said after the air had cleared, “she’s...?”

“A friend.” Loki couldn’t help the tiny smile. Strange, that in a decade, he had never called her that before.

“Which completely explains why you were uncomfortable sitting next to her.” Basilia spoke with a straight face, and still, the sarcasm came through.

Loki leaned forward. “What makes you think this is any of your business?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s not,” she said, and mischief lit her eyes. “That’s what makes it fun. Seriously, though, I think I ask because, in these three years, I have come to think of you as a friend.”

He smiled again with a nod.

“And as a friend,” she said, “I think I need to point out that a decade of living with someone, even for us, is not insignificant.”

“We’re not... There’s nothing going on between us!” Loki said.

“You mean there’s nothing physical going on between you,” Basilia said bluntly. Loki opened his mouth to say something and shut it again. “Look,” Basilia leaned forward. “Unlike you, I have had exactly one love in my life.”

“Oh, I’ve never been in love,” Loki said.

“No, but you know what I mean. Anyway, my husband,” Basilia said, “he was killed, in our last skirmish with Ea.”

“I’m sorry.”

Basilia nodded. “We have two sons, and they have families, and I see him in them all. And I take comfort in that. But even if we had no children, even if nothing came out of our being together, except the devastation of his death, I would change nothing. There are people in this universe who are meant to be single. And then there are people who choose to be alone, which is a very different thing. So as a friend, Loki, figure out which one you are. And figure out what’s in your way.”

And suddenly, the scene changed. The kitchen and Basilia were gone. Scarlet stood in a forest—or Loki did—under the spread branches of huge and ancient trees. A few feet away, the tree line broke, at the edge of a cliff.

The same forest continued on the other side of the cliff, a ceiling of trees spreading itself out below her for as far as the eye could see. But above this forest, at the edge of the cliff, stood a woman, pale like all the Aesir. In one hand she held

an elegant dagger, with words carved into its black blade. Her arms hung loose by the sides of a nightdress, as she stared out in silence over the forest below her.

“Don’t do this,” Loki said. There was a desperation in his voice the like of which Scarlet had only felt twice, back when Kurt lay dying in the bus, and again when Tiamat had control of Kurt’s mind. “You should not suffer for my sins.”

The woman smiled, the terrible smile of exhausted rage. “I always have,” she said, and stepped out, over the edge of the cliff.

Scarlet woke then, gasping, with the feeling that every bone in her body had broken all at once. But there was something worse than shattered bones and organs. In that moment, she felt complete and total grief, the kind that has nothing even left to grieve for and so turns inward, consuming itself. It was almost enough to keep her from ever going back into Loki’s memories.

Almost.

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The weeks blended together. Every Monday through Wednesday, Scarlet got up, ate, watched Kurt run off to the library, then wandered the halls until an annoyed Luke teleported her to the gym. On Thursday, she trudged behind Kurt to the library, where they found Loki happily preparing a lesson, Asok slumped on her chair, and Luke trying to talk her into giving this a chance.

“All right,” Loki said, one Thursday after their encounter with the Harpies. He clapped his hands together while Asok glared at him, Kurt sat attentively, Scarlet slouched, and Luke just stared at the database. “So last time, we discussed the First Race—brutal monsters, no choice in the matter, at least part of

the reason God sent the Flood.”

“Was Noah real?” Kurt interrupted.

“Good question. And short answer, yes.” Loki reached into the database as he spoke from his seat on its rim, and a second later, tossed a bunch of ghost images into the air above it. “Moving on in our own history...”

“Garg!” Asok said. Luke whacked her arm.

Loki continued. “After that whole flood disaster, perhaps a few thousand years passed. No one knows exactly how long, because Humans hadn’t started to write history yet. But eventually, Humans and Watchers started talking again. They thought they had fixed the problem, to create a new race of Nephilim who could control themselves.

“To be fair, they were more or less right. The second generation of Nephilim—or, in other words, us—are, obviously, more Human, more intelligent, less hungry, and more able to think and control ourselves. But that means we are no longer victims of our makers. We are fully responsible for the evil that we do. And believe me, we have done evil, to Humans, but even more so to each other.

“But, anyway... I want to take these lessons in chronological order, so we will start with the first type of Nephilim that were bred after the Flood.”

Asok suddenly sat forward. “The Djinn?”

“Aha, so now you’re interested!” Loki said, receiving an eye roll for his triumph.

“The Djinn are older than the Ageless?” Kurt asked.

“As a species, yeah,” Luke said.

“As I’m sure they taught you all at some point,” Loki said, “the second generation comes from several groups of Watchers and Humans, working independently of each other. Each species has its own Origin. Tiamat and Apsu are, of course, the Origin of the Aesir, Anunnaki, and Vanir—also of the Olympians and a few other families of gods that are

now extinct. Then, Tiamat by herself is the Origin of the Leviathan, and then the Leviathan are the Origin of the venomous shape-shifters.

“Shape-shifter history is complicated, though. From Europe came another race of shape-shifting Nephilim, which had nothing to do with the Leviathan. The Harpies and Valkyries came from them. But this separate group of shape-shifters also bred with the Leviathan at some point, which created a whole new species.”

“Wait, so there are other types of shape-shifters?” Scarlet asked.

“Oh yes,” Loki said as if this were nothing more than a casual bit of trivia. “Several types, actually. Humans remember the wolf type best. Where do you think vampire and werewolf myths come from?”

Scarlet’s mouth fell open. “Vampires are real now?”

Loki continued without pause. “Fairies and Elves have another Origin. There were a few others scattered across the world, but they’ve mostly died out now. And then there is the oldest race of second-generation Nephilim.” He looked straight at Luke and Asok. “Which are, yes, the Djinn.”

“I guess...” Kurt looked confused. “I just always assumed the Ageless were the oldest race, and that’s why they were in charge.”

“Yeah, that’s why the Ageless don’t teach things in chronological order at school,” Asok said.

“Well, there’s also that other thing,” Luke said, receiving an eye roll from his cousin.

“As a species, we’re older, but the oldest living Ageless is older than the oldest living Djinn,” Luke said.

“Because they were all killed?” Scarlet asked.

“No,” Luke said. “Because originally, we aged and died at the same rate Humans do.”

Loki cleared his throat. “Most Nephilim races had lifes-

pans about the same length as Humans. That's another reason the title 'immortal' is so inaccurate. What makes us Nephilim is our ability to use magic in ways Humans can't. Our connection to magic is what makes us so difficult to kill, and what gives some of us lifespans into the thousands of years."

"But shape-shifters can't use magic," Scarlet said.

Loki let out an annoyed huff. "As I keep trying to tell all you people, shape-shifters can't use or be affected by spells. Spells. Spells are not magic. Spells are one particular, weaponized form of magic. Your ability to shape-shift, your healing powers, and your lifespan are all forms of magic. Magic is the force of nature that keeps life running and connected to the world around it. A creature that couldn't use magic would not be able to breathe! But..." He took a breath. "As I was saying, Nephilim are not necessarily long-lived. In fact, only one species has ever been born with a seemingly endless number of years. The trouble with the Djinn..."

"The trouble with the Djinn," Asok cut in, "is that we are more powerful than the Ageless, and as if that weren't bad enough, back when we had our original life spans, we couldn't be killed."

"Define 'couldn't be killed,'" Kurt said.

"Couldn't be killed," Asok repeated.

"She means," Luke said, "that nothing could end our lives except old age."

"There was another issue," Loki said. "All Nephilim species have... how do I put this..." He fidgeted in his seat. "We... You see... when a man likes a woman..."

"We have difficulty having children," Asok said.

"Yes, thank you." Loki was turning red.

"Basically, if a couple wants to get pregnant, they really have to try," Asok said. "Usually for about a century."

"Yes..." Loki took a deep breath. "See, the other Nephilim races with Human life spans died out because they had just as

much trouble... um..."

"Having children," Asok said.

"Yes, as those of us who live for hundreds of years. Without a hundred years to try... for... that... their species died out in the first generation. But..."

"The Djinn don't have that problem," Asok said.

"We're the only Nephilim race to invent birth control," Luke added.

"Em... well..." Loki was still red. He cleared his throat with a glare at the two Djinn teenagers when they started laughing at him. "The point is, the Anunnaki and the Djinn come from approximately the same place on Earth, the Ancient Middle East."

He pulled down a map, one of the images hovering above the database. The eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea filled one side of the map, with two large rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, running down the other side, eventually emptying into the northern tip of the Red Sea. Between the rivers and the Mediterranean lay a relatively small stretch of land.

"The Djinn come from here," Loki said, pointing to a spot toward the north, along the edge of the Mediterranean. "It's pretty much the border between modern-day Israel and Syria."

"Apsu and Tiamat were born here." He moved his finger toward the south, stopping at the point where the two rivers came together to empty in the Red Sea. "Now, as far as ancient Humans were concerned, these were basically two ends of the entire world. But, the distance isn't actually that far, especially for creatures that can teleport and run as fast as an airplane."

"Now, make no mistake, every single member of every Nephilim race is a born predator. Their methods of hunting may be different, but we are all predators. And one of the biggest concerns any predator has is to keep other predators from threatening its territory."

"For a long time, the Djinn had free range over all of this."



Loki waved his hand across the entire map. “But then Tiamat and Apsu were born, the Ageless race came into existence, and five seconds later—give or take a decade—the Djinn and the Ageless were at war for territory. The main problem for the Ageless was...” He pointed to Asok.

“They couldn’t kill us,” she finished.

“And because the Djinn don’t have a problem...” he pointed at Asok again.

“Reproducing,” she said.

“...they couldn’t just wait for the Djinn to die out, either,” Loki finished.

“Then there was the whole civil war between Tiamat and her children,” Luke said.

“Which we had no part of,” Asok added.

Luke nodded. “But once that was over, and Anu’s children established their control over the entire Mediterranean world, and had finished punishing the Vanir for siding with Tiamat, or whatever...”

“They needed to find another group of people to fight with,” Asok said.

“So, they turned their attention back to us,” Luke said. “We fought for a while. And then the Anunnaki came up with this brilliant plan, and through some mind-bending twists of truly evil magic, they made us ageless.”

“The Anunnaki made you ageless?” Scarlet asked. “How is that good for the Anunnaki?”

“It was just a tool,” Luke said. “You have to remember, despite all the flashy stuff, when you get down to it, magic is just the thing that makes nature work.”

“Technically, it’s the rule of nature that enforces the rules of nature,” Loki said. “Or... anyway, continue.”

“Yeah, right. Anyway... One of the biggest rules is that, because it was created from nothing, everything in the universe must eventually return to nothing. For living creatures, this

means we have to be able to die. Tiamat and her children can live forever, which means there has to be a way to kill them. Djinn couldn't be killed, so we had to age and die. Shift the balance in one direction, it has to shift the other way too. Stop the Djinn from aging, and there now has to be a way to kill them. The Anunnaki just used these rules to their advantage."

"Okay..." Scarlet held up a hand, trying to get her head around all this information. "Are you telling me that the Anunnaki made your ancestors ageless in order to kill them?"

"Pretty twisted, right?" Luke said.

"But once the Anunnaki could kill the Djinn, they realized they now had a way to control them," Loki said. "The chance to control creatures that powerful was too good to pass up."

"So we spent the next few thousand years as yet another slave race," Asok said.

For several seconds thereafter, the four teenagers stared at each other, no one eager to give their opinion on this subject. It all felt somehow intimately familiar to Scarlet. She too, she realized, had been given immortality—or, near-immortality—as a means to a terrible end. Tiamat resuscitated the dead in order to enslave them, made them indestructible so she could have an unstoppable weapon. In that moment, looking at the forever altered Djinn race, the Ageless had never been more obviously Tiamat's children.

"I thought the Djinn came from Arabia," Kurt said, maybe in an attempt to shift the subject, Scarlet thought. "Aladin and the Thousand and One Nights, and all that."

"Right, right," Loki nodded. "That's actually a funny story... well, interesting anyway, if not funny..."

"The Ageless are inept," Asok said.

*You realize Loki is Ageless, right?* Scarlet almost asked that question out loud, but Loki himself cut her off.

"She means, when the Annunaki enslaved the Djinn, a certain number of Djinn families escaped, before the spell that

made them ageless. The Arabian peninsula, at the time, was a good place to hide, so they fled there, and continued to live out their free, Human length lives.”

“Meanwhile, the great and powerful Annunaki had absolutely no clue any of this had happened until, what, a thousand years after you came here and sealed the rifts?” Asok said.

Loki was smiling with one corner of his mouth. “Something like that. And that, Kurt, is why Humans today think of the Djinn as coming from Arabia.”

“So there are still Djinn on Earth right now?” Scarlet asked. It was one thing to understand that all these creatures had been part of her Human world once, long ago. But to think of them there, in the present day, when she had been a normal little girl who hated going to her normal little school... She had so separated that lost Human life from the life she had now, that the two seemed wholly incompatible. Immortals were the creatures that lived on the other side of the rifts, not on Earth.

“Short answer, yes. Longer answer is—a lesson for another day,” Loki said.

“And what about vampires? You said vampires were real. Are there vampires on Earth now?” Scarlet asked.

“What I said was that shape-shifters were the origin of Human vampire myths, not that vampires, strictly speaking, are real. They’re much more like werewolves. But, anyway, short answer: yes.”

“Are you serious?” Scarlet almost shouted.

“And it’s lunchtime again,” Loki said.

“There are werewolves, on Earth, right now?” Scarlet asked.

“Why is that so shocking?” Asok asked. “You’re the one that grows scales.”

“And drinks blood,” Luke added.

“But I’m not on Earth!” Scarlet shot back.

“Stop talking about blood. I’ll lose my appetite,” Asok said, stringing her arm around Luke’s.

“Come back in half an hour. We have science class next!” Loki said milliseconds before the cousins vanished.

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After that, the days and weeks continued to blend. On Fridays and Saturdays, Scarlet and the Djinn returned to the gym. On Sundays, Loki disappeared. Eventually, Scarlet asked where he went.

“The Djinn have a worship service,” Loki said.

“You mean like church?” Kurt asked, reaching across the table for jelly to spread on his toast.

“Like church, yes,” Loki said. “I keep meaning to take you two. And then I forget you two are here. And then the service is half over before I remember... Anyway—you want to come?”

“Is it only an hour?” Scarlet asked.

“No.”

“Is it in English?” Scarlet asked next.

“Not exactly—as in... No.”

“I’ll pass,” Scarlet said. Kurt said nothing.

Two more weeks went by unnoticed. Loki started making Scarlet drink weird teas before going to bed, and she knew it had something to do with his memories. Though she still dreamed about his past, the dreams were nowhere near as vivid as before.

They also stopped appearing in order. One moment she was on Earth, in northern Europe, hunting Valkyries with Sif and Donar. The next she would be on Ea’s world, screaming at him, sometime after they had sealed the rifts. One memory would lead into another, and it was usually difficult to find a connection between them.

During free time, Scarlet read up on ancient clothing styles, to help place these memories in time. Her studies didn't help much, and after a few days of frustration, she realized why.

Reliving Loki's memories was not like watching a movie. She only noticed things that Loki had noticed, things that had left an impression on him. Any detail he didn't care about, her own mind just filled in.

She came to this realization after noticing that in the dreams, Loki wore the same black blazer and blue jeans that he had worn almost every day since she had met him. But clothing like that had only existed for a hundred years or so.

The only thing she could figure, pondering it over her eggs that morning, was that Loki didn't care enough to remember what he had worn two thousand years ago. So, her mind filled things in with familiar images.

The same went for most other people in the dreams. Donar wore modern sportswear even in the mountains of Europe six thousand years ago. Most Ageless men appeared in generic black suits. The women, she noticed, all wore the same flowy blue dress. Even his Harpy friends, she realized, could just be wearing what she expected them to be wearing because she knew from school how Harpies dressed. Unless Loki made note of a specific outfit, she either saw the average person in jeans and t-shirts, or didn't notice their clothing at all.

And the only person whose clothing Loki really seemed to notice, was Effa. His memories of her were therefore the easiest to place in time. They were also the most frequent.

Scarlet woke almost every morning with fleeting glimpses left in her mind of the two of them sitting in the library, in the kitchen, in his room, or another room that must have been hers. They cooked together, and argued over where to put the dishes, and had more dinners with various Harpies.

One night, they stood on a balcony, looking out from an

endless cliff over a cavern the size of a city. Balconies, windows, and doors dotted the cliff face, and stone buildings filled the cavern floor. An artificial sun hung above them, showing faint traces of the stone ceiling that covered this enormous cave. The Underworld. Scarlet knew it from her own recent visit there.

“Why are you doing this?” Effa asked. She wasn’t looking at him, but out over the vast city below, as if watching the mist.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Loki asked.

Then Scarlet woke, remembering only that much, and swearing never to touch Loki’s stupid dream-blocking tea again.

But there were other memories, dark memories, and as the weeks passed, they grew in frequency. Scarlet woke screaming a few times, feeling her skin crawl. Her hands would still be shaking at breakfast, images of blood and torture refusing to leave her mind.

“They’re playing a game,” she remembered Loki saying once. She was out under the blue, open sky, surrounded by green hills. Somehow, she knew it was Earth—the Earth of long ago. That was the only hint she had about a date.

In front of her stood a little boy, about Kurt’s age, with a cloud of anger coming down over his face. She sat on a boulder in front of him, and in her hands, she held a long dagger. It had a wooden blade, and what looked like letters carved deep into it.

“They keep forgetting to tell you when they go off to play, don’t they?” Loki said.

“They don’t forget,” the boy said. “Ever since Balder came along, they don’t want me around.”

A smile twitched the inside of Loki’s mouth, but he didn’t let it show on his face. “Oh, they want you around,” he said. “They’re just scared of Frigg. I’m sorry. It’s not fair.”

“Fair?” The boy had bright blue eyes to match his blond

hair, and they flashed with watery fire. "I'm Odin's eldest son! So what if I'm not all-blessed Frigg's son too?"

"Frigg is Odin's queen," Loki said. "Balder is her son. Her only son so far."

"I'm three years older!"

"And in a fair world, that would make you the favorite." Loki twisted the wooden dagger in his hands. "The world isn't fair."

The little boy crossed his arms. "It's like I don't even belong in the family anymore."

"Well, that's how Balder wants you to feel," Loki said. "Of course..."

"What?" the boy asked.

Loki shook his head. "No. Never mind."

The boy stomped his foot on the trampled grass. "Tell me!"

"It's just, you haven't really done anything to prove him wrong," Loki said. "Balder and Frigg have pushed you aside, and you haven't done anything to tell them they can't."

"And how am I supposed to tell the Queen of the Aesir anything?"

"Now you're being a baby," Loki said. "The Aesir have never wanted me around. I've had to tell them, every day since I was far younger than you, that I have as much right to be here as they do." He pretended to think for a moment, then suggested, "You should just go play with them."

The boy bit his lip. "They don't want me."

"I'm telling you," Loki said, "the only one who doesn't want you there is Balder. So just go, show him you're not one of his Vanir slaves to be pushed about."

The boy hesitated. "What are they playing?"

Inside, Loki's smile grew broader. "Knives," he said. "Balder's standing as the target right now. You know how he likes to show off that pain doesn't bother him. So you see?"

Go play, tell them you have as much right to be there as any of them, and you get the added bonus of being able to throw knives at your brother without anyone getting angry about it.”

“I don’t have my throwing knives with me,” the boy said.

“Good. Because I brought this.” Loki grabbed the wooden dagger by its blade and handed the hilt to the boy.

The boy took it carefully. “This is a spelled dagger,” he said, eying the blade. “I can feel the magic in it. But I can’t read the spell.”

“It’s in Djinn,” Loki said. “I got it from a passing trader a few months ago.”

“It’s not...” The boy bit his lip again. “It’s not a killing spell, is it?”

“What?” Loki asked. “No! The Anunnaki destroyed all the Djinn’s killing daggers. It’s a sleeping curse. Get that in Balder’s heart, and he’ll be out for a week.”

An intense light came into the boy’s eyes. “A week?”

“Give or take. And you’ll have your father all to yourself again.”

The light in the boy’s eyes turned suspicious. “Why would you help me?”

Loki did not respond for a moment. “Because I know what it’s like to not be wanted,” he said in a heavy voice. “But you’re luckier than me, Hod. Whoever your mother is, you are Odin’s son, and you will always be his firstborn. Take this chance. Show him why he should love you more.”

“He should love me more,” the boy said. He clenched the dagger in his fist and held it at his side. “Thank you, Loki.” Then he turned, and sprinted up the hill, headed for the children playing on the other side.

Loki watched him go, and little by little, the inside smile broke onto the front of his face. It was not a nice smile, but one that made Scarlet’s skin prickle and almost woke her. She caught a glimpse of her own dark room, felt the pillow beneath



her head, then rolled over and forced herself back into the dream.

The landscape had changed. She squatted, stoking a fire in a wooden hut with a long, green stick. Wooden logs with frozen mud packed between them formed a dome around her. The smoke from the fire went through a hole in the center of the roof. She caught a brief flash of Loki's reflection when she glanced at a polished, copper cooking pot.

Bear skins covered the entrance to this hut, and Loki stood when those skins flew aside, followed by the violent assault of cold air against the sparking fire. Sif, the elegant and terrifying goddess, crashed through. Her hair was a mess, and her eyes blood-shot red.

"What did you do?" she screamed.

"Um... You mean, what have I done today?" Loki asked. "Well... I got up at sunrise, went for a walk..."

Sif flew across the room and smashed both her arms hard into his chest, sending him staggering back into the wall. Tears burst from her eyes and she screamed, "Balder is dead! Hod killed him, with a Djinn spelled dagger! What did you do?"

"Oh, right!" Loki said. "You see Djinn words, and automatically it has to be me!"

"Who else would have a Djinn dagger?" Sif shrieked. "Who else could have hidden one from the Anunnaki purge? They're babies, Loki! Hod will live with this for the rest of his life—however long Frigg allows that to be!"

"What do you want me to do?" Loki asked. "Apologize?"

Sif spun in a circle and screamed out a list of profanities, or maybe they were curses, against Loki's name and an unnamed mother. "The Aesir will not forgive this!" she said when the list ran dry.

Loki flew into her face. "The Aesir hate me! Frigg more than any of them."

"So you murder her son?"

"I gave a boy a dagger," Loki said. "What he chose to do with it..."

"You murdered my cousin!" Tears stopped on Sif's face, and her voice dragged itself over broken glass. "And you used my other cousin to do it. Do you even realize what you have done? Did you even think of me in this?"

Loki rolled his eyes and turned away.

"I'm Aesir, and I never hated you," Sif said. The passion in her voice had bled out, leaving lifeless words. "I loved you. All these years, I have stood beside you, forgiven you, defended you, ever since we were children in my mother's house. I have never treated you as anything less than my true brother. But this I cannot overlook. This I cannot forgive."

He turned and saw only darkness in her beautiful face. "Run, Loki," she said. Balled at her sides, her white fists were shaking. "Run. And never come back."

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"Something bothering you, Scarlet?" Loki asked.

She looked up from her bowl, across the table at the ancient trickster god. "Oatmeal's a little lumpy," she said.

"I see." His eyes remained locked to hers.

"So, what I don't get," Kurt said, squinting into his oatmeal as if it held the answers to life and death, "is why Djinn magic's so much more powerful than everyone else's?"

Loki kept his eyes on Scarlet as he answered Kurt's question. "Um... It's not really a power thing... Well, it is a power thing, but... What am I trying to say...?"

"Is it like a battery?" Scarlet asked. Loki looked at her in surprise, and she shook her head. "Luke was just explaining... Like batteries in computers, or something."

"I'm beginning to think you give yourself far too little

credit, Scarlet,” Loki said. “Or, well, scratch beginning. I’ve kind of always thought that.”

Scarlet sighed. “You’re going to make me explain it now, aren’t you?”

Loki swept his hand from her to Kurt with a devious smile.

“Okay. Luke said... Do you remember Mom’s laptop computer?”

Stupid question, she thought. Kurt had spent about six hours a day playing on the thing. He nodded.

“It had an internal battery, right?” Scarlet said. She was trying to remember what Luke had told her and stalled by asking stupid questions. Again Kurt nodded. “But it could also be plugged into the wall to get power that way. And every so often you would have to plug it in to recharge the battery. Anyway... Right, this is what he said! Okay, magic drains energy.”

“Obviously,” Kurt said.

“Yeah. It’s why we’re driven to drink blood after we change forms, or heal from injuries. We’re replenishing energy with the life force of other creatures. But, the same thing happens to the other races, they just, I don’t know, have a less violent reaction.”

“Not always,” Loki said. He stabbed half a fried egg, put it in his mouth, chewed, swallowed, then continued. “All Nephilim feed on the life force of other creatures in some way. Actually, all living creatures feed on the life force of others—that’s what eating is. That you Leviathan do it through blood just makes what you’re doing more obvious.”

“Yeah, why blood?” Scarlet asked.

“Think about it,” Loki said. “Every other system in the body would stop functioning without blood. Therefore, blood is tied to a person’s life force—the spirit, some call it—in a very special way.”

“Then why does the blood of dead animals work?” Scarlet asked.

“Actually, the dead are better than the living,” Loki said. “They can’t fight back. We’re not spirits trapped inside skin. That’s a lie the demons told the first Humans. Our bodies are as much a part of who and what we are as our spirits. You can’t separate the two, not even in death.”

“What are you saying?” Scarlet asked.

“I’m saying, that even when a creature dies, it’s spirit remains connected to its corpse.”

“So when I drink blood, I’m drinking a soul?” Scarlet asked.

“Well, no,” Loki said. “You’re consuming the energy of a life force. See, there’s a difference between a spirit and a soul, too. Although, technically, both of them remain connected to the corpse...”

“What are you talking about?” Scarlet asked.

“Not the Djinn, apparently,” Kurt said.

“Yeah,” Scarlet said. “So what do the Djinn feed on?”

“Life force, of course,” Loki said. “But whose life force?”

“Oh!” Something clicked in Scarlet’s mind. “You mean... Each other!”

Loki was trying to hide a proud smile. Meanwhile, Kurt had begun to drum his fingers on the table.

The answers were suddenly so vivid in her head that Scarlet turned smiling to her brother, only half sitting on her own chair. “It’s like this. All Immortals have this magic battery inside them...”

Kurt raised his eyebrows. “Magic battery?”

“Just go with it!” Scarlet said. “Anyway, every act of magic drains the battery, and when it gets too low, we have to stop and recharge, just like you’d have to take Mom’s computer to an electrical outlet. We can only do the magic that we ourselves have the energy to do, and once that energy’s gone, we either stop ourselves, or pass out, or worse. This means there are limits to what kinds of spells Aesir and Anunnaki and all

them, can do. But the Djinn are different. They don't have magic individually, they have magic as a family. The Djinn don't have magic batteries, they're just always connected to the electrical outlet. They don't need to feed on the life force of others because they're constantly feeding on each other. I get it now!"

"Djinn magic is limitless," Loki said. "Or, as close to it as can be. They don't get drained of energy and keep casting spells until long after everyone else has died from exhaustion."

"We can die from exhaustion?" Kurt asked.

"Well, no, of course not! But you get my point."

"But Luke and Asok do have limits," Scarlet said, deflating back down onto her chair. "When we were running from the dragons, they said they could only teleport with me so many times."

"Just because you have access to unlimited power doesn't mean you can control it," Loki said. "Control takes time and practice and then more time. Besides, teleporting isn't just magic, it's also physical. That's why people get sick the first several times they do it. Luke and Asok are young. Their physical abilities haven't caught up yet to their magical abilities—which is why I do hope you're making them fight you hand to hand during school. Which, by the way, you're both late for."

Kurt checked his watch, shoved two more spoonfuls of oatmeal into his mouth, then dumped his bowl in the sink on his way out. Scarlet followed him, and before the kitchen door could close, she felt Loki following her.

"What?" she asked.

"I don't know, you tell me," he said.

Scarlet marched several hundred more feet, stopped in an intersection, and turned, crossing her arms. "Did you once trick a boy named Hod into killing his half-brother?"

Loki's eyes narrowed. Otherwise, he didn't move a muscle. "Yes," he said. "I did."

“Why?”

Loki shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t matter?” Scarlet repeated, incredulously.

“No, it doesn’t,” Loki said. “Because what you’re looking for, Scarlet, is an excuse, and I don’t have one.” He shook his head, then looked her straight in the eye. “I have done terrible things in the last eight thousand years. More terrible things than good, in fact. That’s the truth of it.”

“And you’re just okay with this?”

“No,” Loki said. “If I were okay with it I’d come up with an excuse.”

Scarlet stared him in the eye for a while longer, then shook her head and turned away. This time, he didn’t follow her.

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She was standing in fire.

The walls moved with it. The floor writhed beneath her, rock, heated to its boiling point, yellow and red.

If it even were a floor.

She didn’t seem to be standing. Floating more like. In fact, the more she looked, the more certain she became—there were no walls, no floor, no ceiling. There was just the fire, the writhing, burning rock, suspended all around her.

She hung in a cocoon in the center of pure heat. It burned every inch of her down to her bones, and yet she lived, never to die. This was eternal. This was forever.

Before the weight of it made her collapse into a sobbing mess, Scarlet started to sing, the song that always calmed her: “Jesus loves me, this I know...” She knew only the first verse, and sang it over and over again, whispering in the fire. She closed her eyes, and sang: “little ones to him belong, they are weak...”

In the back of her head, something screamed. She felt a clawed hand reach inside her skull, scraping her brain, squeezed her eyes shut, bit down against the pain, forgot all rhythm and melody, and shouted the verse one more time: "... they are weak, but he is strong..."

The scream vanished. The claws slid out of her skull. And when Scarlet opened her eyes, she found herself in the place to which that song belonged.

The little church from her childhood grew around her as she watched. Its walls, pews, altar, pulpit, and giant pipe organ melted into shape, just as she remembered them. The lights were out, and it was dark the way she used to imagine it looked after all the people went home, and they turned the lights out so God could get some sleep. Huge stained-glass windows rose above the altar, displaying images from Jesus' life in vibrant reds, yellows, blues, and greens. The sun came up behind these windows, and shone all its golden intensity through one pane—the picture of Jesus, sitting on the ground, with the children all around him.

Something screamed, again. It was the high-pitched cry of a slighted emperor, someone who ruled without question, someone who must be obeyed. And powerful—so much more powerful than little Scarlet Fielder.

Not an emperor, really. A god. Her god. Her maker.

Scarlet moaned, grabbed the back of her head, as pain ripped through her skull. The pain traveled down her spinal cord, into her stomach and legs. She could feel the heat of the fire behind her, see its red light as it spilled into the dark church, casting shadows against the stained glass windows. Inside her skull, her god, the maker of the dragon inside her, screamed for her. Beside that monster, the God who spoke with little children seemed so powerless.

Scarlet found herself on her stomach, on the steps of the altar, trying to claw her way up as flames consumed the sanc-

tuary behind her. High above her loomed the stained glass windows, images from the life of the God she had worshiped as a child, staring down, silent against the call of the god who had raised her from the dead and made her a dragon.

She dug her fingernails into the carpet, trying to keep herself there, but even as she did, those fingernails became claws, black, and hard, and sharp enough to tear the throat from anything. She screamed and tried to shed the claws, to make herself Human.

Another image loomed in the window above her, outlined in lead and glass, a dark road with shadowy trees all along it, sucking her into it. She felt herself falling through space, the altar carpet dragged across her hands, the fire roaring.

And then, all was silent.

A full moon shone bright overhead and splashed its pale light against the pavement under her feet. Tall trees with bare limbs lined the road, sticking their skeletal branches into the cloudy sky. And under her feet lay the concrete top of an overpass. There was a road beneath, but she saw no cars, no lights, no movement of any kind. A wire rail, too flimsy to stop a car from going over if it really wanted to, ran along either side of the overpass.

“No, no, no, no...” Scarlet grabbed at the back of her head. The claws were back, inside her brain, pulling.

“No... Stop!” The pain wrapped itself around her spine and dug into her heart. She could feel the darkness under the overpass—not a road, or people, or fire even, just darkness, that made the fire-tomb with all its heat seem heavenly. She could not stay here. The fire was preferable. Anything was better than this road in the dark. She couldn’t stay here... She couldn’t stay . . .

And just before she let that hand in her skull drag her down into the cement, something else grabbed her.

“Scar! Scar!” she heard, and then woke, gasping.



Her hands clawed at the blankets around her, struggling to breathe, heart beating dangerously fast. For a few seconds, before she gained control of herself, she saw the fire and the overpass and the church all rolled into one image in her mind.

And then, it was Kurt's face in front of hers.

"You were having a really bad dream," he said.

"Yeah." Scarlet swung her legs out from under the blankets, over the bed, and stood.

"Where are you going?" Kurt asked.

"Out," she said, swinging the door open.

Scarlet spent the next several hours getting lost in the halls, walking as fast as she could without running. She wanted to run, but forcing herself to walk made her feel like she was in control.

So she walked until her mind was numb.

Sometime later, she realized she had crossed into the Harpies' complex, and turned back. She got lost again and eventually ran across a little sitting room.

It was just a little pocket carved out of the left-hand wall, large enough for some furniture and not much else. A fireplace was built into one wall. A comfortable couch and a low table cut the space off from the rest of the hallway. But more important than the decor, she felt something when she looked into that room, something deep, not quite good or bad, but powerful, warm. Something important had happened here. For an instant, she thought she saw Effa lying on the couch, and a feeling...

But something about that feeling brought the fire from her nightmare closer. She shook all of it away and kept walking.

Scarlet got to the kitchen just as she and Kurt were sup-

posed to head off to school. She opened the door and saw Loki and Kurt sitting together on the same side of the table, talking in voices very close to whispers. They looked up when the door opened, as if caught stealing candy.

They were talking about her.

Kurt got up. He took his plate and a data-disk off the table, dropped the plate into the sink on his way past, and ducked his head out of Scarlet's eye line on his way out the door. It swung shut behind him with a loud thud.

A second later, Scarlet turned on her heels, pushed through the door, and marched back into the hall. Loki followed her.

"Um... Scarlet..." he called.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"Look, Scarlet—So, there are very few things that I will ever not give you a choice about. And this just happens to be one of those very, very few things."

"It was a nightmare!"

"Really?"

"It wasn't even one of your memories."

"I know. That's why I'm concerned."

Scarlet stopped. She felt heavy, and her feet dragged on the ground as she turned. "So what was it?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I need you to tell me about it."

Scarlet took a breath. She tried to remember how the dream had started. The images were there, but words would not form inside her head. "No," she said.

"No," Loki repeated.

She shook her head. "I can't."

"You don't remember?"

"No, I remember everything. I just..." Just thinking of the fire and the overpass had raised the rate of her breathing. Her heartbeat was bordering on dangerous, too. "I won't."

"Scarlet..."

“They weren’t even your memories!”

“I know.”

“How could you know?”

“Because...” Loki hesitated, then forced himself to say, “Because I never met my mother. And last night Kurt heard you screaming for yours.”

“My mother...?” Scarlet shook her head. “She wasn’t in the dream.”

Loki came toward her, raising his hand toward her face. “Scarlet, let me see.”

Scarlet jumped back. “You remember how we got into this whole mess, right?”

“This is different,” he said. “I merged our minds last time. This is just me reading off the surface of yours.”

Scarlet eyed him suspiciously, then nodded. Loki put his hand on the side of her face. In half a second, the entire dream flashed through her mind again. She gasped, jumped away, and backed into the wall, breathing hard.

Loki stood stiff and hunched over in the center of the hall, his head bent down, and his eyes threatened to drill holes through the marble floor. Looking at him put a knot in Scarlet’s throat that she could not swallow back. Slowly, Loki raised his head and met her gaze.

“I am so sorry, Scarlet. Really, I am.” He turned and started walking off down the hall.

“Hey!” Scarlet shouted after him. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

Loki stopped. He stood still for two seconds, then turned on his heels, pressing his palms together with a lying smile. “Everything’s okay. I mean, it really isn’t—but everything’s okay for now. Get off to class with you!”

“Loki!” Scarlet said.

He had gone off again down the hall. Without stopping, he raised one hand into the air and called out, “I will fix this!”

just before vanishing around the corner.

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When Kurt and Scarlet got to the kitchen that afternoon, they found a large, folded piece of paper waiting for them on the tabletop.

*Read Immediately*

it said, in large, red letters.  
Inside they found a note.

*Dear children,*

*I've gone out—by which I mean, I've gone through the rift to another planet, not that I've gone outside. It's toxic out there—I've told you that, right? Anyway, don't know how long I'll be gone. Could be a few days. Or more. Eat your vegetables and get to bed at a reasonable time. I'm not sure what a reasonable time is, actually, so figure that out too, while you're at it. Oh, and please finish the turkey. I'll pick up more.*

Kurt and Scarlet looked at each other with raised eyebrows.  
“So, we’re alone here?” Kurt asked.

“Shouldn’t he have told us how to call for help if we need it, or something?” Scarlet asked.

“I think midnight’s a good bedtime,” Kurt said, opening the pantry door. He reached his arm in and drew out a large plate wrapped in foil. “Turkey?”

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Later that night, Kurt stood before the bathroom mirror, staring at his blond reflection, with an unused toothbrush in one hand. He had the finger of his other hand pressed against his right eyetooth, wiggling it up and down in his upper jaw. Scarlet winced when she came into the bathroom, because it reminded her of the x-rays she had seen of her own skull.

When in Human form, the dragon's fangs were retracted up through their nasal cavities, almost into their eye sockets. It was the only part of their dragon forms the Leviathan could access without morphing. In a fight, Scarlet's fangs would descend in less than a second, without her even having to think about it. It also meant that even in Human form, their eyeteeth were very thin and sharp, odd to look at if they smiled too widely.

Kurt massaged his fang down a few centimeters, then pushed it back up. "If you do that too much it'll fall out," Scarlet said, opening her drawer in an ornate cabinet near the sink.

"No it won't," Kurt shot back. "And even if it did, I'd just grow a new one."

Scarlet rolled her eyes, shoving her hairbrush aside in search of the toothpaste.

Kurt pulled his fang down again, further this time. "This feels really funny."

"Then don't do it," Scarlet said. A second later, she slammed her drawer. "Did you take my toothpaste again?"

Kurt tossed her a white tube, then went back to his tooth.

Their bathroom was made of the same red-brown marble as the rest of Loki's compound. For a sink, they had a large stone bowl supported on a lion paw pedestal which, all together, had to weigh at least a thousand pounds. It had a modern-looking faucet smashed into the wall directly above it, under the plain little mirror.

Beside this odd jumble of elegance and practicality, stood

a wooden cabinet, probably hundreds of years old, banged up, but still beautiful.

Loki had forgotten to put an electric light in the bathroom, so all they had were two oil lamps, mounted to the wall on either side of the sink. The flickering wicks made weird shadows against the mirror sometimes, but it wasn't late enough for these to look creepy, yet.

"Why do we have to brush our teeth, anyway?" Kurt asked. He was still playing with his fangs, which Scarlet tried to ignore. "I mean, it takes us five seconds to heal from being stabbed through the chest. Are we actually in danger of cavities?"

"I think it has more to do with our breath," Scarlet said. "Seriously!" She slapped at his hand. "Stop playing with your fangs! It's creepy."

Kurt rolled his eyes, stuck his toothbrush in his mouth, then pulled it out again. "You remember when all our real teeth fell out?"

"These are our real teeth," Scarlet said.

"Our Human teeth, then."

"I remember being in agony for five days straight." Something about this conversation inspired Scarlet to brush with extra vigor.

After Effa had rescued them from Tiamat's lair, the thirteen Leviathan children had spent weeks adapting to their new condition. Their bodies continued to change throughout that time, slowly replacing all Human cells with those of the monsters Tiamat had made.

They had all reacted differently to the change. Some developed skin lesions, others developed fevers that ran up to three hundred degrees, mood swings, bursts of temper, bones that broke at the touch of a feather... Most started hallucinating at some point. Scarlet had spent a week convinced that her dead mother was in the room with her. Two of the others had become so violent Donar had eventually chained them up in

the vaults beneath the school.

Kurt had had the easiest time of it. As the youngest, his Human body was less developed than the rest of theirs. And he didn't have all his adult teeth yet.

Without question, all thirteen of them agreed that was the worst part—the last week of their transformation when, one by one, their teeth fell out, forced from their jaws in a bloody mess by a new, larger, sharper set. It was agony the like of which Scarlet had not felt before or since. And that was really saying something, since her last four years of school had consisted of being stabbed, shot, and generally beaten up on a daily basis.

"Why the sudden interest in teeth?" she asked her brother.

Kurt shrugged. "I was reading about shape-shifters today. There are three different species of shape-shifters, and then each species has at least a dozen different breeds, but all of them—every single breed in every species—has fangs. It's the only thing all of us have in common. I just thought that was interesting."

Scarlet spit her toothpaste into the sink. "Harpies and Valkyries don't have fangs."

"They do, actually," Kurt said. "In their Human forms, before they grow beaks."

Scarlet put her brush down and looked at her brother with scrunched eyebrows. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"That is weird."

"Right?"

Scarlet started brushing again, trying to picture every shape-shifter she had ever met. How had she never noticed that Harpies and Valkyries had fangs? Of course, she had never really gotten close to one she wasn't fighting, and when fighting, they usually had beaks.

A commotion in the hall drew their attention, rippling

voices flooding toward them, eventually turning into Djinn words. Scarlet and Kurt looked at each other.

“What is that?” Kurt asked. Scarlet walked out the door, toothbrush still in her mouth.

In the hall, she saw three people coming toward her. A slight woman, about a foot shorter than Scarlet, led them. She wore a bright red tank top, had black hair pulled back in a high ponytail, and a lace mask tattooed around her eyes. Asok—wearing a color other than black. Scarlet froze in the center of the hallway.

“Okay, snake,” Asok said as soon as she saw Scarlet. “Where do I put my bags?”

“W-ah-wah?” Scarlet mumbled through her toothbrush.

Luke came down the hall behind his cousin, and he was wearing a blue jean jacket, no hood, over a blue shirt. This was just weird. Scarlet blinked, but the colors wouldn’t go away.

“She’s trying to ask you where the guest rooms are,” Luke said. A woman walked beside him. She looked familiar, but Scarlet couldn’t place her.

Scarlet removed the toothbrush from her mouth. “Guest rooms?”

“Yeah.” Asok stopped walking and crossed her arms. “You’d better know where they are. Because I am not spending the entire night wandering around this crazy maze looking for open doors.”

“What...” Scarlet held up a finger, ran back into the bathroom, spat out the rest of her toothpaste, and ran into the hall again.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Do not tell me you don’t know where we’re sleeping!” Asok said.

Luke had stopped at Asok’s shoulder, but the woman kept walking toward Scarlet.

“He didn’t tell you did he?” she asked.



She had a few black swirls, like Luke's, going up the right side of her face, but otherwise, her skin was clear, far fewer tattoos than Scarlet had seen on a Djinn before.

Loki's bedroom, Scarlet realized. This was one of the Djinn healers who had pulled Loki back from the brink of insanity, that night when Tiamat rose.

The Djinn woman stopped a few feet from Scarlet and smiled. "That man!" she said, shaking her head. "The attention span of a two-year-old. Never remembers the details."

She glanced toward the bathroom door, where Kurt hung peaking into the hall. "Loki asked me to stay with you while he's gone. My son and niece here were nice enough to keep me company while I keep you company."

"Wait, we had a choice in this?" Asok asked.

"No," the Djinn woman said. "And it suddenly occurs to me that the three of us have never actually officially met." She held her hand out to Scarlet. "I'm Irina."

"Right," Scarlet said, coming out of a daze to shake her hand. "Luke's mother." She looked like Luke. A lot like Luke, actually. Their faces were the same shape, and they had the same eyes. "I'm Scarlet. Which, obviously, you know..."

Irina was nodding, still smiling. She was not dressed like any Djinn Scarlet had ever seen. For one thing, she wore an actual dress, something Scarlet had always assumed Djinn women just didn't own. For another thing, it was blue, bright blue, and only went to her knees.

"And you must be Kurt," she said.

"So, you don't know where we're sleeping?" Asok asked.

"*He's lih'ach rag, Yallad,*" Irina said. Scarlet had no idea what that meant, but it shut Asok up.

"Um..." Scarlet glanced behind her. "All the doors in this hall are open, but ours is the only room with furniture..."

"*Yalladin,*" Irina said, "you heard her. Start opening doors until you find three rooms with beds in them."

Asok threw back her head and stomped over to the nearest door.

"There won't be beds..." Scarlet said.

"No, Loki will have moved beds in before he left," Irina said. "He forgets to tell people almost everything, but somehow he always gets things done."

Scarlet shook her head. She was still back on page one, trying to figure out why the Djinn were even here, in her hallway, at this time of night. "When did he have time..."

"You've heard of magic, right?" Irina said. Before Scarlet could answer, Irina took her arm and turned her back to the others. "Walk with me, maybe?"

"Um..." They had gone a few steps down the hall before Scarlet even realized they were moving.

Behind them, Kurt helped Luke and Asok open doors. "Hey, so," Kurt called out, "there's a bed here, but I'm pretty sure this is a closet..."

"Ah, yeah, that's a closet," Asok said a second later. "There's a mop in the corner."

"*Inmah*, he put Asok's bed in a closet," Luke said.

"*My* bed?" Asok said.

"Just teleport it to an actual room, sweetheart," Irina called. She sounded like a Human mother, reminding her son to put his toys away if he was tired of tripping over them. "So," her grip tightened around Scarlet's arm. "How are you doing, *Yallad*?"

Scarlet blinked. "Who, me?"

"We are walking together, right?"

"My name is Scarlet..."

Irina laughed. "*Yallad* means 'girl,' or 'boy.' It's a term of address, like Miss. Now, how are you?"

"I... What do you mean?"

"Look," Irina stopped walking. "I understand I'm a complete stranger and you have no reason to trust me, but Loki is

a friend, and he asked me to help you.”

Scarlet hesitated. “He told you about me?”

“No, of course not,” Irina said. “That would require him to actually communicate. But getting people’s heads back on straight is literally my job, and little girl...” She reached up to touch her fingers lightly against Scarlet’s temple. “Your head is all messed up.”

Scarlet went stiff, and Irina drew her hand back quickly. “Sorry, but it’s the truth.”

“I just thought the Djinn were less... direct,” Scarlet said.

“Oh, we’re the best liars in the universe,” Irina said. “We’re only blunt with people we care about.”

“*Inmah*, should we teleport your bags to your room?” Luke shouted down the hall.

“That would be very sweet of you,” Irina called back, then said to Scarlet, “So tell me everything.”

Scarlet shook her head. “Loki says it’s just that his memories got stuck in my head during that whole ‘save Kurt from Tiamat’ thing. But I’m pretty sure he’s lying to me.”

“He’s not lying.” Irina touched Scarlet’s face again. “He would never lie, not directly. Lies are only believable if they’re part true.” Her eyes focused hard on Scarlet’s, searching for something.

“Are you telling me Loki’s too good a liar to actually lie?”

“Yes, exactly. But more to the point, he would have an excellent reason for lying, and it’s probably that he doesn’t understand this either.”

“So, there is something else going on?”

“Oh, most definitely.” It felt as though Irina’s fingertips had fused into Scarlet’s skin. Her eyes searched, deep into Scarlet’s head. “The flashes of Loki’s memories, that’s only to be expected. But passing out after the database is weird, and he must know that.”

“Did Luke tell you about that?”

“No. Your memories are easier to scan than I expected.”

Scarlet’s face contorted in horror, and a smile twitched Irina’s mouth.

“Don’t worry,” she said, her eyes still searching behind Scarlet’s face. “Very few of us can read minds this easily. It’s a natural talent some of us are born with and then have to spend centuries developing.”

Her eyes narrowed, brows drawing together. “There was a dream, not of Loki’s memories, but...” Suddenly, her hand snapped back. She took a step away from Scarlet as if something had stung her.

“What?” Scarlet asked.

Irina took a deep breath. “You told Loki about that dream?”

Scarlet swallowed as her heart started its dangerous pounding again, blood rushing through her chest, into her neck and face. “Yes. I think that’s why he left, actually.”

Irina nodded. “He’s gone to find an extractor, then. Good.”

“Can’t you do it?” Scarlet asked. “Extract the memories?”

Irina shook her head. “If you were Djinn, I would. But Djinn telepathy and shape-shifter telepathy don’t get along well. Most extractors are Ageless, and Ageless are related to Leviathan through Tiamat. That will be safer.”

“*Dov Irina!*” Asok had just come out of a room, ripping the door open to slam against the wall. “Luke won’t help me teleport my bags!”

Luke came out of the room behind her. “I just teleported mine and *Immah*’s. I’m tired, and she packed three suitcases. Why in the world would anyone need three suitcases?”

Asok rolled her eyes. “We’re going to be here for weeks. I needed to cover all possibilities.”

“What possibilities?” Luke asked. “The weather’s always the same. You’ll be with the same people, doing the same

things...”

“*Tovcha!* Asok, where are your bags?” Irina asked, turning to the Djinn teenagers.

“I left them on my bed back home,” Asok said.

“All three? On the bed?”

“*Ken.*”

“Fine.” Irina raised one hand, snapping her fingers. Three black suitcases, stuffed full, materialized in the hall. “That them?”

“Thanks,” Asok and Luke muttered together.

“You’re welcome, now grab a bag and get to bed.” Irina waved a hand at one suitcase and it slid through the open door behind the teenagers. Asok grabbed another one by its handle.

“It’s just...” Luke was apologetic as he grabbed the third bag. “We would have had to teleport all the way back home... and then pick up each bag... and teleport all the way back...”

“Yeah, I know,” Irina said. “I love you both. Go to bed.”

Luke and Asok faded into different rooms. Kurt had gone too.

“And I forgot to ask where my room is,” Irina said.

Scarlet pointed. “I saw them go into that one.”

“Thanks.” Irina started over, then stopped. “There is something I can do,” she said.

She touched her hand to Scarlet’s face, and Scarlet saw something, just a flash, but one that burned through her mind like a flood—a dark road at night, shrouded in trees, still and empty.

“It’s a dream block,” Irina said. “When you enter a dream cycle, it will trigger that image, and the image will trigger your mind to enter a deeper layer of sleep. You won’t dream at all tonight. Dreaming’s important to mental health, so this won’t work forever. But for right now, it’s probably best.”

It meant no more of Loki’s memories, but at least she wouldn’t have the nightmare again. “Thanks.”

Irina nodded and walked toward her room.

“Hey,” Scarlet called as Irina opened the door. “Why that image?”

“I don’t know,” Irina said. “The trigger image always comes from the mind of the person who needs the dream block. It must be important to you somehow. Get some sleep, Scarlet.” She closed the door behind her.

## CHAPTER 5

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carlet?" Irina said.



Scarlet looked up at the image above the library database.

Irina stood beside the database, looking very much the part of teacher in a gray blazer and skirt. Nearby, Kurt paid careful attention, Luke sat on Asok's footstool, and Asok had her head back with the expanded data-disk resting flat across her forehead and nose.

"Is it...?" Scarlet squinted at the ghost image above the database. "Iron?"

"Iron is an element, not a compound," Asok said, groaning through her data-disk.

"You're not even looking!" Scarlet said.

“Right.” Asok sat up. The data-disk slid down her nose and into her hands. “But I know we’re studying compounds, and iron’s not a compound, so it’s not iron.”

“It’s a big blue blob stuck to two other blue blobs with little red blobs coming off them!” Scarlet said.

“Well, yeah, if you want to be literal,” Asok said.

“It’s water.” Luke got up, walked to the database, pointing as he spoke. “Two hydrogen molecules, and oxygen. Can you two stop arguing about nonsense now?”

“I don’t get this stuff,” Scarlet said.

Asok let out a groan and put the data-disk back over her face.

“Asok, enough!” Irina said. “What don’t you understand, Scarlet?”

“Why we’re doing this,” Asok said.

“She didn’t ask you!” Scarlet said.

“Scarlet?” Irina said.

Scarlet squinted at the image. “I don’t know. I just don’t get it. And why are you so into chemistry anyway? Don’t you read people’s brains for a living?”

“I fix people’s brains for a living,” Irina said. “And brains are formed in the interaction between chemistry and biology and magic.”

Asok let the data-disk slip off her face. “And yet, this somehow manages to be boring.”

“Look.” Irina moved her hand in a sweeping, downward motion, and the ghostly image of molecular water fell into the basin. “I know you would all rather be in the gym...”

“Hey!” Kurt said.

“Sorry,” Irina corrected herself. “I mean, most of you would rather be in the gym, throwing poisoned darts at each other...”

“Now there’s a good idea,” Asok said, with a sly look at Scarlet. Luke whacked her arm.



“But it’s Thursday. I’ve lived on this planet with the Harpies for a thousand years, and I still wouldn’t do something as foolish as interrupting their training.”

“Is it lunchtime yet?” Asok asked, putting her head back again.

“We ate lunch half an hour ago,” Scarlet said.

“Oh, right,” Asok said. “Dinner, then?”

Irina sighed and reached into the basin. “Let’s try another one.”

Loki had been gone now for three weeks, three weeks of Irina putting dream blocks on Scarlet’s mind, and three weeks of Luke and Asok living across the hall. The girls fought every morning over the bathroom, and the boys had taken to locking them out of the bathroom while they were busy fighting.

But not everything about the situation was bad. Irina could actually cook, which meant no more burnt eggs and soggy pasta, no more turkey sandwiches every day for lunch. She was also a better teacher than Loki, and overall, it was just nice to have a woman around.

Then there were the Djinn’s prayer services. Scarlet had gotten up early to use the bathroom one morning and stumbled on them in the hall. At first, she thought it was some magic ritual, a spell, or something. And it did feel like a spell. The same power, or the same kind of power, filled that hallway. But she had quickly realized something else was going on.

First, the words they spoke came not in commanding chants, but in song, flowing and endless. Their tones reverberated off the stone walls, feeding the three flames that glowed from wax candles between them. They sat there, singing a song without beginning or end, a song that changed and flowed from one feeling to the next, apparently unaware of Scarlet’s presence.

Ever since she first stumbled on them, Scarlet had woken up early, to listen. She would lie in bed, and hear the singing,

trying to pick out the few Djinn words she knew. Among the most common, *Elanu*, Our God.

Scarlet had heard Irina sing before, in Loki's room, the night she had come to heal his mind. Her voice led their singing prayers, as it had led the other healers, strong, and ancient. Luke was a tenor, which matched his speaking voice. But what struck Scarlet most was Asok. She was an alto, a powerful alto, and fit her voice to such effortless harmonies, that it sometimes felt as if heaven would break, to rain down upon them all.

In the library, Irina was saying something about covalent bonds, in answer to a smart question from Kurt. And that was when the door opened. Irina broke off mid-sentence, and Asok sat bolt upright.

A Harpy came in and stopped short. She had brown hair, streaked by black feathers, and wore one of their knee-length, silk robes. Her eyes went straight to the Djinn woman at the basin.

"Irina," she said after they had stared at each other for half a minute.

"Crae," Irina said in the same monotone.

The Harpy's eyes made a quick dart around the library. "You're not Loki," she said.

"Loki's been gone for almost a month," Irina said.

"Oh..." Crae the Harpy's eyes made another trip around the room. They landed again on Irina, and she asked, "And you're...?"

"Babysitting," Irina said, inclining her head toward Scarlet and Kurt.

"Ah."

"He didn't tell you?"

The Harpy shrugged. "He has a short attention span."

"The shortest."

They stood staring at each other for several seconds more.

Then Crae tipped her head to one side and raised an eyebrow. “Are we going to have a problem?”

“I don’t know. Are you going to threaten to eat my kid again?” Irina asked.

“She pointed a gun at me.”

“They were kids training with blanks. They’re seventeen. Which birthday did you celebrate this year, again?”

Crae stared at Irina with narrow eyes. Eventually, she said, “We have lava from Volcano Five coming dangerously close to the west side of our facility.”

“Sounds like you should deal with that,” Irina said.

“I plan to. Loki has a rule that we let him know before we send people outside the walls.”

“Right. Well in the unlikely event he’s back before you all get back, I’ll let him know.”

“Where is he?”

“I think the appropriate response is actually ‘thank you.’”

“Thank you. Where is he?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Fine.” Crae’s eyes rested on the teenagers for a moment before she turned to the door.

Irina took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a second as if annoyed with herself, then called out, “Crae, wait.”

The Harpy took a similarly annoyed breath and turned. “Yes?”

Irina sent a look of heavy resignation toward the door as if she wished the Harpy were on the other side of it. “If you’re sending people outside, you really need to have someone in the comm hub monitoring you.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“It probably isn’t necessary, but it could be, and that’s why Loki made it a rule.”

Crae cocked her head again. “Are you volunteering to spend sixteen hours staring at our vital signs from a comm hub

screen?”

“It’s what Loki would do if he were here,” Irina said. “And he sent me to look after things, which as far as I’m concerned, puts me in charge. Unless, of course, you’d prefer to deal with my father-in-law.”

Crae took in a sharp breath. “I don’t have a problem with men, Irina. We are not a sexist society anymore!”

“Sweetheart, I’m Djinn,” Irina said. “Literally every other species is sexist from my point of view.”

Crae rolled her eyes. “We’re leaving tomorrow morning, first thing. If you want to watch over us, it’s your day to waste.” She spun on her heels and left the room.

“Okay, seriously!” Scarlet said as soon as the door had closed. “What is it with Harpies and Djinn?”

“The short version?” Luke said. “They used to eat us.”

“Yes,” Irina said, “and we, in turn, used to burn their nests like a farmer might burn out anthills.”

“Because the Ageless made us!” Asok said.

“That does not absolve us,” Irina said. “Whatever the reason we did it, we did it. Now, covalent bonds, as I was saying...”

“Arg!” Asok threw her head back into the stuffed chair.

Effa asked for help.

In response, Loki waved his hand at a beam of wood, causing it to fly from a pile of stone dust and debris into a large bin containing yet more debris.

“Explain to me, again, why I agreed to this project?” he asked, inhaling aerosolized bits of marble for his trouble.

“Because...” Effa stood back, wiping the dust on her hands off against her skirt. “You finished your library a decade ago and think another building project will help you not be bored.”

“Yes, but explain to me why you have to tear walls down,” Loki said.

Hours had passed since he had moved from his perch on a large slab of marble. In front of them stood a brown marble wall, covered in its own dust which also covered the floor, the ceiling, and every inch of their clothing. The wall was being hacked and sawed and hammered apart from both sides by a team of Harpies, and Effa. The remnants of three other walls stood behind Loki.

“Right, like we can put an entire gymnasium in one closet,” Effa said.

Loki hopped off the marble slab, bringing him close to Effa’s face. “I gave you one room for this project.”

“Look out below!” a Harpy bellowed. He was half morphed, just enough to spread huge black wings and balance on clawed feet between what was now the top of the wall, and the ceiling. As he shouted, a huge chunk of wall shattered, broken shards of marble flying in all directions. Loki pushed Effa and Effa pulled Loki back against the wall as the shards rained down. They stood, holding each other’s arms as the dust settled.

“Sorry,” the Harpy said.

Loki pushed away from Effa. “One room,” he said.

“Actually...” Basilia the Harpy Queen appeared on top of the wall, then jumped over it. She glided to the floor on black feathered wings, folding them behind her back as her feet touched the floor. “What you said was that we could have as much space as we needed.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Which means, go pick out any one room big enough.”

“And there wasn’t one,” Basilia said.

“Right, so you take up five?”

“It’s going to be six,” Effa said.

“Si... You’re tearing out six of my rooms?”

“Like you were doing anything with them!” Effa shot back.

“Have you even been in this section of the compound before?” Basilia asked.

“And you!” Loki turned on the Harpy with a waving finger. “Why do you need a gym in my house, anyway? You have one of your own!”

Basilia shrugged, black wings going up with her shoulders. “And now you’ll have one.”

“Yes,” Effa said. She ran her hand up his arm, looking for the muscle beneath his shirt. “Maybe then you’ll do some training of your own.”

Loki jumped away as if she had electrocuted him. “I can fight perfectly well.”

“Really?” Effa crossed her arms. “You think you can take me?”

“I certainly could.”

“I mean without magic, Loki.”

“And when, realistically, am I not going to be using magic?”

“Um...” Basilia spread one wing, picking flecks of marble out from between the black feathers. “When up against an army of shape-shifters, maybe?”

“Oh hesuke. You’re immune to spells. There are more ways to fight with magic than just spells.”

“Admit it, Loki, you could use some practice.” Effa tried to touch his arm again, and again he jumped away. “What?” she laughed.

“Nothing. Enjoy tearing walls down.” He turned and marched to the door with as much drama as he could, over shattered slabs of marble. “I hope you don’t get crushed by anything,” he called over his shoulder on his way out.

A few flashes followed, dragging Scarlet into another time and place where she knew she did not want to go. First, there was a woman, a blond Aesir, standing under the bowing green trees. She stood on a precipice, in a white nightdress, with a terrible dagger in one hand, looking out over a forest, the like of which no longer existed on Earth.

And then Scarlet was in a cave, and every cell in her body screamed to get out, tearing at the bindings that held her on a rock. Silver light streamed in through the cave's mouth, and she kept her face turned away from it, ripping at the chains with all her strength.

A few steps away, she could hear growling, with Human screams dying away under the light of that silver moon. Claws tore stones from the cave floor, and a second before she saw the beast, Scarlet forced her mind out of that place, ripped open the edges of the memory, and spilled out, into another place and time.

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She found herself standing at a door, one of the thousand identical doors in Loki's compound—except it seemed the hall was wider than usual. A few hours earlier, Loki had marched out on Basilia and Effa. Now, he knocked on a door, fifty miles from his own compound. It opened, and Basilia stood on the other side, wingless now, with a dishrag in one hand. The smell of boiling meat wafted out around her.

"Loki," she said.

He smiled and lifted a clay jug. "I brought the wine."

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“You feeling okay?” Luke asked.

Scarlet had her arms crossed, walking behind the others toward Loki’s communications hub. Kurt skipped ahead with his typical enthusiasm for all things new or technological. Asok was filing her nails as she went, and she and Luke had been talking about something, in Djinn. When that conversation had ended, Scarlet didn’t know. She didn’t even realize Luke was at her shoulder until a second after he spoke.

Scarlet took a breath which raised her shoulders several inches. “I had another dream last night.”

“Really? You tell my mother yet?”

Scarlet rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I will. I just...” She detangled her arms so she could run one hand back through her hair. “I don’t get what’s happening, Luke!”

“And...” Luke lowered his voice. “I don’t know, but... Do you, maybe, not want the dreams to stop.”

Scarlet turned to him with sharp green eyes.

“Hey!” he said, putting his hands up in defense. “It’s just, honestly, if I had an all-access pass to Loki’s memories, I’m not sure I’d want to give it up, so...”

“Are you your mother’s apprentice, or something?” Scarlet asked.

Luke looked at the ground. After a second, he spoke, but so rapidly, she suspected he was hoping she wouldn’t understand him. “Telepathic sensitivity does run in families.”

“Great.”

“Please! I hardly need to read your mind to figure this out.”

Asok turned to walk backward. “Figure what out?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Scarlet took off down the hall, leaving all of them behind.

A few minutes later, they all entered the comm hub. Irina was already there, pulling images out of the basin. It was an



octagonal room, not very large, with no windows and only a few, stiff chairs. The basin was larger than the one in the library, with a broader rim on which sat hundreds of data-disks. Asok immediately took one of the chairs, propping her feet up on another. Irina smiled at them, then took a data-disk and spoke into it.

“Crae, looks safe out there for now. Are you headed out?”

“I told you you don’t have to do this,” said a crisp voice from the other end. There were hints of other, high-pitched voices all around her. “And yes, we’re leaving. You should see us on the screens in a minute.”

“Looking forward to it,” Irina said in a crisp voice.

A few minutes later, black wings filled one of the ghost images above the basin. The volcanic scenery of Loki’s planet was by now familiar, but Scarlet still couldn’t quite imagine going out into it, into the constant eruptions, under the sky that never saw the sun break through its black clouds.

“Isn’t it toxic out there?” she asked Irina.

“Shape-shifters have an extremely high tolerance for poison,” Irina said. Her eyes stayed on the Harpies, a few dozen winged men and women, lighting on an outcropping of rock. “They’ll take shifts out there, and it should be fine.”

Kurt hopped up onto the basin’s rim, to get a better view of the images above it. “What exactly are they doing?”

“Volcano 5 is the closest to Loki’s compound on their side,” Irina said. “It erupts almost constantly. Here...” She reached up, rotating the image of the Harpies, flipping the perspective one hundred and eighty degrees and pulling it back to get a wide view.

From the outside, Loki’s compound was a lumbering mass of brown stone, worming and snaking over and around itself, balanced on stilts on uneven ground, stretching on forever. Half way around the planet, Loki had told Scarlet once. She figured he was exaggerating, but maybe not.

The Harpies had landed about nine hundred feet from the nearest wall, and directly in front of them ran a molten river. The sight made Scarlet back up against the wall. Lava, running red with the force of a flood, so close.

"That river's been here forever," Irina said. "There are some minerals on this planet that will not melt, even under extreme heat. They line the bed there, creating a perfect channel for the lava. Unfortunately, only about twenty percent of the rock on this planet is made of those minerals, so that river gets progressively wider with time. When Ea had this place built, he put a security wall right about where the Harpies are now standing. But it gets worn down. So, every hundred years or so, someone has to go out there to fix it."

"So, this is normal?" Luke said.

"Quite normal," Irina said. "Unpleasant, but normal."

Kurt asked more questions, about volcanoes and toxins and Harpies. Irina answered them all. Asok slumped down on her chair, reading from a data-disk. Scarlet took another seat, letting her mind wander as she stared off into the erupting volcano. She could almost feel the lava on her skin, watching it burn inside that caldera where Tiamat had been imprisoned.

Scarlet gripped the arms of her chair harder, trying to shake the sudden waves of heat attacking her chest. For a second, she saw herself standing in that river, lava running in shining drops down her arms, splashing from her fingertips into the stream below. The fire was all around her, calling for her to walk through it, to breathe the sulfur deep into her lungs, to merge into the flame, become one with it, forever.

And then she was in a cave, with the light of a full moon streaming in, and a monster rising off the stony ground in front of her—a mass of fur, picking itself up, limb by limb. She saw one massive paw, the size of a Human head, spread itself across the ground to balance the rest of its shifting weight. Shards of bone extended from the fingers of that paw, as white

as the moonlight—the hooked claws of a giant wolf...

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“I brought the wine,” Loki had said, an old joke between them, and Basilia the Harpy queen let him into her home for dinner. It was a sudden shift, from one memory to another, and felt somehow familiar—like the dream block Irina had put in her mind. Except it didn’t stop the dreams, only changed them.

After dinner, Loki sat on some cushions in front of the fire, discussing things happening off-world with Basilia’s grandson, Illin. He had come to stay with his grandmother several weeks earlier, bringing his own young daughter, Crae, with him. He came often to the communications hub to speak to his mother, the chief of another Harpy clan, so he and Loki had gotten to know each other a bit over the weeks, especially since his mother’s clan lived on a planet controlled by Enki, Loki’s half-brother.

“So, as I’m sure you overheard,” Illin said, “your dear brother is making quite some trouble for us.”

“Half-brother,” Loki said. “And far from dear. Enki’s mother was Ea’s wife, and he will never let me forget it.”

“And who was your mother?” Illin’s daughter asked from her perch—literally—on the back of a nearby chair. Just that week, Basilia had officially named Crae her heir, but looking at her now, Loki could only think about how young she was. Not even a hundred.

“Crae,” Basilia said. She stood near the stove, pouring spiced cider into cups for her guests. “Forgive my daughter,” she said to Loki. “We trace our families through the women, so it’s hard for us to believe we really know a person until we know the mother.”

She added something to Crae in their own language—a

very ancient form of Greek, which Loki understood perfectly well. He didn't tell them so.

"I suppose that means you won't be able to help us any, with your not-dear half-brother, I mean," Illin said, getting back to the main conversation.

"Trying would probably hurt your case," Loki said. "Enki hates me."

"Because you have different mothers?" Crae asked. Her great-grandmother gave her a firm glance as she brought the tray of drinks over.

"Because I'm still alive, actually," Loki said, taking a cup of cider. "Now, Crae, are you ready to take over your grandmother's empire?"

The girl snorted. "No. And she's not going anywhere."

"Smart girl," Loki said with an approving nod to her father. "People that young rarely realize how young they are."

"She's not that young," Basilia said, seating herself beside her grandson. "Old enough, to know how to sit on a chair."

Crae rolled her eyes and slipped from the back of the chair onto the seat, reforming Human feet as she moved.

"Excellent cider, Illin," Loki said, draining his cup.

"Can't take credit for it, I'm afraid," Illin said. "My wife made it. I just brought it from home."

Crae made a choking noise. "Dad, stop telling everyone Mom does the cooking. It's embarrassing!"

"It is not embarrassing," Basilia said.

"Hey," Illin told his daughter. "I'm the one who did all the child care when you were growing up, so don't lecture me about gender roles." Crae made another choking noise and buried her face in cider.

"Loki," Basilia said, setting her cup aside on the rim of the fire pit. "Would you take a walk with me?"

"Certainly."

They stood, said goodnight to Illin and his daughter, and

left Basilia's chambers.

Over the decades, the Harpies had made significant alterations to their section of the facility. The narrow, winding corridors Ea had constructed were unmanageable for creatures who could fly. So they had torn out every wall they could years ago, now in the process of adding levels. Once those levels were built, shielding the interior from the planet's poisonous atmosphere, they could raise the ceilings.

Basilia led Loki into one of the mostly finished rooms, six or seven stories of empty space above their heads. Across from the door stood a floor-to-ceiling window that looked out on the lava fields, toward a volcano that seldom stopped erupting.

"Soon everything but the private homes will look like this," Basilia said.

Loki looked up into the ceiling, hypnotized almost by its height. "When I told you to make the place your own, you certainly took me up on it."

"Don't get me wrong," Basilia said. "I miss the forests and the open sky. But my people have never felt safer than they feel here. We have you to thank for that."

Loki wasn't sure what to do with the gratitude, so just nodded, walked over to the window, finding the volcanoes in a rare quiet state, the ash clearing above, lava hardening below. They could almost see the stars.

"Are you having second thoughts about Crae?" he asked.

Basilia sighed. "I can't, that's the problem. Illin's sister is already named as their mother's successor. My other son has only sons. And I'm an only child. That makes Crae the only female relative available to me."

"I see."

"I'd much rather name my elder son, but that's out of the question." Basilia shook her head. "There are days I hate politics."

"There are days you *don't* hate politics?" Loki asked,

making her laugh. “Still,” he continued, “Crae may be your only option for now, but both your sons are married, not to mention all of your grandchildren. Another hundred years or so...”

Basilia shook her head. “I’ve already let the question go too long. People expect me to name an heir, and with all this trouble with Enki, it would be irresponsible not to.”

“Exactly how involved are you getting in that?” Loki asked. He knew his brother, how dangerous he could be, and how far he could sometimes take things.

“I’m staying as far out of it as I can,” Basilia said. “Fortunately, he hasn’t really done anything yet. But I am tied to Arixa’s clan through my son and their children. I have to be involved.”

Loki hesitated, but finally said it. “You know I would offer them a place here... I mean, if it were to come to that...”

Basilia was smiling and shaking her head at the same time. “Arixa is... Proud. And far too attached to the days when the Anunnaki were our mortal enemies.”

“I understand.”

They stood in silence for a while, watching the lava cool around them. “I wish I could help you, Basilia,” Loki said at long last. “With Enki.”

Basilia stood, staring at the lava below them, her face tightened to the full extent of its already pinched bone structure. “Really, Loki,” she said at long last, “I’m just tired of this—of the blood, of the violence, the constant threat.” She closed her eyes, and opened them again, to stare back across the vast reaches of time.

Loki waited. There seemed nothing else to do.

After quite a pause, Basilia continued. “I was a child when the Ageless marched against us. When I close my eyes, still, I see the blood that covers the forest floor, our homes on fire above us, wings burning and warriors cast flightless onto the

ground. We were not innocent in what happened, I know that now. The angel of death on black wings—Humans get that image from us, you know. The Ageless felt justified in exterminating us, and if I’m honest, maybe they were. But the violence just kept going. So we ran from the great forests of Europe and made our homes in the swamps no other race would willingly enter. And still, the wars found us, again and again. I don’t know why you came here, but for us, sealing the rifts, creating this new society, it was a chance to start again, to put the bloodshed behind us.”

“And it hasn’t worked,” Loki said, the sad truth he could sense behind her words.

“None of us expected it to work,” Basilia said. “In our hearts, we thought the closest we might come would be to give every species its own planet, so we could ignore each other for once.”

She shook her head, and the lines in her face softened. “And yet, I have seen more hope in these last centuries than I ever expected. Here we stand, Loki, you and I, together. Here we are, a family of shape-shifters, on the planet of an Anunnaki, who’s harboring a Vanir. We hear rumors that Donar means to build a school where everyone can learn and train together. Fairies and Elves have stopped killing each other for the first time in four thousand years. Even the Djinn are assimilating. I see hope, despite all my better judgment. Every now and then, I think that maybe we were right. Maybe all we needed was to eliminate Humans from the equation... And then I talk to Arixa.”

Loki nodded. “And she tells you all the things my oh-so-not-dear biological family is doing.”

“Yes, and what about your family, Loki?” Basilia asked abruptly. “Mine may have its problems, but we would all die for each other.”

“And we would all die by the other’s sword,” Loki said.

"Including this mother of yours?"

"You silence your daughter over that, yet bring it up yourself?"

"Crae has not been your friend for fifty years."

"True." Loki took a deep breath. "But I have no idea what my mother would do. Ea deleted her from my life before I ever knew her. Hades, and Persephone, and the Underworld beneath Greece is the closest I've ever come to having a home and family."

"Yet you left them behind, to come here when the Ageless sealed the rifts."

"I have my reasons."

"I never doubted that." She looked at him sideways, in that inquisitive, knowing way only a bird could manage. It was as if there were corners in their eyes that other species simply did not have. Loki's only defense was to change the subject.

"You know I don't really hate this gymnasium project, right?"

Basilia laughed. "No?"

"No. And I suppose Effa does have a point. I suppose I could use some work on the physical side of fighting."

"And how are things with Effa?" Basilia asked.

Loki went stiff, which canceled out his efforts to play it cool. "I don't know what you mean."

"It's been seven decades, Loki," Basilia said with a sigh. "She's been living here for seven decades."

"You've been here for almost six decades."

"Yes, in our own compound, paying rent."

"Effa pays rent," Loki said. "She... does the dishes... and cleans up, and... frankly, nothing would ever get dusted if she weren't here."

"Because she insists on doing so."

"So what are a few decades between immortals, anyway?" Loki shot back.



The Harpy was looking at him straight on now with her keen gaze, blue eyes under black lashes, under dark hair. “If they’re the right decades?” she said. “Everything.”

He grimaced, fidgeted, turned toward the door for some reason, then finally rested his back against the window, arms crossed. “We don’t really know each other,” he said, shocking himself by the sincerity in his own voice. “I mean, we know all the small stuff, but nothing big. She hasn’t even told me who she killed.”

“You know who she killed,” Basilia said. “Everyone knows who she killed.”

“Well of course I know. Idun’s been ‘letting it slip’ at Council meetings for decades now. The point is, she hasn’t told me!”

“Because she knows you know!”

He took a breath, leaning harder into the window. “And there are things I can’t tell her.”

“Why?”

“You’d understand if you knew.”

“That’s easy to say when you’re the only one who does know.”

“I am not,” Loki said. “Donar and Sif know, and they’ve given me about five lectures each on why I shouldn’t tell anyone.”

“But I assume you told Hades?”

“You shouldn’t assume things.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Yes. I didn’t tell Hades, he found out, just like the other two.” Loki shook his head. “Why are we talking about this?”

Basilia sighed. “I am your friend, Loki.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Does it have something to do with the whole Aesir and Anunnaki hate Vanir thing?”

“Effa and I are not enemies,” Loki said.

"But you should be. You're Ea's son..."

"Only by blood."

"And she is Qingu's daughter."

Loki's head snapped toward her. "How do you know that?"

"I figured it out the same way I'm sure you did," Basilia said. "I saw the scars. And there's only one reason someone her age would have been dangerous enough to condemn to Tiamat's volcano."

They were silent again, standing on the edge of cooling lava fields, until Basilia broke the silence. "Family is important, my friend, and if you really have none, then you should make your own."

"I did that once," Loki said. His voice was razor sharp, blistering. For a moment there was something else, something dark, invading the space between them. A giant wolf, rising off the floor of a cave in the silver moonlight, and somewhere else, a whimpering boy... All eclipsed a moment later by a woman, standing at the edge of a precipice...

"I know," Basilia said. "But please understand, I never met that man. As far as I can see, he died a long time ago—perhaps with them. In fact, probably with them."

Loki shook his head. "Why can't Effa and I just be friends?"

"Oh, you could!" Basilia said, smiling with one side of her mouth. "I just don't think that's what you are."

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"If you're trying to sneak in without being noticed, you fail." Effa did not look up from her scroll as she spoke.

"I wasn't, in fact," Loki said.

The lounge in which Effa sat was just a widened sec-

tion of the hall, a rectangular pocket poked into the passage between the Harpies' compound and Loki's. A fire burned in the hEarth on one wall, directly opposite where Effa lay on a couch reading. It was set up like a Roman dining room. There were three large couches, meant for lounging, not sitting, and a low table one could reach even while half lying down. Effa was on her back on one couch with the scroll.

"I wanted to run into you, actually," Loki said.

Effa put the scroll down on her chest and raised her eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Yes." Loki seated himself on the table, his knees near her shoulder. Effa rolled onto her side, head propped up on her hand, elbow propped up on the seat of the couch—exactly as a Roman man would lie to eat.

"So?" she asked.

"Right. So..." Loki had spent the entire walk back fixated on what Basilia had said, and finally decided to test her theories. It was second nature for him, after all, to tell the truth without actually telling it. "I've found a way for you to repay me."

Effa sat up. "Well, that only took seventy years."

"I told you at the beginning I would want a favor one day."

"I have a vague memory of that." She was lying about the 'vague' part.

"Right, well..." He cleared his throat. "Effa, those of us who trade in favors know not to cash them in until we're sure about it."

"It's not like I owe you only one," Effa said.

"Well, you've done the dishes for all these years and helped with the library and... you haven't made me tear down a single wall of the walls you're tearing down for some reason in my home."

Effa was smirking at him. "So what is it?" she asked.

Loki just stared at her for a while. A minute, maybe more.

This was harder than he had expected. Why was this so hard?

After about thirty seconds, Effa sensed the struggle. “Loki?”

He got up and paced over to the fireplace. “I...” He took a breath, looking into the fire. “You asked me, a long time ago, why I chose to come when we sealed the rifts. Have you figured it out?”

“No.” She was still sitting on the couch. “I thought for a while it had something to do with Ea. But now... That’s not it.”

Loki nodded. “I chose to leave Earth—” This was hard. Why so hard? He had said the name a thousand times, whispered it to those on the fringes of society, whom he barely knew. It wasn’t like people didn’t know. “—because I was looking for someone. Someone I have to find, dead or alive.”

“Okay...?”

He heard Effa stand and turned to face her. “A woman,” he said.

Her face was unreadable, and it hadn’t been a second ago. “A woman,” she repeated.

He really wanted to stop. But he’d gone too far now. “Helatha. Her name was Helatha... is, Helatha. I honestly don’t know which tense to use.”

“Is that name Anunnaki,” Effa asked, and her eyes narrowed, “or Djinn?”

“Djinn.” He wanted to leave it there, but it was impossible. Effa stood, looking straight at him, arms crossed and face expressionless. What part shocked her more, he wondered, the Djinn, or the woman?

“Um...” Loki turned back to the fire. “She was one of the Djinn that got divided up into my father’s house after the whole catastrophe in Canaan—that’s how it happened, how we... met.”

“So, she was important to you?”

Loki stared into the fire, trying to conjure the image of a

face—any face, any image, however vague. Anything he could be certain was not his own imagination. “Very important.”

“You loved her.” The words came out blank like her expression.

Loki turned from the fire and made himself look at Effa. “The plan was to run away together. The together part didn’t work out.”

“Because...”

“Ea, yes.”

There was a pause, during which emotion melted back onto Effa’s face. The muscles all relaxed, even as her fingers dug into her crossed arms. “She’s . . . why you came here?”

Loki let out a conflicted sigh. He needed Effa to understand this part. “It’s more complicated than just her. I was so young, and, whatever happened to her, it wasn’t good, and it was my fault.”

He couldn’t tell how much of this was getting through, and, as he had so often before, he talked his way through the rising waves of panic. “The Djinn weren’t given a choice when we sealed the rifts. If she’s still alive, she’s here. If she has any family that still lives, they’re here.”

Effa sat, reaching for the scroll again. She hadn’t looked at him for a while. “And you want me to help you find her?”

“Nothing so direct,” Loki said. Effa was looking down, at a point in the scroll far from where she had been when he walked in. “It simply occurs to me that people might say something to a Vanir that they wouldn’t say to an Anunnaki. So, if you’re out anyway, and happen to hear something, or ask a certain question...”

“Of course.” Effa looked up and flashed a smile that he wanted very much to trust. “So, just to be clear, even if she is... no longer alive... you’re still interested in finding the family?”

“Djinn are all about family. It would be—not the same, of course, but... something near finding her.”

“Okay. I’ll ask a few questions when I’m out next.”

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“And I think I’m boring poor Scarlet to death.”

The sound of Irina’s voice, laughing, was like an electric shock to Scarlet’s spine. “No, I’m awake!” she sputtered, clawing at the back of the chair. “I... daydream...”

Irina’s almost black eyes narrowed at her. Scarlet recognized the look just a split second too late. “You were dreaming Loki’s memories again!”

“I... um...”

But Irina had turned on Luke. “And you knew!”

“I... no!” Luke sputtered, reverting to his native language. “*Nay naham-lee bih-pa’am bih-himesh! Vihamar-lee amar-lachah!*”

*She told me only five minutes ago, and she said she would tell you.* Scarlet blinked. How did she know what he was saying? She didn’t understand Djinn that well.

Irina tapped her heel on the ground a few times.

“How bad is this?” Scarlet asked, whispering.

“Bad,” Irina said. “But Loki’s already doing what can be done, so worrying does no good. Um...” She moved data-disks around on the basin rim. “Anyway, there’s this book I should have. It’s a *saypher-to’areem*—instruction manual, I think you’d say. It has all the emergency procedures written down, and it’s not here. Would someone like to go find it for me?”

“Why would Loki write down emergency procedures?” Asok asked, tapping the back of her data-disk with one finger, and gesturing at the database with another.

“I don’t know. I think he needed a new calligraphy project. The point is, I need it, so...”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Yeah, fine, I’ll go.”

“I’ll go with,” Scarlet volunteered, standing. “Where, the library?”

“Probably not,” Irina said. “My first guess is his room somewhere. If not, try the kitchen.”

Luke put his arm around Scarlet’s, and they were gone.

“Okay, so where is it?” Scarlet asked.

Loki’s room was more the size and shape of a meeting hall than a bedroom. It was a long rectangle, with fake wooden beams running across the ceiling, and another pillar every few feet to hold up the heavy, stone ceiling. The bed was just a mattress thrown on the floor with a few pillows and blankets, in front of a massive fireplace. The door was a few feet away, on the same wall. Across from the door were several large windows, overlooking an open space between other sections of the compound. There was also a dresser, and some other small pieces of furniture—a few chairs, little tables or desks. Not much.

Luke shrugged, pulling open a dresser drawer. “Somewhere, I guess.”

“Helpful,” Scarlet said. She found a stack of books on a table against one wall and started knocking them off each other one by one. “How important is this book, really?”

“Probably not very,” Luke said.

“Then why are we bothering?” Scarlet asked. She finished knocking all the books over, and her eyes caught on a safe, built into the wall above the table. It looked like something she had seen once in a hotel room back on Earth. She could see the outline of the door, and a keypad beside the large, round handle.

“Why are you staring at the wall?” Luke asked.

Was she staring? Scarlet blinked, saying, "It's a safe."

Luke came up behind her shoulder, frowning. "Really? Are you seeing things now?"

There was writing, the Djinn alphabet, scrawled deep across the safe door. "What does *Lo ra'ah* mean?"

"Essentially, Thou Shalt Not See," Luke said. "If that's written on this safe you're looking at, it's probably a spell."

"But I can see it."

"You're immune to spells."

"Right." Scarlet reached out and touched the door. It was a black sheet of metal that stood out against the red-brown wall. "You really don't see this?"

Luke set his hand next to hers. "I don't feel anything either. It's a good spell." He shrugged, then stepped away.

Scarlet could hear Luke continue to open drawers and search stacks of books. "I don't think the safety manual is important enough to hide in a hidden safe," he said when Scarlet didn't move.

Scarlet didn't know why she did it, exactly. She had been staring at the keypad, and suddenly, her fingers moved over it, punching in a twenty-digit sequence that no one could have guessed. Her other hand fastened on the bolt and turned. The door opened, revealing a black hole in the wall.

"Okay, I see that," Luke said, taking a few steps in Scarlet's direction. "What are you doing?"

"I just knew the code," Scarlet said. There was only one thing inside the safe, and she put her hand around it, drew it out.

Luke gasped. He staggered back, away from Scarlet and the safe, his eyes going wide as they locked on the thing in Scarlet's hand.

"I don't get it," Scarlet said.

In her hand, she held a dagger, about sixteen inches long, with cuneiform letters carved deep into the polished, obsidian



blade.

It was ancient, made of stone, not metal, chipped in several places. The handle was carved from some kind of animal bone, worn smooth by centuries of use. For one split second, Scarlet thought she saw herself standing on a precipice again, with that blond Aesir woman, who held a dagger—a dagger with letters carved into the blade. But that blade was metal, not stone...

“Scarlet, put that back!” Terror laced Luke’s voice, making the command sound desperate.

Scarlet frowned. “Why?”

And suddenly, Irina was in the room with them. She pushed her son behind her with one hand and reached the other out toward Scarlet.

“I don’t know how or why you got into that safe, *yallad*, but put that back.” Her voice was firm, but carried a hint of the terror in Luke’s.

Scarlet stood with the blade out in front of her, eyebrows raised in bewilderment at the Djinn and their senseless dread. “I don’t get it. There are weapons all over this place. We literally trip over them sometimes. Why lock up one little dagger?”

“Because that thing can kill us.” Irina took a breath to compose herself and tried to smile. “You can’t sense it like we can. The blade is spelled.”

“To kill you?”

“Not exactly.” Irina had relaxed a little, but Scarlet sensed it was a false calm, for her benefit. “Anything that happens to us with that thing—it’s as if it happened to a regular Human. Cut us with that blade, and we won’t heal any faster than a Human would. Stab us through the heart with it...”

“...and we die as surely as a Human would,” Luke finished.

“Now, please, put it away,” Irina said.

Scarlet felt like pointing out that she was just as dangerous as this weapon. Her bite could kill them too. But then,

Luke had first-hand experience of that fact, and she really didn't want to remind him about it. She put the blade away and locked the safe.

But, as the lock mechanism clicked shut, Scarlet could have sworn, that for one second, once again, she was somewhere else, somewhere in a deep, dark forest, standing at the edge of a cliff. On the precipice stood a woman with violent blond hair, and in her hand, a knife with writing on the blade. And there was blood, too, running down both her pale arms.

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"So why does Loki have one of these daggers?" Scarlet asked as she, Irina, and Luke walked back toward the comm hub.

"Back on Earth," Irina said, "there were a lot of spelled daggers. Ageless, Djinn, Fairies—we all figured out how to make them. Then, we made a lot of them. But part of the point of leaving Earth behind was to get away from all that stuff—the killing and the race wars. Ereshkigal's people searched everyone who came through the rifts, to make sure that all the spelled daggers stayed behind. The memory of how to make them was extracted, by the same people Loki's trying to get to help you, and all metal workers had to vow never to try to get that memory back."

"They just... promised?"

Luke snorted.

"Not exactly," Irina said. "They made a vow to the Ageless Council, which means they took the Styx potion."

"The flaming river in the Underworld?"

"Actually, the fire river in Hades was called Phlegethon. Styx was a poisonous river created by a woman named Hecate. Humans got the two mixed up at some point," Irina said. "Anyway, Hecate combined chemistry with spells to create a

potion. It bonds itself into a person's body and detects falsehood. If you make a vow while drinking the Styx potion, it will remain inside you forever, and detect any violation of that vow. It also binds the person making the vow to the person they're making the vow to, so that person knows immediately if you break the vow."

"Ageless man used to make their wives take it," Luke said.

"Okay, so, no making more spelled daggers," Scarlet said. "And... Loki has one because..."

"Oh, come on," Irina said. "Since when do the Ageless play by the same rules as everyone else? The Council saved one spelled dagger for every Anunnaki and Aesir who came through the rifts."

"So every Anunnaki or Aesir has one?"

"No, but all of them born on Earth do."

Scarlet shook her head. "So, really, the Council just wanted to make sure they were the only ones who had the power to kill."

Irina hesitated. "Yes, that was part of it. To be honest, I'm not sure it's fair, though. I think they did intend to leave all the daggers behind—at first. But then, they realized the full extent of what that would mean."

"Which is...?"

"Well... The truth is, death has to be an option. It's sad, but this world is a sad place sometimes. Ageless and Djinn can only die if someone kills us, and the daggers are the only way we can be killed, without a live dragon. I think the Council realized that they couldn't take the daggers out of the equation completely. It just wouldn't be practical. Allowing only the Ageless to keep a spelled dagger—well, that's where the racism comes in."

"Yup," Luke said.

Irina sent her son a look, a calming, don't stir up unnecessary trouble, look—the kind of look you would expect from

a mother, but that no one at school would ever expect from a Djinn. Maybe Irina was different. Or maybe the other races at school really didn't know the Djinn at all.

A door, opening into the comm hub, broke the glance between mother and son. Above the database still hovered the ghost form of that molten plane, with the volcanoes erupting in the distance. Harpies covered the support wall like fledglings, contemplating their first flight. Black wings stretched wide for balance, while others flitted from spot to spot, moving bricks and stones, carting barrels of cement around the site. They kept their wary eyes on the fire below, a rushing river of burning rock.

What would happen if one fell in? Scarlet watched the line of fire for a moment, staring through it into the darkness of a cave in the moonlight. And then, Basilia stood in front of her, with black wings spread wide, with fire—real, hot red flames—shooting straight toward her...

“Scar!”

They were Irina's fingers, snapping two inches in front of Scarlet's face. She jumped, blinked, and finally saw the rest of them staring at her with wide eyes. Irina's eyes were the widest, and the most knowing. She could read Scarlet's mind, after all.

No one said anything. No one had to. They went back to watching the Harpies and asking questions about the support wall. Scarlet tried to pay attention, but drifted into different thoughts, sinking into the too-comfortable chair. Irina asked if she had any questions—probably an attempt to help her stay awake. Scarlet forced herself not to look at the fiery image above and blurted out something else.

“Yeah, could you, maybe, tell me who Qingu is?”

Irina's face snapped toward Scarlet. “How do you know that name?”

“I heard it in... Someone said that Effa was...” Scarlet wasn't sure how to explain. So she stopped talking, waiting for

Irina to figure it out. Unfortunately, by then, the others had caught on to the fact that something significant was happening. Something, apparently, more significant than Scarlet had thought.

It wasn't just a random question anymore. Scarlet really did want to know who Qingu was. And she had a feeling she was not the only one.

"Immah?" Luke asked.

And then something else happened.

It was just a red flash, from the corner of one eye. And then all their heads had turned to the ghost screen above the basin, to see the support wall, crumbling.

## CHAPTER 6

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**T**wenty-four days after leaving his world, Loki stepped out of a rift onto a planet populated by younger Aesir. Like most planets, it had only one inhabited area, a commercial city, streets literally paved with gold, and white marble buildings that shone too bright to look at in the sun. The builders might have been trying to mimic images of heaven from Earth pop culture. Loki didn't know for sure. He only knew that he absolutely hated this place.

Fortunately, it was cloudy that day, with scattered rain showers that occasionally sent everyone indoors. Still, the golden streets swelled with Ageless, come to spend their endless wealth on shopping sprees and casinos and even worse things. Ageless children played in the shining fountains,

watched over by Elf and Fairy nannies.

At least it wasn't a school holiday. None of the children was over four years old and he didn't mind children that age. Loki didn't mind children at all, but Ageless teenagers were not children. They were miniature adults who believed what their parents taught them about the universe being theirs. They ran about without restraint, without rules, and with no consideration for others. On worlds like this, school holidays tended to turn into crime spree. But the perpetrators were Ageless, and therefore nothing could be done.

One step onto the first golden street, Loki took the hood of his black sweatshirt and put it up over his face. He often used this strategy on Ageless worlds. People would assume he was Djinn and steer clear. Even venders would leave him alone. In this way, under the disapproving glance of many a nanny, he made it through the streets with little difficulty and ended up in the doorway of a clothing shop.

He hesitated in the doorway, glancing up at the sign above it. In five languages it read: *Edris's Fine Dresses*. Above the sign and the shop loomed five more floors, surmounted by a magnificent terrace. It was all part of one palace, housing two Aesir and a host of claimed servants. Similar palaces loomed above all the other shops, some private homes, some apartments for less important families, some boarding houses for Ageless on vacation.

Loki took a deep breath, still hesitating in the doorway. This was, literally, the last place he wanted to be. He had intentionally left this extractor for last, because the thought of him working in Scarlet's mind was almost intolerable. Unfortunately, this was also the only extractor he knew for sure he could strong-arm into helping him. And since all the others had refused, here he stood. With another breath, Loki pushed open the door to *Edris's Fine Dresses*.

Not that Edris the Aesir had anything to do with the day-

to-day workings of her dress shop. She was too old, too rich, and too well married to do anything that resembled working for a living. But when she got bored in her palace, she would come down to disorganize whatever work the shop girls had managed to get done, or amuse herself by firing and replacing the entire staff.

As Loki came in, one of the shop girls walked toward him, chatting with a customer on her way out the door. Another girl stood in the corner putting ridiculously elaborate dresses on mannequins. Edris herself stood near the door, at a jewelry case, moving things around for no apparent reason.

The shop girls and the customer both gasped when they saw a Djinn—or so they thought—enter this high-end Aesir establishment. Edris turned from the case, and Loki drew back his hood.

Edris froze in place. She wore skintight gold jeans, a red blouse with one sleeve, and an abundant amount of eye makeup. The makeup did, Loki had to admit, make her dull gray eyes look less dull. She stared straight at Loki for ten seconds, then said, “We’re closed,” turned, and marched for the checkout counter, twelve feet further into the shop.

The customer fled. The one shop girl backed into a corner with the other.

“Closed? Since when?” Loki asked, following Edris.

“Since you got into town. I just didn’t know it yet.” She got behind the counter and started messing with the cash register.

“Come on, Edris,” Loki said. “What happened to your hospitality?”

“It blew up. Along with my house, the last time you were in it.”

“Oh...” Loki winced. “Right...”

Edris opened the cash drawer, only to slam it shut again.

“I’m not looking for trouble,” Loki said.

“You’re never looking for trouble, Loki! You just find it.



And you drag everyone in your path straight into the storm. Go away.”

“I’m looking for Devfon,” Loki said.

“Yes, of course you are. Like I said, we’re closed. You two can go make trouble carousing somewhere other than my shop!”

“Okay, look.” Loki put his elbows on the counter and leaned toward her. “Tell me where your husband is if you know, or give me the name of his latest friend...”

“You do mean whore, right?” Edris said.

“...and I’ll ask her. If you want me out of your shop, this is the quickest way,” Loki said.

Edris swore at him, reached under the counter, and drew out a slip of paper and a pen. “I haven’t seen my husband in three days,” she said, scribbling on the paper. “Which means he’s here.” She handed the paper over. “It’s a brothel. Mostly Fairies. Some Vanir. They’re your favorite, right? Have fun.” She marched out from behind the counter and yelled something at the shop girls in an Elf language.

“Thanks, Edris!” Loki called from the door.

“Go away!” she shouted, marched over, and slammed the door behind him.

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For a while, the space of a heartbeat suspended beyond time, the Leviathan and the Djinn stood in Loki’s comm hub, staring at the screen above the database.

Outside, the support wall crumbled, brick by brick. Cement buckets tipped over, their contents folded into the lava which writhed to meet them. Miles away, they heard the mountain rumble, sending shock waves through the unburnt stones. It took a second to realize they weren’t hearing it

through the silent screen, but through the air around them—an explosion strong enough to rip cracks into the stone, like a hammer striking ice.

And the Harpies—Black wings turned over feathered heads, clawed feet grappling at the falling stones of the support wall. The mountain belched out smoke as black as the Harpies' wings, and half a second later, the first of the flying debris hit ground—boulders on fire, launched from the volcano in its torrential rage. A hundred bodies plunged in a twisted mass into the lava river.

A hundred more took flight, but the flying rocks struck half of these down too.

Scarlet's ears were ringing. In the distance, she could hear Irina, speaking quickly to someone with a high-pitched voice—someone who wasn't in the room with them. Then the pitch of the other voice changed, and the language did too—Djinn. She was speaking to a Djinn man now.

Some of the Harpies tried to claw their way out of the river. Others swooped on burning wings, down toward fire, reaching for the hands caught below. Scarlet noticed that Luke was standing beside her now, holding hands with Asok, that Kurt had risen to his feet on top of the seat of his chair, that the male voice had stopped talking.

Irina moved. She grabbed for the jean jacket that lay on a nearby chair, put it on, and pulled her hair into a tight bun, all in the space of two heartbeats. "I'm going out," she said, and for once *out* really did mean outside.

Asok's face snapped toward her. "What?"

"So's your father," Irina said. "And yours, Luke. Our healers and warriors—we have to help."

More Harpies fell into the river with each passing second. The volcano did not explode again, but it had yet to stop erupting. Scarlet stared at it and thought for one moment that she saw Basilia. The Harpy queen stood with her back to Scarlet,

wings outstretched as if to block the fire that came straight at her.

Where was Basilia now?

For the first time, Scarlet realized there was this gaping hole in her timeline. Crae was in charge of the Harpies. Crae, Basilia's heir.

Where was Basilia? Where was Loki's friend?

"No, *Imma*, take us with you!" Luke said, pulling Scarlet from the vision of things long past.

"Yes," Scarlet said. "Take us. Me at least." They were Luke's words, but she felt them coming from somewhere else, some place deep inside her which stared into the fire and never wanted to look away.

Irina wavered, hanging on the line between reality and the nothingness through which her kind could teleport. Then, as if compelled, she held out a hand. "Kurt," she said. "One of my people will be here in a minute or two. Help him." Her hand closed around her son's as she spoke—Luke, who was still holding Asok's hand. Scarlet grabbed on with them.

The universe vanished into crushing oblivion, exploding a moment later into a concussion of heat and noise. Scarlet took a breath and felt her lungs collapse in on themselves. Sulfur rushed in instead of air, closing her throat around toxic gas.

She was on her knees, eyes burning through the smoke with the ground shaking beneath her, when she heard Asok, choking and sputtering like someone being held underwater. From behind the water in her own eyes, Scarlet saw Irina, dropping Luke, moving over to Asok, grabbing her by the throat.

"*Ruach tov*," she said, and the burning air swelled around her, coiling between aunt and niece. The power of magic wound into a weapon—a weapon called on to heal.

Asok breathed in, deep, healing breaths.

A yard away, Luke crawled up onto his knees, turning to

face Scarlet, already breathing. It was then that Scarlet realized she was breathing too, in and out, like normal. The sulfur still burned, but it wasn't torment. It felt—not good, but right somehow. She sat up, feeling the poison as it surged into her lungs, like a fish, relearning how to breathe underwater.

They lay on a field of rock, Loki's compound behind them, and the fire river directly ahead. It was weird, seeing the building from outside, a meandering, stone beast twisting its way over the rocky landscape, farther than even immortal eyes could see.

"How long will this spell last?" Luke asked his mother.

"A few hours. I'm sorry, Scarlet," Irina said, breathless, looking at the Leviathan with large brown eyes. "I can't do anything for you. I can send you back if the poison's too much."

Scarlet realized she was clutching her throat, and that doing so probably gave the wrong impression. "No, I'm fine," she said. Her voice was rough, muted. There were scales in her throat, and the acid of Loki's world rubbed against them. "Really, it feels... not bad..."

Irina looked at her, half daze, half confusion, but before either could say more, the ground shook, harder than the small and consistent tremors. Lava spewed from the top of the volcano a hundred feet higher up into the black sky. Scarlet planted her feet to ride out the quake as the Djinn grabbed each other for support.

"All right, the support wall is that way," Irina said, shouting as the quake subsided. She pointed upriver, against the flow of lava. "I'm headed there. You three follow the river downstream. Find any Harpies that may have been dragged this far. Your job is to locate and transport them back. If you can't reach them, call for one of us. And, *Yalladin*..."

"Teleport ourselves back if things get too rough. Yeah, *Immah*, we know," Luke assured her.

Irina put her hand on the side of his face. "*Tav yallad*," she

said. *You're a good boy.* Scarlet did not have a lot of time to wonder how she could understand those words. Irina touched her forehead to her son's for just one second before vanishing. She reappeared five hundred yards away, upstream, skirting the edge of the fire river.

Scarlet, Luke, and Asok glanced at each other, then headed in the opposite direction.

The sulfur only grew heavier, even though they were walking away from the mountain. Scarlet could hear the others struggling to breathe, despite Irina's spells. How long could they last out here? she wondered. A few hours was not exactly a precise measurement. How long before they had to teleport back to the safety of the compound? And would she remain behind, even if they left her alone in the middle of fire, with no easy way out?

Unbidden and unwanted, the fire cocoon from her nightmare rose to engulf her—an eternal trap made for her by those who should have loved her most...

Her foot slipped, she gasped, and felt Luke's hand on her shoulder, pulling her back. Beneath her raged the fire, rock that flowed like water, eating away at the rock under her very feet. In her mind, she saw a road, lit by moonlight, drenched in the winter cold, before the extreme heat of Loki's planet flooded in again.

"What is going on with you?" Luke asked. He hadn't let go of her shoulder yet and was screaming in her ear.

"Let go of me," Scarlet said.

"Luke!" Asok called.

They turned to see Asok scramble over the jagged rocks a few yards away. The volcano belched once more, so that Luke and Scarlet had to grab onto each other to keep from tipping over into the river.

Several feet beyond Asok, a dark figure crawled across the broken stones. One black wing dragged limp on the ground

next to her. The other was gone, burnt away to a stump. Scarlet rushed forward, Luke at her heels.

“Why isn’t she healing?” Scarlet asked.

“She is. She’d be dead if she weren’t,” Luke said. “Repairing the wings just isn’t important right now.”

Asok had already dropped to her knees beside the mutilated thing. Scarlet was almost there when she caught sight of the Harpy’s legs. Bile rose in her throat, and she gagged, forcing it back down into her stomach.

Any clothes the Harpy had worn were burnt away, leaving strips of charred flesh and muscle. The meat clung in useless chunks to exposed and blackened bones, and Scarlet could see her shoulder blade, the exposed bone, stripping the surrounding flesh with every movement of his battered arms. The Harpy was crawling out of the river. She had been in the river.

The fire cage closed around Scarlet’s mind again. She doubled over onto her knees, using all her energy to keep from throwing up. Through the vision of fire and the ringing in her head, she saw Asok grab the Harpy.

Black fingers clawed up, clutching Asok’s sweatshirt. Through a burnt throat, the Harpy rasped, “Save him...” Then both she and Asok had vanished, and Scarlet found herself somewhere else entirely.

For a moment, she was in a cave, lit by moonlight, with the snarling of some horrible creature ringing in her ears. Then, another place, Basilia stood with her back to Scarlet, in the middle of a green field. The sun above had almost finished setting, staining the sky, burnt orange against the dark trees that hemmed them in.

Basilia stood, a hundred yards away from Scarlet, in her Human form, but with black wings stretched wide to either side. And a second later, there was fire—bright, hot flame, coming from in front of the Harpy queen, hidden by the enormous span of her black wings. The flame engulfed her. The

black feathers melted, and the smell of burning flesh followed the stench of burning hair. Scarlet heard herself scream—only it was his voice, calling out for his friend.

And then Scarlet lay on a floor, on a red carpet that looked like velvet. There were pews on either side, and above her loomed the high arches needed to support the stained glass windows. She rolled onto her back and felt the ground shake, with a hand crushing her arm...

“Scarlet wake up!” Luke was angry as he shouted in her face. Scarlet blinked, as his face and Loki’s miserable planet came back into focus around her. She crawled onto her hands and knees, then onto her feet.

Asok was gone. So was the Harpy. “They...?”

“Teleported,” Luke said. His eyes were on the river of molten rock, running a yard from where they stood. “What is wrong with you? You passed out again. I’ll take you back if that happens again!”

Scarlet changed the subject. “What was she saying? About helping him?”

“I think someone else is in the river.” Luke moved, hopping over and around boulders, almost slipping on pebbles.

“Still?” Scarlet asked, going after him.

“I don’t know.”

They went on, looking for any sign of life, in the river or on the banks. The mountain belched fire, and the river only grew higher, wider, faster. Luke slid on dirt down a sharp incline, as they started down a hill. Scarlet leaped over it, landing on her feet just ahead of Luke and a bit too close to the bank for comfort.

Her eyes passed over Loki’s compound, on her right. Huge marble pillars stood embedded in the ground less than twenty feet away, holding up the floor of the Harpies’ section. It was as absurd from the outside as from the inside, winding and bulging like a python over the uneven ground.

Then Scarlet's hand lashed out, grabbing Luke hard enough to hurt him. There, in the center of that lava flow, stood a giant boulder, unburnt by the fire. And to the boulder, clung a man.

He was half-man, half-bird. His hands were a mass of talons, one set dug into the boulder, holding fast. The other clawed at it, trying to get a second grip. Most of his body was submerged, including half of one shoulder. The wing attached just above that shoulder blade had been stripped of feathers, bone still hanging from it, tossed around on the surface of the watery fire, useless.

The other wing flapped in the air, beating hard enough to keep his head above the lava. It faltered every few seconds, sheer exhaustion, and his exposed back would slip further down into the river. He would pull himself up again, taking longer to do it every time, exposing deep tissue burns in his skin. The burns would scab over and heal within seconds, but that too took longer every time.

*"El yeh'on!"* Luke said. *God help!* A Djinn cry of dismay or pain or fear. His breath brushed the hair around Scarlet's left ear.

"Can that kill him?" Scarlet asked. She felt fire crawling up inside her own skin with a sickening thought—What does his lower body look like right now?

"If it gets to his heart..." Luke said. "But his body won't let that happen, not for a long, long time."

Protect the Heart. Scarlet's own body knew the power of that biological mandate. That organ was a shape-shifter's one weakness, and therefore, a shape-shifter's body would do anything, sacrifice anything, force itself to endure anything, just to keep its heart beating.

"I know him." Luke stared at the boulder, and the river, and the man as if all of them had melted from a nightmare into the living world. "He's just a kid. He left school a year before



you showed up.”

“Well teleport him out!” Scarlet said. She remembered the Djinn from school, how cruel they had always seemed. The Harpy wasn’t one of them, after all, just another student, another species, whose food could be turned into spiders for the fun of it.

Luke’s hand balled into a fist. “I can’t. I’d have to touch him.”

Scarlet smelled blood, and a second later realized that one of Luke’s nails had cut through the skin on his palm.

“So teleport to the rock and pull him up!”

“It’s too small. I can’t hit a target that small!”

“Your mother?” she asked. “The other adult Djinn?”

“I’m calling them!” Luke’s eyes were turning red, and she could both smell and hear the spike in his blood pressure. She remembered the Luke she had first met, the enemy, sitting with all the other Djinn at their table in the dark corner, hoods over their tattooed faces, the bully picking on her brother. The boy standing beside her looked nothing like the boy she had fought that day.

“Well are they coming?” Scarlet asked.

“Shut up, Scarlet! I don’t know when they’ll get here!” Luke let out a tirade of words in Djinn that ended with the word *Immah*.

In the river, the Harpy’s wing faltered again. He slipped, farther down than ever before, half his neck submerged in the fire. Several feathers from his one good wing brushed the surface of the lava. They melted on contact, and cinders ran up his wing.

The Harpy let out a gargled shriek. Panic gave him enough energy to beat the air and raise himself a few inches out of the lava with one wing. The damaged wing continued to flap, and the melted feathers did not grow back. Luke took a staggering step back from the edge of the river.

Scarlet went the opposite direction, stepping up to the very edge until her toes hung over it. The Harpy's shriek, the pure hopelessness of it, stabbed into her chest and left behind a ridiculous thought.

"How far is that, do you think?" she asked.

"A hundred yards, maybe..." Luke said. Then his head snapped toward her. "Wait, why?"

Scarlet stared at the lake for one more second. Her throat closed around itself, as her heart stopped beating, then started to race. Heat spread through her, carried by the adrenaline her cells released. She took a breath of the air in which she had been born, in the fire of volcanos just like these, felt the sulfur burn all the way into her lungs, then grabbed her jacket first and ripped it off, then her boots, to the renewed sting of sulfur against exposed skin.

"What are you doing?" Luke asked.

Scales had already grown through her skin, spreading up her legs, across her back and stomach, closing around her chest.

"Get your mother here," she said. "She'll probably have to teleport us both out now."

"You're crazy! I won't let you do this!" Luke said, reaching for her.

Scarlet shook him off. "I'm not crazy. I can get him up onto that rock."

Red scales, like glass, covered her entire body, following a million, million tiny cuts through her skin. Black claws pushed her fingernails out of their beds, and her fangs descended because they always did at times like this. The scales started up her neck, and in anticipation, her hair fell out, a red cloud blown away in the violent wind from the volcanoes. She turned to Luke, encased in a diamond shell, as the scales did something they had never done before—they grew over her face.

"I can do this," she told him.

He hesitated for a second too long. A second later he would leap forward, shouting for her to stop and attempting to grab her back from the edge. But in that second, before he moved, Scarlet jumped.

Once, long ago, before her father left, he had taken her to the beach. She suspected, even then, that her mother had somehow forced him into it. But she didn't care why he had done it. It was just about the only memory she had of her father being a father.

It was the very end of spring, and they were almost alone on the beach because the water was still so cold. Little Scarlet ran right up to the water, stuck her toe in, and ran screaming back to her father. As she tugged on his arm and whimpered about the cold, he looked up from his cell phone long enough to tell her something she would remember for the rest of her life.

"There's nothing for it, kiddo," he said. "Don't try wading in. You just have to jump."

She had listened to him, of course. All little girls think their fathers have the magic answer for everything. She ran straight to the end of the pier and jumped. For a second, as the water closed around her, she felt betrayed and certain she would die. Then she ended up playing in the water for hours. She also ended up with a cold for the next week, but her child-brain never put those two things together.

Once again, in the second that Luke hesitated, Scarlet followed what had become a guiding principle in her life—the only advice her father had ever given her.

She just jumped.

There was a moment of heat so intense that her organs liquified inside her, a moment in which she knew this pain was the only thing that ever had existed and the only thing that ever would exist. Every story she had ever heard about hellfire came to life around her and was in no way a *spiritual* reality.

Then her feet hit solid rock, or melting rock, or some form of rock that wasn't yet part of the river. She felt the stream moving around her and dug her feet in, hanging there for an eternity inside the crashing torrent of fire.

The pain never lessened, but it did give way, slowly, to the animal self. The instinct of self-preservation broke out against the pain, against the fear. It forced her rational mind to come back from the hellfire of her nightmares, to think, to figure out what came next.

She felt herself healing, even as the heat kept destroying, tearing, melting. Not everything healed. Her stomach was gone, her kidneys, liver, intestines, and all the lower organs too. They formed a melted puddle inside her, crushed by the pressure of the heat.

But she wasn't burning. That thought came with such force that her eyes snapped open. At the same moment, she realized how stupid that action was, and braced herself for more excruciating agony. That agony never came. And she could see. Something was protecting her eyes.

There was nothing to see, though. Just the rush of red and yellow, rolling over and inside itself. Even holding her hands before her face, she could not see them.

*Move.*

The thought came from somewhere else, and she obeyed it. Her body sacrificed organs to keep her muscles intact as she pushed off from the melting ground. But her heart was beating. Her brain was working. She pushed up through the surface and sucked in air. Her lungs were working.

Above, in the air and visible again, her scales sparkled red. The fire did not melt them. It could not get through them. Her clothes were long gone, but diamond kept the fire away.

She had heard a story once, that ancient people used to think salamanders lived in volcanoes, inside the magma. Might the Leviathan have something to do with that legend too?

The force of the stream hit her as her feet left the bottom. She lost her balance and threw out an arm, then the other, and tried to kick. But it was not like swimming in water. More like wading through mud. The lava sucked her in and tried to drag her downstream all at the same time.

She fell beneath the surface again, dug her feet into the ground beneath the fire, and pushed forward. Or, she hoped it was forward. Prayed it was forward. The heat crushed her organs like a giant hand kneading back and forth. Her vision cut out. She felt pressure in her head and realized her brain had slid onto the collateral damage list. As far as instinctual healing abilities were concerned, muscle and heart took precedence over higher reasoning. Before her frontal lobe liquified, she pushed off again and surfaced.

The damage did not immediately repair itself. Heart and muscle were still priorities. But it didn't get worse either. For a moment she thrashed wildly, with no idea where she was, or why or how. Slowly, healing came. Her vision returned, and she saw the rock, maybe a yard in front of her, and the Harpy clinging to it. That triggered a memory, why she was here, what she had to do.

So close, Scarlet lashed out. Her scales glittered as lava rolled off them, like rubies cast underwater. Her huge, reptilian claws missed the rock by half an inch and swiped against the Harpy's one good arm instead. He probably didn't even notice the pain, but it was yet another thing his exhausted body had to repair. Scarlet screamed, not willingly, but forced to by anger and pain and annoyance. She kicked furiously with both legs and lashed out again.

Three of five claws dug into the rock. Chips flew out of it, and the claws held fast, embedded two inches deep. For a terrifying second, exhaustion made her hang, like the Harpy, except without a thrashing wing. Then she felt that wing bone hit her head. A black sheet covered her, and a second later,

she smelled rotting rubber—melting feathers.

He was falling.

Scarlet lashed out with her other hand. Another set of claws dug into the rock, higher than the first. With a half groan, half scream, she pulled her first three claws loose, accompanied by the chorus of cracking rock and shrieking chalkboards. She dug all five claws on that hand even higher up on the rock.

The putrid stench of burnt rubber grew stronger. The Harpy screeched, as only a bird could, with his free set of talons scraping at the giant rock.

Scarlet smashed one hand, then the other into the top of the rock. Her vision faded in and out between blurry and black. Her body had begun to sacrifice muscle now, but she willed her arms and legs to stay intact, just a little longer. She arched her back, got the claws on her feet into the stone, and heaved.

On top of the rock, the world spun. The rock was pockmarked and dented, and barely big enough for two people. Her body rushed to make repairs, and still, those repairs came slowly enough that she could feel liquid condensing back into organ, muscle knitting back together, one fiber at a time. Her brain took longer to clear than she wanted, and when it did, the realization that she still had more to do, brought tears to her eyes.

The Harpy's wing flapped against her leg. The bottom feathers were all burnt away now, and he no longer managed to gain altitude. Scarlet forced the tears back, forced her aching muscles forward, peered over the edge, over the top of his head.

His claws held fast, but he could no longer pull his neck out of the lava. When he noticed her, she did not know. But he looked up now with huge bird eyes, no whites, irises so brown they made the entire eye look solid black. His tilted head exposed his throat to her view. It was bright red, and par-

tially burnt through, so she could see pieces of the esophagus, and the hyoid bone.

Scarlet reached out. The world went black, but her hands closed around the Harpy's free arm. She took hold of his elbow, groping around for his other arm. He had enough brainpower left to tear his own talons out of the rock, and she caught that hand just before it fell.

Then she heaved. Her vision did not return. Her muscles stung and screamed and started to snap. The Harpy's legs were too damaged to be any help. Her heartbeat a dangerous lack of rhythm, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes skipping beats. But Scarlet cast all of this into the back corner of what was left of her mind. She allowed herself only one thought: *Pull*.

*Pull.*

*Pull.*

A part of her truly believed it was the last thought she would ever have.

---

The brothel, one of many in this city, was conveniently located at a crossing of major streets. It stood to the proud height of six stories, with bright signs pointing the way in. Loki paused, for a long time, on the corner across the street, just staring, watching the men sauntering in and out like a parade of colorful, drunken fish. Places like this made his skin crawl. They always had.

The rain began to fall in earnest as if to remind him of his duty. For Scarlet's sake, he crossed the street.

At the golden door, engraved with vines and erotic images, he reluctantly pushed the hood back from his head and stared straight into the eyes of a carved, topless nymph. She was all

gold, and yet somehow as explicit as a photograph. He fought the urge to pull the hood over his face again, to fade under the mask of a Djinn. But a place like this could afford to be picky about its clientele. Only an Ageless would get in.

Sure enough, behind those vacant, golden eyes, the bouncer saw Loki on the sidewalk and unlocked the door. Inside, music throbbed, resonating through the floor and the walls, leaving no corner undisturbed. It was tasteful music, pleasant, soft. This was no back-alley brothel.

Next, heavy doses of perfume and incense assaulted the sense of smell. This was simple magic, what Human scientists would call chemistry, potions in airborne form to play with patrons' minds and make them stay longer, spend more money.

Color and shadow, flame and curtain played against each other to entrap the one who entered. One large room was made to feel like many small ones, begging the visitor to come ever further in, to find out what might lie behind each curtain.

Keeping his eyes straight ahead, Loki passed through one curtain after the next, until he came to the bar.

The bartender, an almost topless Fairy, came immediately to his aid. "Drink?" she asked.

"I'm here, right?" he said.

"What'll it be?"

He told her, she poured, and he drank. "Do another," he said.

She poured a second glass, moving like the leaves of a willow tree. "Just here to drink?" she asked. Blue paint surrounded her blue eyes. Without it, she would be quite pretty. With it, her beauty had an agenda. She pushed the glass toward him, and leaned on her forearms, across the bar. "Or looking for company?"

"Company, of course," Loki said. He kept eye contact with her, gulped the drink, and set an empty glass down on the



counter with a click. “Specifically, a man named Devfon. Have you seen him?”

She understood what he wanted. In fact, he got the sense that she had rarely been confused by anything in her life. Still, not straightening up from the bar, she said, “We don’t cater to men looking for men. All girls here.”

Loki kept his voice neutral. “His wife says he’s here.”

The bartender raised an eyebrow and stood up. She reached for the bottle and refilled his glass without being asked. “Devfon the Extractor? He went upstairs ages ago.” She pushed the glass toward Loki, but kept her hand around it. “Why? You have some memories you don’t want?”

“Oh, lifetimes of them,” Loki said. He touched the edge of the glass to pry it from her loose grip. “But this one isn’t for me.”

“For her then?” The bartender’s fingers caught the glass just before he pried it free. She was in his mind, or trying to be. Fairies. There was a reason they made such excellent servants, and spies, and prostitutes.

Loki kept eye contact. It was the safest move. “Her?”

“This woman in your head,” the Fairy said. “You keep her there to block us out.”

“And that amuses you?”

She shrugged, leaning again across the counter. “Faithfulness doesn’t enter this place often.”

“Who says it’s faithfulness?” he asked. “And no.” He tugged the drink away. “It’s not for her. What room did you say the extractor was in?”

She smiled. “What will you give me for telling you?”

“Give you?”

“Here’s how I see it,” she said. “You could go up and look for him. Or you could ask someone else. Or I could just tell you, and save you, probably, quite a bit of time.”

“I’ll pay for four drinks,” Loki said.

“Yes, you will.” She took the glass from his hand and drank it in one gulp, then poured another. “But you will also tell me something true.”

“I will?”

She drank half of the fourth glass and looked at him. “Your mind is harder to get into than most. Actually, than all—at least that I’ve encountered before.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“People, the men who come in here, they never have a true word to say. Sometimes I wonder if they’re just stupid, to think I really might believe them.”

“I have learned,” Loki said, “to count on the stupidity of the male race.”

“I think you could deceive me, and that is rare.”

“I could deceive you if I wanted,” Loki said, then seized her hand. Her skin was soft, but the bones beneath were jagged, thin like talons, and tiny like a child’s. Loki leaned in close and said, “There is a girl—and by that, I mean just that, a *child*—someone in my care. Her mind is fracturing, and beyond being her guardian, it is my fault. And that is why I seek the extractor. Am I lying?”

The Fairy held his eyes for several seconds. “Third floor,” she said at last. “Second room on the right.”

“Thank you.” Loki let her hand go, slipped some money across the counter for the drinks, then turned to find the stairs.

“I was wrong,” the Fairy said, and he couldn’t help but turn back. She looked not at him, but down, into the half-full glass. “It’s not just one. There are three women in your head, one a mission, one a mother, and one...” She ran her finger around the lip of the glass. “Like I said. Faithfulness does not enter this place often.”

“What’s your name?” Loki asked.

There were several answers she could have given. He felt them all slide past her mind in the half-second that followed

his question. But she chose the one least used, the one with greatest meaning.

“Darrel,” she said. “The daughter of no one. And I know your names already. Go save your girl, son of Ea.”



Two seconds after Scarlet jumped into the fire river, Luke was standing on the bank. Just standing. He couldn’t move, not even to lower the arm he had reached out for her

And then, at the end of those two seconds, two things happened. First, he gasped in relief as a shining, red diamond head broke through the lava about twenty yards away. And then, Asok re-materialized at his side.

“Well, the Harpy should be fine. Have you two found...”

Asok stopped talking with a sharp intake of breath. She grabbed her cousin’s arm and shrieked, “*Ma asah?*” What is she doing?

“I couldn’t stop her,” Luke said. Scarlet’s head sunk beneath the lava again, and Asok let out a shriek.

“*Afa Immee?*” Luke asked, in case Asok had perhaps seen his mother or any other Djinn. “We have to get her out!”

Then Asok jumped, pointing. The diamond crusted head broke above the lava again, a few feet from the giant boulder. “She’s doing it!” Asok said. The relief was no stronger than shock in her voice.

“Scarlet, come on!” Luke said.

Asok hopped, her hand crushing Luke’s arm as the dragon’s claws dug into the rock.

“Come on, Scar!” Luke said.

Steady, the dragon climbed. Her scaled body emerged, undamaged, and glittering under the lava that showered from it.

"She's out! She's out!" Asok said, jumping half a foot in the air with each word.

Then Scarlet slid toward the river, and the cousins found themselves on the very edge of the bank, leaning forward with their hands crushing each other. But Scarlet righted herself, and crawled forward, grabbed the Harpy by both arms, and heaved him up.

"Yes!" Asok stopped jumping, leaning half her weight against her cousin's shoulder. "I don't believe it!"

"Whoa! Scar!" Luke said.

On the rock, Scarlet had begun to slide, again. It was hard to see beneath the scales, but her body had gone limp. Her legs went first, slipping over the edge of the rock.

Luke almost took another step forward. Asok caught him before he could go over the edge.

"Teleport?" she asked.

"Do you think you can hit that target?"

"No! But we have to do something!"

"We'd just knock them both off the rock and then end up in the lava with them! If we made it, to begin with!"

"Shut up!" Asok said.

And then, as Scarlet slid within inches of the lava river, two black wings swept into the air above her.

The Harpy's legs were a mass of mutilated flesh barely clinging to charred bone. His back was not much better. But his shoulders had healed, and his wings, all feathers intact, beat against the poison air. One arm, battered and charred down to bone, lashed out, seized the dragon around her waist, with the wings lifting them both from the rock.

Asok's hand crushed Luke's arm. The black wings faltered twice, and Scarlet's left foot dragged through the lava for most of the flight, but within ten seconds, they were both over land again.

The Harpy's wings gave out as soon as they were safely

beyond the river. He crashed, deadweight straight down, Scarlet beneath him, with a bone-shattering thud. Luke and Asok ran to them.

Luke rolled the Harpy away from Scarlet, struggling to ignore the smell of burnt flesh and the feel of protruding bones. He summoned one thought to mind, the image given to him by his mother along with her breathing spells: The Harpy's gathering chamber, inside Loki's complex.

He had never been there, but his mother had given him the image along with her breathing spells. He pulled to mind every detail, huge red pillars that supported a ceiling, three hundred feet off the ground, massive, floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides, rafters, crisscrossing the open space above his head—seating, not support. He concentrated, pushing all other thoughts out of his mind, and teleported.

A second later, he came back to the world in a room exactly like his mother's mental image, windows on three sides, stretched the entire three hundred feet between the ceiling with rafters crisscrossing the open space above his head.

As seemed usual, Harpies filled the room, but not flying Harpies. Not Harpies carefully perched on the crisscrossing rafters. Not Harpies discussing the latest business of the clan. But Harpies spread and sprawled across the floor. Harpies groaning and crying and screaming. Harpies so damaged they were barely healing anymore. And a few uninjured Harpies passing around flanks of raw meat, to help them heal faster. Raw meat, freshly killed someone had told Luke once, was for Harpies what blood was for dragons. Unfortunately, the Harpies had to be strong enough to chew for it to help.

Luke found himself staring at the writhing mass. There were at least four hundred of them, most of the males in the clan, and many women. They had all fallen into the river, everyone who had gone outside to repair the bank, and probably many who had gone out to rescue them too. It was a catastro-

phe that even his mother's caution could not have foreseen. No wonder it had taken her so long to answer his call for help.

Asok appeared, twenty yards away, only a split second after Luke arrived, Scarlet in her arms. As soon as she did, a tremble ran down Scarlet's body. The scales peeled off of her skin, piling around her and Asok's knees like a horde of rubies. Within seconds, they decayed, Seconds later, they were dust.

One of the uninjured Harpies rushed over, wrapped Scarlet in one of their backless robes, then turned to Luke, and the Harpy boy.

Without a word, the uninjured man dropped another robe over the Harpy body, glanced at his face, and froze, then looked at Luke with the skepticism one might give a helpful snake. "Do you know who this is?" he asked.

"Um... I saw him at school, but I don't remember..."

The sharp look in the Harpy's eyes caught Luke off guard. He wasn't sure if he should be concerned, or proud, or maybe teleport to safety right then, while he still had the chance.

Before he could think of anything to do, or even more words to say, two dozen Djinn appeared in the room, teleporting themselves and three dozen Harpies.

"*Immah!*" Luke called, jumping to his feet. Irina turned, and relief broke through her exhausted face as she started toward her son.

"Hallis!" someone screamed, high-pitched, above the range of a Human voice. A Harpy woman came crashing from the other side of the room. Her robe, shorter than normal and burnt at the hem billowed out behind her, along with her brown hair. She jumped over the healing bodies as if they weren't there, running straight at Luke and shouting again, "Hallis! *Paida! Paida!*"

Luke's knowledge of the Harpy language was almost as pathetic as Scarlet's understanding of Djinn, but he did know that word: *Paida*. *Child*. The Harpy woman dropped onto her

knees, sliding several feet across the marble floor, and scooping the Harpy boy into her arms. Tears streamed down her pretty, pointed face as she cradled him and continued to shout his name.

It was Crae.

Luke had never seen her acting anything other than pompous and regal and didn't recognize her, until he saw her husband, making his own way between bodies. He dropped to his knees beside Crae, the boy now cradled between them.


Luke felt a hand slide into his and realized that Asok stood beside him. At his feet, Crae sobbed into her son's hair, leading into her husband for support as one of her hands clawed out, and grasped Luke's leg.

"Thank you." She sobbed, and repeated, "Thank you."

"It wasn't us, it was Scarlet," Luke said. He wasn't sure if she heard him, but his mother did, following his gaze to the red-haired dragon. She still lay on the floor, breathing steadily, unburnt. As if nothing had even happened to her.

## CHAPTER 7

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ave a seat, Devfon,” Loki said. He had seated himself on a stuffed chair, leaned all the way back, with his elbows placed on the chair arms and his fingertips pressed together over his lap. Two Elf girls were still getting dressed in one corner, and Devfon the extractor stood by the end of the bed, glaring at Loki.

“You know,” he said, “you could find your own room.”

“Have a seat, Devfon,” Loki repeated.

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t like prostitutes.”

“I have no problem with prostitutes,” Loki said. “Their profession only exists because of men like you. Just close the door behind you, ladies.”

The Elves went, closing the door. Loki sat perfectly still,



and Devfon rolled his eyes. A pitcher of wine sat on a stand by the bed, and he walked over to it, poured himself a glass.

“What do you want, trickster?” he asked.

The thin glass shattered before Devfon could drink from it. Red wine splattered everywhere, staining the sheets, floor, and Devfon’s shirt. “Loki!” he bellowed.

“I want you sober, for starters,” Loki said, not moving a muscle.

“So you brake the club’s property?” Devfon asked.

“I’ll pay for it. Sit down.”

Devfon sighed and sat on the end of the bed. “I’m not interested.”

“Hear me out.”

“Last time I helped you...”

“I know, I know, your house blew up. That was a long time ago.”

“What? No. That was the last time you came for a social visit.”

“Oh, right. So, when was the last time you helped me?”

“The Valkyrie nest...”

“Oh, that... What can I say? I’ve never reacted well to being double-crossed.”

“You double-crossed me first.”

“We can argue about the details later.”

“Let’s not.”

“Agreed. Straight to business...”

“Loki,” Devfon said, “there is not enough money in the universe...”

“Of course not,” Loki said. “People like us are too rich to have a use for money, anyway.”

“I’m not taking favors from you.”

“Devfon,” Loki shifted in his chair. “I need an extractor, and you’re the only one who hasn’t flat-out refused.”

“I *am* flat-out refusing.”

“Well, that’s your opinion, and you’re entitled to it, I suppose.”

“Loki...” Devfon got up and walked over to the pitcher of wine. “You can’t force me to help you. You can’t trick me into helping you. Your money isn’t tempting, and somehow, you owing people favors always seems to backfire on the people you owe the favor to.”

A smile twitched the corner of Loki’s mouth. “Well...”

“Besides,” Devfon poured wine into another glass. “Why don’t you just use that Vanir girl of yours?”

This time, the pitcher shattered along with the wine glass. Red liquid showered over the floor. Devfon swore in two languages, neither English, and turned on Loki with embers shooting from his eyes.

Loki sat perfectly calm, although his fingertips had gone white from pressing into each other. “I know you’re not talking about Effa, right?”

“You have ruined my clothing,” Devfon said, wiping at the wine stains with wine-stained hands.

“I know you’re not talking about Effa,” Loki said, “because I know even you wouldn’t refer to a nine-thousand-year-old warrior, from a bloodline about thirty times more impressive than your own, as ‘that Vanir girl.’”

“I am not going to help you, Loki!” Devfon said. “Is that enough of a flat-out refusal yet?”

“You are going to help me,” Loki said. “And you’re going to do it for a favor.”

Devfon held his dripping hands out at his sides. “The last time you did me a favor, I ended up in a swamp for three days.”

“It’s not my fault you didn’t word your request properly,” Loki said.

“The last time you did Edris a favor, I also ended up in a swamp.”

“Well, to be fair, that is exactly what she asked me for. *She* knows how to word her requests.”

“The point,” Devfon said, “is that I’m not taking favors from you.”

“And who said they were my favors?” Loki asked.

For a moment, they locked eyes, Loki, sitting still as stone while the extractor dripped wine.

“I trade in favors, Devfon,” Loki said. “And I don’t make a living of it by always granting favors to other people. There isn’t a powerful Ageless in all the worlds who doesn’t owe me at least three times over. Why do you think they put up with me?”

Devfon hesitated. “Just to be clear, you’re offering me a favor from someone else?”

“To be clear, yes.”

“From whom?”

“I’ll throw in a bonus for you,” Loki said, jumping up. “You can choose. Let’s see . . . Ea owes me three, Idun sixteen... Oh, Ereshkigal owes me twenty-seven... I can get you a full list if you like...”

“Ereshkigal?” Davfon said.

Loki smiled. He loved it when things went according to plan. “Thought that might catch your interest.”

“So what you’re really offering me,” Devfon said, “is Keldon.”

“What I am offering you,” Loki said, “is one favor from the Queen of the Underworld. This, yes, should be more than enough to get you, say, twenty-four hours in the Underworld to visit with whichever prisoner you might want to see. Whether that is what you choose to do with said favor, and whether that prisoner happens to be your son, is none of my concern.”

Devfon shook his head. “How is it that even when I’m on my guard against you, you still manage to manipulate me?”

“Devfon, you’re a whore-monger,” Loki said. “And yes,

offense intended. You're not that hard to manipulate."

"And now you're insulting me, and still I'm going to help you," Devfon said, shaking his head even harder.

"Great." Loki grabbed him by the arm. "First step, leave the brothel. Second step," he looked the extractor up and down with annoyance, "get you a clean shirt. Basic hygiene still not a strength of yours, I see."

"You did this!" Devfon said. They left the room and started down the stairs.

Loki shrugged. "That's your version of events."

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I," Devfon said, still shaking his head.

"I've always regretted my stays in brothels," Loki said.

Devfon shook his head. "Shut up."

"No, seriously. It's one of my only mature qualities. Maybe there's hope for you yet."

"Just shut up," Devfon said.

---

"Crae was beside herself," Irina said. She sat under the great rafters of the Harpy meeting hall, with Scarlet's head on her lap. Her husband, Luke's father, stood behind her, and Luke and Asok sat cross-legged across from them. Irina stroked Scarlet's red hair and looked listlessly into the crowd of recovering Harpies.

The room looked something like the inside of a hive, Luke thought, with layers of crisscrossing beams stacked above their heads at varying heights and sizes to form dozens of different, sharp, angular shapes. The pattern wasn't consistent enough to be a honeycomb. Maybe something made by ants, or termites. It almost mimicked the branches of a tree, except there was no central trunk from which those branches came. There was

something mesmerizing about it, and he couldn't stop looking up, forming patterns with his eyes.

"*Kih'yadah eset, emet-cain?*" Asok asked. *Do you know what happened, exactly?* Luke tore his eyes from the rafters, because he wanted to know the answer too.

"It was an accident, that's all," Luke's father, Mohasa, said in English. He was a large man, like Kobah, on the shorter side, but broad-shouldered. "Someone placed one of the bricks wrong. There's no telling who. The weight from the wall above it made the entire thing crumble."

"Most of the Harpies ended up twenty miles down that *racha* river before any of them got out," Irina said. "Those that did were in too bad of shape to attempt going back in for the others."

"Not that some of them didn't try," Mohasa said. "It was nice of them, you know, to make our entire job more difficult."

"Maybe you should have said that in Djinn," Asok said.

"They were trying to help loved ones. We can hardly blame them for that," Irina said. Mohasa sighed, but knew better than to turn it into an argument—his wife was very good at reading minds, after all.

"You're saying they really needed your help," Asok said, a bite in her voice.

"They have thanked us," Mohasa said, in a tone that declared the matter settled.

"But Crae was going crazy," Irina repeated. "She was one of the first to get out, and she held herself together pretty well for a while. But the more people we pulled out . . ."

"The more people who weren't her son?" Luke guessed.

Irina nodded. "I got the impression she didn't want him to come out in the first place."

"Because he's a boy," Luke said.

"Because he's her boy, and he's only twenty-one," Mohasa said.

“Crae has mainly outgrown her sexism,” Irina said. She exchanged a look with her husband that had them both smiling. “Besides, you may have noticed most of the Harpies out there were men. The women are leaders and warriors, but they still call on their men to do all the heavy lifting.”

“That does seem to be our primary purpose in existence,” Mohasa said, with a wink at his son.

“Why are we talking in English?” Asok asked.

“We don’t want the Harpies to think we’re talking behind their backs,” Mohasa said. “This is their home, it would be rude.”

Asok rolled her eyes.

“Shouldn’t she be awake by now?” Luke asked.

Irina followed his eyes down to Scarlet’s head and stopped stroking her hair. “*Ama*, what time is it?” she asked her husband.

“Late enough for the boy to be right.” Mohasa knelt beside his wife and put a hand on Scarlet’s neck, pressing on the carotid artery. His frown made Luke’s heart skip a beat. “You said she was still morphed when you brought her here?” he asked.

Asok sat up straight. “Yeah?” she said. “Partly, technically, I guess. She lost the scales and everything as soon as we got inside.”

Luke looked between his parents’ faces, their expressions chilled as if braced for a winter storm. “Is that not supposed to happen?” he asked.

It took Irina longer than usual to answer. “You know that, when shape-shifters die, they remain in whatever form they were in when killed.”

“She’s not dead,” Asok said.

“No.” Irina shook her head. Mohasa was now checking the pulse in Scarlet’s wrist. “The—my point is, changing forms requires an act of will. If you’re unconscious, you can’t will the

change.”

“And you didn’t notice a problem earlier?” Asok asked, rising to her knees.

“I thought she was semi-conscious this whole time,” Mohasa said. “I thought she could hear us and had at least some control over her body! Part control, part conscious!”

“She is!” Irina’s fingers dug into Scarlet’s hair. “Her mind is communicating with the outside world. I can feel it! If she’s not partly conscious—what else could it be?”

“Her pulse says she’s out cold!” Mohasa said. Husband and wife locked eyes with each other, wide eyes, beneath surprised, tattooed faces. A silent conversation passed between them, during which the cousins held their breath. Then Irina pulled Scarlet’s head up against her shoulder and scooped her other arm under Scarlet’s knees.

“Make sure Crae understands why I’ve gone,” she said and vanished with the sleeping dragon.

“What’s going on?” Asok asked.

“*Avvah?*” Luke said, rising to his feet.

Mohasa stared for a while at the spot from which his wife and the girl had disappeared, then looked up with a forced smile. “You did well today, Yalladim,” he told them. Sincerity and appreciation brimmed from his voice, but even that could not hide the edge of fear beneath it.

“Where did *Immee* go?” Luke asked. Asok stood up beside him and crossed her arms. On her, that was as good as a demand to be answered.

Mohasa sighed. He took his son’s hand and sent an image into his mind—a room Luke knew very well, large and square and broken into sections by soft, breezy, green curtains. The Djinn healing center. His father nodded. “Go ahead,” he said, letting their hands slip apart.

Luke took a breath and seized Asok by one of her crossed arms.

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Scarlet lay, on her back, in the middle of a green field. The bathwater air brushed against her skin, bringing with it the slightest hint of sweetness, like honey. Flowers, all around her.

All around them.

She wasn't alone. Another heartbeat, very close by, warmth from a body as well as from the wind and sun. And her head lay on something softer than the grass, something with blood pulsing inside it, to the same beat as that heart.

Scarlet opened her eyes to the blue dome above her. Wisps of white cloud floated here and there, too small and airy to be made into shapes. But the blue mesmerized her. It was a mirage, she knew. A cheat, a scam, perfect blue beauty, endless and as deep as the ocean. The setting of the sun would peel it back, and reveal it for what it was—a shell, terribly, terribly thin. Terribly fragile. The only thing between all this life, and the black void of space. But right then it was a flawless blue, solid and stable and safe. And in the bright sunlight, and gentle breeze, Scarlet didn't mind being deceived.

Since when was she so cynical? Scarlet wondered. When had she begun to think of the sky as a scam?

Slowly her eyes moved, from directly above, toward the top of her head. Effa sat above her, hands planted behind her back for support, legs stretched out in front of her. Scarlet's head rested on one of those legs.

"You're awake," Scarlet said.

Effa smiled as she looked out across the grass and flowers. "This is nice," she said.

"We should come here more often."

Effa looked down. The movement of her head cast a



shadow over Scarlet's face, and her eyes were very dark, and sharply in focus. "We were never here," she said.

A shadow passed over the entire field. Scarlet blinked. Her mind staggered, like an actor on stage, blinded by the lights, unable to remember her lines. "Wait, what?"

"This isn't your memory, Scarlet," Effa said.

The sun still hung where it had been in the sky, but now it seemed to draw light in instead of giving it. Scarlet sat up, keeping Effa in sight at all times. She turned on her heels and crouched, knees against her chest, holding Effa's gaze. "I'm dreaming."

"Of course you are," Effa said. "But this isn't your dream." Shadows clung to every corner of her pale face as the wind turned sharp and whipped her long, blond hair. Her eyes were brown, dark brown, and reflected the light of the anti-sun above them. "What business do you have in his fantasies?"

"Who are you?" Scarlet asked.

"I'm a memory," Effa said. The icy wind and the anti-sun twisted those blond strands of hair to shimmer between gold and black. "Someone else's memory."

"No." Scarlet rose, slowly, like she was trapped at half speed, staring into the dark brown eyes. Horrible brown. Almost black... "No, you're real."

Her throat choked on the last word.

Effa had not moved. She sat, with her legs outstretched and hands planted behind her, looking up at Scarlet from the grass. Shadows spilled away from her body, like black water, flowing over the ground. Her face throbbed, pale one second, dark the next. "You should never have jumped into that river, little girl," she said.

The second after they materialized in the healing center, Asok asked, “*Ma’asah-kai shee, emet-cain?*” *What are we doing here, exactly?*

“Checking on Scarlet.” Luke brushed through the green curtain that hung in front of his face.

They had materialized inside a section of cots, each surrounded by a green curtain, each empty at the moment. A few steps further, however, brought them into the main part of the room, open with a few clusters of comfy seats, and a glass ceiling.

Usually, one or other of the Djinn healers conjured some idyllic image to cover the ceiling and block out reality. There was no such illusion now. The truth of the planet hung over their heads, red sky and wafting plumes of black smoke, blown like dust across the glass. Luke shuddered at the memory of what it was like out there, on the surface, burning and struggling to breathe through poison.

The cousins came through the curtains to see Irina, several yards away, laying Scarlet on a cot on the opposite side of the room. Most of the curtains on that side of the room were pulled back, offering a full view of the dark, warm spaces in which cots rested. The healer apprentice, the only one they had had in a hundred years, stood at the head of Scarlet’s cot, listening to Irina describe her condition. Another healer sat on duty by the door.

Aside from the healers and the apprentice, there were two patients in the room. One sat propped up on cushions by one of the low tables, reading from a data-disk. Luke had seen him many times and heard whispers from his mother about “old battle scars,” the kind left on the mind, not the body. The other, a younger woman, had come a few days ago from another Djinn world and appeared to be asleep on her cot.

Luke approached his mother, hoping to catch some pieces of her explanation to the apprentice. Before he had gone more

than ten steps, with her back still to him, Irina interrupted herself to say, "And if you want to help, Luke, why don't you go get her brother."

"Okay," Luke said.

A step behind him, Asok bit her bottom lip. "That sounds serious. Bringing the family is always serious, right?"

Luke didn't want to admit how much sense her words made. He closed his eyes, summoned an image of Kurt up in his mind, and teleported.

---

In the field, in Scarlet's mind, she stood under a huge sun which absorbed light. Beneath her was something that looked like Effa, sounded like Effa, should have been a memory of Effa. It sat perfectly still, hands behind its back, legs outstretched, eyes black and burning into Scarlet's soul.

"Why?" Scarlet asked, because she simply couldn't take the silence. "What happened when I jumped into the river?"

Shadows dug themselves deeper into Effa's face. But then, it wasn't Effa's face. Not exactly. Or, not all the time. It fluctuated, between Effa and something else, something with higher cheekbones and wider eyes and darker skin.

And then, like a crocodile lifting its head out of the mud, the thing rose.

Scarlet stepped back. The sun turned black, and the wind whipped toward it, sucking like a hurricane caught in a funnel. The thing's eyes were dark as the sun, and her face lost all form entirely.

"Stay away!" Scarlet said.

But the thing took another step. Scarlet jumped back and almost tripped, her heart pounding inside her, threatening to rip itself from her chest. "What happened when I jumped?"

she asked.

Trees, far back in the forest around them, ripped up by their roots. They flew up through the air, joining the hurricane, sucked with the light into the black sun. Another image filled Scarlet's vision: the fire cage, surrounded by the burning heart of a volcano. She felt again the intense heat of her own trip through the lava, then saw the black eyes in front of her and took another step back.

The thing had grown. Its shadow spread out behind it like a billowing cloud, then changed direction, wafting forward, around Effa's shifting body, toward Scarlet. Everything, the trees and flowers, grass and dirt, was ripped back into the anti-sun.

"Go away!" Scarlet said, throwing her arms over her face.

Blackness consumed her. She heard a shout of rage, and then a cackle as she fell through space, landing on her back on a solitary road on a cold, winter night with the moon suspended over her head. She was alone.

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Within minutes, Luke returned to the healing center with Kurt only to have his mother send him on another errand, then another, and another, until she ran out of things to have done. Asok wandered in and out on her own.

After errand number four, Luke asked if she had overheard anything, and Asok told the truth: "*Lo yadah Imma'cha et'da-katah.*" *Your mother doesn't know what's going on.*

That was hardly a reassuring thought.

Finally, at the end of errands, Luke returned to the healing center to find his mother standing, her arms crossed, staring at Scarlet's cot from many feet away. Kurt sat beside his sister,

reading aloud from a data-disk.

Irina must have sensed her son walk up behind her shoulder. She probably even sensed his hope that she would now answer his questions. Luke knew how impossible it was to hide things from his mother. He still tried. He just knew it was hopeless.

Eventually, Irina took a breath, lifting her folded arms along with her chest. "I told him to read to her," she said. "That the sound of his voice might help."

"Will it?" Luke asked.

Irina stared at the Leviathan for a moment, then whispered, "*Lo ya'adee*." I don't know.

"*Inmah*," Luke said. "*Dibrah lee*..." He glanced at Kurt, made a choice, and repeated in English. "Tell me what's going on, please."

Kurt's careful reading of *Oliver Twist* faltered. He looked up, straight at Irina.

Irina shook her head, but hid nothing. Her reply was in English. "Please understand, I don't want to frighten you."

"But you're frightened," Luke said.

"Not frightened, at this point, so much as confused," Irina said. "Your father, and the other *basrasheh'im*—the body healers, doctors..." she added for Kurt's benefit. "They tell me she is unconscious."

"So?"

"So I, and the other *levsheh'im*—mind healers—we... her mind is communicating with something outside itself. She's not dreaming. But she is. It's... really confusing."

Luke could not remember a time when his mother had admitted to being confused. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"It means..." Irina shook her head. "It means there's more going on here than just Loki's memories."

"But..." Luke looked at Scarlet's face, almost as white as the pillow, inside its crest of red hair. "What...?"

Irina held up a hand to silence him. Her lips pressed together as her eyes unfocused, widening. Then she blinked, returning to the room with them. "Sorry. The rift just opened. I think Loki's back." She tried to disguise it, but Luke could not miss the tone of relief in her voice.

Almost before she stopped talking, three people appeared near the center of the room. The tallest was Loki, wearing the same jeans and black jacket he had left in over a month earlier. Slightly shorter, but larger, was a man who, from blond hair to pale skin to self-important scowl, reeked of Aesir. Between the two, holding each by the hand, stood Asok.

Irina's eyes, wide with relief, turned from Loki to narrow at her niece. Luke raised his eyebrows at her.

"What?" Asok shot back. "You didn't need me here, so I figured I'd hang out in the rift room. He had to show up sometime..." Her voice trailed away as her eyes focused on the smirk growing over Luke's face. "*Tzimmin!*" she said. Roughly translated, it meant *shut up*.

"Oh great," the Aesir man said. "Family drama."

"Not half as bad as your family drama," Loki said, rubbing his hands together. "So, Irina, good to see you. I realize I was gone longer than I probably should have been. But did you have to cover everything in lava while I was away?"

"Oh, half the Harpies are incapacitated at the moment, too," Irina said,

"They're what?" Loki said.

"They fell in a river of lava," Luke said.

"Half of them?" Loki asked.

"Okay!" the Aesir said. "Loki, as interesting as your tenant issues are..."

"Right, right, okay," Loki took a breath. "Irina, this is Devfon."

"The extractor, yes, I'm familiar with him," Irina said.

"Great. Devfon, this is Ir. . .

“Yeah, I really don’t care who the Djinn is,” the Aesir said. “Where’s the girl?”

“This is Irina,” Loki finished. “The *tzar levshchik*. The head of the Djinn healers. Of all Djinn healers.”

“Yeah, whatever, patient!” Devfon the Aesir said.

“Tov dabar, Loki,” Irina said when he looked like he might press the issue. It’s okay. Or, in other words, drop it before you start another race war!

Loki rolled his eyes, rubbing his hands together again. “Fine. Here. Kurt! Good to see you.”

“Welcome back,” Kurt said as he rose out of the chair beside Scarlet’s bed.

Devfon sat heavily on the vacated chair. “Let’s get this over with,” he said as he wrapped one large hand around Scarlet’s forehead.

A second later, he jerked back turned with burning blue eyes and a clenched jaw. “Loki! Is there, perhaps, something that you, maybe, neglected to tell me—possibly?”

“Oh, yeah, um...” Loki began speaking very fast, each word getting quieter. “The girl I need you to help also just happens to be a Leviathan...” The word Leviathan came out as a barely audible whisper, followed immediately by the loud question, “That’s not going to be a problem, right?”

Devfon tried to rise. “It’s always something else with you!”

Loki moved so quickly no one saw it, suddenly standing over Devfon, a hand on his shoulder, pushing him down into the chair. “She’s not connected to Tiamat.”

“How is that possible, exactly?”

“Exactly? No idea.” Loki’s hand still pressed down, holding the larger man on his seat. “Now, Leviathan are more closely related to us than to any other species of Nephilim. The extraction should be easy. Just do it.”

For an uncomfortable moment, it seemed to Luke that Devfon the extractor would not in fact ‘just do it.’ He sat stiff

on one side of the chair, staring at Loki with an ancient and determined expression of disdain. Loki held his ground, one hand on Devfon's shoulder.

Finally, the extractor took a breath and turned back to Scarlet, returning his hand to her forehead, closing his eyes. Loki stood guard for a few moments longer, then turned, and walked over to Irina.

"So..." he said, with another fake smile. "I didn't want to ask in front of our most unwilling help there, but... Why is she unconscious? In the middle of the day? In the Djinn healing center?"

Irina shook her head. "We don't know," she said. "But it has something to do with her jumping into lava after a Harpy."

Scarlet was pacing up and down across the top of the overpass—for how long she had no idea. There was no sign now of the thing in the field, the thing that had looked like Effa, the thing controlling an anti-sun and a hurricane. Still, Scarlet did not feel safe. The opposite in fact. The longer she paced, the more certain she became: There was something under the overpass, something waiting for her, something worse than the fire cage, and the thing in the field.

She paced in the very center of the road, as far from the guardrails as possible, stamping her feet against the asphalt, trying to stop herself from thinking about what lay beneath her. She cast glances off to the sides, like a child looking for monsters in the shadows of an unfamiliar bedroom, drawn to the edge, dragged there, by some voice that was not her own. *Look over, it whispered. Everything will be clear. All of this will end. Look over. Look over. Look over!*

It got so loud in her head that she screamed to drown it out.



She got to one end of the overpass, and turned on her heels, ready to pace back the other way. Her wild scream ended in a yelp, and her feet stopped moving for the first time in hours.

Directly in front of her, in the center of the overpass, stood a man. He had blond hair, broad shoulders, and pale skin. Aesir. Someone Loki had known, maybe?

Whoever he was, whatever memory was now bleeding into her visions of this stupid roadway, he looked confused. He glanced around, then turned to Scarlet with one raised eyebrow.

“What is this place?” he asked.

The directness of the question startled her. Memories didn’t speak that way. And she didn’t know herself as Scarlet in the memories.

“It’s a road,” she said. “Who are you?”

The man’s frown deepened. “This is Earth. Present-day Earth.”

“Yeah. So?” Scarlet asked. “Wait... Are you real?”

The man rolled his eyes, and for some reason, that made Scarlet angry. “We’re not supposed to interact during this. What didn’t he tell me now?”

“You are real! What’s going on?” Scarlet asked.

The man turned and took a step toward the edge of the overpass. Scarlet’s heart quickened, and she almost shouted at him to stop. Before she could, he said, “I’m an extractor. You’re my patient. Something’s blocking me from Loki’s memories and you are getting in my way. So just shut up and let me do my job.”

“Excuse me?” Scarlet said. “This is my brain, you know!”

“I said, shut up!” The Aesir shook his head, muttering, “Nothing is ever easy with that man!” and took several more steps toward the guard rail.

Fear swept in, knocking even the boiling rage aside. “Do not go over the edge!”

The man turned to her, his eyes narrowed to slits. "Why? What's over there?"

"Don't look!" Scarlet said.

The Aesir's eyes narrowed even further. "Right . . ." he said at last, and then, without moving, he stood within two inches of Scarlet, seized her by the arm, and dragged her toward the guard rail. "Right. Come here."

"Let go of me!" Scarlet screamed. A hole opened in the center of her chest, threatening to pull everything else into it, to collapse her from the inside out. She struggled, willing even to tear her own arm off if it meant getting away.

It should have worked, too. She was stronger than an Aesir. But that strength no longer existed. He pulled her to the edge as easily as any Human man could drag along any average teenage girl.

"Okay, let's just take a look," the Aesir said, annoyed by her struggling, and completely indifferent to her fear.

"I told you to stay away!" That hole in Scarlet's chest was growing, and she couldn't breathe through it.

"Something's blocking me from Loki's memories," the Aesir said. "Let's see what the problem is, so I can do my job and go home!"

Scarlet's stomach slammed against the curved surface of a sheet metal rail. The Aesir wrapped his arm around her waist, bent her over the rail so that she had to look down. Beneath was only blackness.

No road, no cars, no people. Just the black, the blacker than black, going down through the heart of the planet, into an eternity of nothingness. Scarlet's hands fastened on the rail. Its unsmoothed edge bit into her skin, and the strength in her arms gave out.

You really shouldn't have jumped into that river.

She heard that voice again, the voice pretending to be Effa's voice. She saw again that creature standing in front

of her, under the black sun, with her twisting face, and her shadow. The shadow that spilled over the ground like water. The shadow that came forward, to engulf her.

“What is this?” The Aesir spoke from very close to Scarlet’s ear. His voice had changed, grown tight, and sharpened to a high pitch. His grip on Scarlet relaxed. Now free, however, Scarlet still couldn’t move. She stood there, bent over the rail, staring down into an eternal nothingness.

The Aesir seized Scarlet by her shoulders. He spun her around to face him, and shook her, hard. “What is going on in your head?” he asked.

Fire crashed in around them, the whirling tornado of heat and pressure so much like what Scarlet had felt in the lava river. The Aesir staggered back. His hands left Scarlet’s shoulders, followed by a scream so sharp it ripped Scarlet’s head in half.

“I told you not to look!” she said, determined that the universe know this was not her fault.

The fire vanished, and they stood again, several feet apart, on the pavement under a full moon. A forest loomed on either side of the overpass. And there was still something—something—underneath them.

“No, just no!” the Aesir said.

Dread coiled itself around Scarlet’s heart. She stood hunched over, holding her head between her hands, waiting for the thing to scream again. “It’s her, isn’t it?” she said.

The Aesir did not reply, only sent Scarlet a look of crushing rage and disappeared.

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In the Djinn Healing Center, Devfon flew back from Scarlet’s cot, as if it had burst into flames. “Trickster!” he said, heading

for the door.

“Calm down,” Irina said, getting into his way.

Devfon staggered, looming over the Djinn woman, pointing over her head, at Loki. “You misled me!” He screamed out tirades in five languages, too upset to think in only one, and finally worked his way back to English. “No wonder you didn’t bring the Vanir girl! You didn’t tell me what was in her head!”

“You need to calm down,” Irina said, reaching for his shoulder. “This is a place of peace...”

Devfon grabbed her wrist and shoved her away. Loki took a step at him, but Irina held out a hand. “Ani tov,” she said in Djinn: I’m fine.

“Get out of my way!” Devfon shoved Loki next. He barreled out the door, into the hall, like an avalanche.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Loki ran after him.

“That girl is a dragon!” Devfon came to an intersection and spun in a circle, trying to remember a path he had never walked.

“Yes, we’ve already covered this,” Loki said.

“No price could compel me to work with the thing in her head! I should have known better than to get involved with one of that kind at all!”

“Oh, well, now you’re just being racist,” Loki said.

Devfon grabbed Loki by the collar of his blazer. “Dragons cannot be free. She is bound to that witch in the caldera...”

“She’s not,” Loki said. “It’s hard to believe, I know, but she is free of Tiamat’s influence.”

“Do not feed me stories!” Devfon said. “I can see the beast in her mind. One glimpse, and I know she’s there, and she has brought the Nothingness with her. Not even my son is worth that risk. Now get me out!”

Loki stared at him. His mind raced, and not with thoughts that the extractor might expect. At last, he said, “Fine,” and

nodded to Irina.

The Djinn woman took Devfon's arm, and they vanished, returning to the rift room, returning the extractor to his life. Loki stood still in the hall, waiting. After a few seconds, he noticed the young people who had followed them.

Kurt stood hugging the door frame. Luke and Asok stood a few feet apart, about a halfway between Loki and the door.

"What was that?" Luke asked quietly.

"That was things getting really, very complicated," Loki said.

"What's wrong with her? Why can't he take the memories out?" Kurt asked.

"He can," Loki said. "He just won't."

"Why?"

"What's he so scared of?" Luke asked.

"The same thing we're all scared of," Loki said. "Death and the Abyss."

"You're not making any sense!" Asok said.

Loki nodded. "I know."

Irina reappeared. She stood directly four feet from Loki and crossed her arms. "Tiamat?"

"So it would seem," Loki nodded.

"I knew there was something wrong with those dreams."

"Yes, I did too. I was hoping he wouldn't notice."

"You were hoping the extractor wouldn't notice?"

"Yeah, I know, but what choice did I have?"

"Well, I guess I finally understand why you didn't just call Effa in the first place—which never made the slightest amount of sense to me, before now."

Loki rolled his eyes at her.

"How did this even happen? Was it when you severed her from Kurt?"

"No, none of that got back into Scarlet's mind. I'm sure of it."

“Then how?”

Loki hesitated for a moment. Then, without looking at him, he said, “Luke, I need to know exactly what happened in the volcano.”

“Um . . . what do you mean?” Luke asked, with a glance at Asok.

Loki turned to him. “Freyja—one of the Vanir in the sky that day—she told me there was a moment when all the Leviathan just froze. Did that happen in the tunnels too?”

“So that was Scarlet,” Asok said.

“What did she do?” Loki asked. “I mean, exactly, what?”

“Nothing,” Luke said.

“She just screamed,” Asok said. “That’s it.”

“Wait.” A dark look came into Irina’s eyes. “Scarlet screamed, and every other Leviathan just stopped moving? Why didn’t you mention this before?”

“It’s not their fault,” Loki said. “I was too afraid to ask, because I know as well as you do what it means.”

“What does it mean?” Luke asked.

“So you already know,” Irina said. “Your memories aren’t the main problem anymore, and just extracting them might not fix anything...”

“Yes, but the first step is still to extract them.”

“How?” Kurt asked. “You said he was the last extractor!”

“Yes, yes,” Loki said, turning to the boy. “He is the last person officially called an extractor, but he is not the last person capable of extracting memories. I promise you, Kurt, I always have a backup plan.”

“Like I said, it never made sense you didn’t just call her,” Irina said.

Loki snapped something back at her, in a language none of the teenagers knew. Irina let him talk for a while, crossing her arms.

“You can’t always protect everyone, Loki,” she said when

he had finished

“Yeah, well I can protect her,” Loki shot back. “Her, Irina, her. Usually...” He reached inside his jacket and drew out a little note pad with a pen. “Luke,” he said, scribbling, “I have a job for you.”

Irina raised one eyebrow. “You’re sending my son?”

“Well I can’t go,” Loki said. “And I can’t send you. It’ll be hard enough getting them to listen to a Djinn, let alone a woman.”

“You do know my underage son not the only male Djinn on this planet, right?” Irina said.

“Luke!” Loki tore the top page from the note pad and handed it to him. “This is for a woman named Effa. I need you to go to the main factory world. Go straight to the palace and give this note to Idun herself. Then stay with Idun until Effa shows up and takes the note. Idun will try to get you to leave, but she won’t force it, so just hold your ground—and blame everything on me. Now... There are spells on the palace to stop Djinn from teleporting inside, so...”

Out of Loki’s pocket came a gold ring, old, and not perfectly round. It had a flat top with some kind of symbol engraved into it. Loki tossed it to Luke. “That’s my seal,” he said. “Show it to the palace guards, and they should know better than to block your way. Got all that?”

Luke looked over at Irina. “*Immah?*”

Irina shrugged. “It’ll be a learning experience, I suppose.”

“Okay...” Luke looked down at the note and seal in his hands. “Can I take Asok with me?”

Irina winced, and Loki said, “Better not. If you want company, take Kurt.”

“He means, take a boy,” Asok said, rolling her eyes.

“Isn’t Idun a woman?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” Loki said. “She’s a woman who’s managed to gain power in a male-centered society, which basically means she

has to be even more abusive toward other women than the men are.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “I do not understand the Ageless.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty screwed up,” Loki said. “Have I mentioned that Scarlet’s life is kind of hanging in the balance here?”

“Right.” Luke stuffed the seal and note into the center pocket of his sweatshirt. “Kurt?”

“Sure.” Kurt pushed away from the doorframe and came within arms’ reach of Luke.

“Straight there and back,” Irina said.

Luke nodded, took Kurt’s arm, and they vanished.

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And in the healing center, Scarlet lay and continued to dream the dreams that were somehow also real. Every now and again, she found herself back on that dark road, with the full moon glaring down, and trees bending in.

She stood at the rail of the overpass and looked down, but found no road below. Instead, she saw only darkness. Deep, unending darkness. Like the void before creation. And it was coming closer. She knew that as if someone had explained it to her, as if she could see nothingness move.

The Abyss was coming for her.



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